

Alexandra House
33 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

T 08456 404040
F 020 7421 6855
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk



12 June 2008

Mr McCarron
Headteacher
St Monica's RC High School Specialist
Language College
Bury Old Road
Prestwich
Manchester
Lancashire
M25 1JH

Dear Mr McCarron

Ofsted survey inspection programme – geography

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 13-14 May 2008 to look at work in geography.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a focus on how literacy is being used to enhance learning in geography.

The visit provided valuable information which will contribute to our national evaluation and reporting. Published reports are likely to list the names of the contributing institutions, but individual institutions will not be identified in the main text. All feedback letters will be published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half-term.

The evidence used to inform the judgements made included: interviews with staff and pupils, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of data, analysis of pupils' work and observation of four lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is good and improving.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards are both good.

- Standards are rising at the end of Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4.
- Students enter the school with broadly average standards, but have some relative weaknesses in their knowledge of places and their geographical skills. They make good progress across Years 7-9, so that

by the end of Key Stage 3, they reach standards which are a little above the national average.

- Progress accelerates strongly in Key Stage 4 and students reach challenging targets.
- Results in GCSE examinations in 2007 were very high. Almost 90% of students gained an A*-C grade, over 30% of these were A*/A grades, and all students received a graded result. This represents excellent achievement for the 30% or so of Year 11 students who chose to take the GCSE course.
- Students' excellent attitudes and behaviour make a significant contribution to the quality of their learning. They show a great readiness to learn, listen intently to their teacher and to one another, take an active part in lessons and sustain their efforts.
- Students greatly enjoy the variety of work they do and persevere when faced with difficult challenges.
- The school policy of seating boys and girls next to each other contributes well to the good achievement of both groups.

Quality of teaching and learning of geography

The quality of teaching and learning is good.

- Teachers use their very good subject knowledge to make accurate and well-illustrated presentations. They use large computer displays well to interest students and to help make learning easier.
- Lessons have a clear structure and are planned in detail. Learning activities are purposeful as teachers have a good understanding of National Curriculum and GCSE expectations.
- There has been a concerted emphasis on improving the quality of teaching and learning in recent years. Consequently, teachers use a wide range of methods to engage students and to challenge their thinking. These are generally effective, but some techniques are relatively new to some staff and their use does not always have the impact intended.
- Teachers identify learning objectives for lessons and share these with students. Whilst there is some good practice in checking how students progress towards these targets, this is not present across all of the teaching.
- Opportunities for students to be involved in assessing and evaluating the quality of their work are improving, but these are not yet provided consistently enough.
- Homework is set regularly to consolidate and to extend learning. It, and students' classwork, is marked conscientiously, to clear department policy guidelines. However, teachers' written comments do not focus systematically on providing guidance to students on what needs to be done to improve.
- Assessment is better at Key Stage 4 than at Key Stage 3 as it draws on teachers' very good knowledge of examination requirements.

- A system of regular, robust assessments using National Curriculum levels in Years 7-9 has been put in place to measure students' attainment and progress. Although this information is recorded carefully, it is not yet fully utilised to set targets, check progress or intervene when students do not make expected gains.
- Lessons are planned so that all groups of pupils make good progress. For example, classes are organised into sets in Year 9 and lessons are altered to some extent to meet the needs of the different ability groups.
- Teachers vary the degree of difficulty of activities and provide extension activities for the most able. The department recognises that this could be done more frequently.
- Teachers are alert to any difficulties that students have with their learning during lessons and provide helpful support as they circulate around the classroom.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is good.

- The GCSE scheme of work is continually refined in response to a detailed analysis of student performance in external examinations.
- Detailed individual lesson plans drawn up by teachers build well on students' prior learning.
- Several beneficial changes have been made to Key Stage 3 topics to promote greater relevance and interest.
- There is a good emphasis on tackling global and environmental issues which are presented in ways which students find engaging.
- There is limited use of computers in lessons to extend learning.
- Enrichment opportunities are at an early stage of development. The school's international links are beginning to be utilised to extend students' learning and a FairTrade day is planned for the near future. A new website containing materials to extend and support geographical learning is beginning to be used, particularly by older students.
- The department recognises the need to extend fieldwork opportunities. Some use is made of the locality and the school grounds in Key Stage 3 but fieldwork is not provided in Year 9. However, a well-planned visit to Malham in Year 10 leads to some very good GCSE coursework.
- Students taking GCSE find extra provision for revision helpful in dealing with any problems that they might have. They have begun to use the new school website to help them with their classwork and their coursework.

Leadership and management of geography

Leadership and management of geography are good.

- Effective steps have been taken to establish common systems for curriculum provision and assessment. This is reflected in the good teamwork evident in moving the department forward.
- Planned improvements to teaching and learning are clearly having a beneficial impact on raising standards at both Key Stages and are attracting more students to take the subject at GCSE level.
- There is a clear vision for future development in the subject. This is shown through a well-focused subject improvement plan.
- Planning is based on secure processes of self-review, which are carried out diligently. Hence, there is an accurate understanding of what the department needs to do to continue to improve its work.
- Good features of these processes include the use of students' voice to provide feedback and the detailed analysis of GCSE examination results. However, the available data from Key Stage 3 teacher assessments is not yet used fully to analyse the relative effectiveness of different parts of the teaching scheme.

Subject issue

The extent to which literacy is being used to enhance learning in geography is good.

- Students have very good speaking and listening skills. The emphasis placed on active learning in lessons is encouraging students to develop their thinking skills and their capacity to articulate ideas and opinions.
- The strong focus on learning key words in all lessons helps students develop an increasingly sophisticated vocabulary.
- Teachers have high expectations for students' capacity to read and gather information from a wide variety of texts and resources.
- Students learn to write notes in different forms and to use these to produce a good range of structured writing.
- Teachers provide helpful support and feedback so that students can develop their explanatory and evaluative writing.

Areas for improvement

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include the need to:

- involve students more consistently in assessing and evaluating their work, particularly at Key Stage 3
- use the data from teacher assessments at Key Stage 3 to improve the quality of guidance to students and to refine the scheme of work
- enrich the curriculum further by making greater use of fieldwork, by providing students with more frequent opportunities to use Information Communication Technology (ICT), and by extending opportunities for students to engage with geographical ideas and issues outside the classroom.

As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and will be published on Ofsted's website. It will also be available to the team for the next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Ralph Higgs
Additional Inspector