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Dear Mrs Bexon-Smith

Ofsted subject survey inspection programme – Geography and Art and design

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 15-16 July 2008 to look at work in art, craft and design.

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 students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subjects, the visit had a particular focus on how literacy is being used to enhance learning in the subject in geography. In art and design it had a focus on the impact of assessment on individual progress and creativity.

The evidence used to inform the judgements made included: interviews with staff and students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of five lessons in geography and observation of four lessons in art and design.

Geography

The overall effectiveness of geography is good with several outstanding features.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards are both outstanding.

- Teacher assessments at the end of Key Stage 3 indicate above average standards. Achievement and progress from Year 7 to Year 9 are good.
- Work is generally pitched at the appropriate level enabling lower ability learners to make good progress with some more able students completing work of high quality. Work is generally presented well with effective use of diagrams.
- Students use geographical terms accurately and demonstrate good ability to give explanations and express opinions on topics such as tourism.
- Their understanding of physical processes is good. Students explain geographical patterns and processes particularly well. For example, most Year 9 students are able to describe the location of the major plate boundaries and explain the processes occurring at a destructive plate boundary.
- Most students make excellent progress during Key Stage 4 and their GCSE examination results are consistently well above the national average. Most students apply themselves to study very well and their exercise books indicate very good understanding of GCSE topics.
- Coursework is of high quality and most students summarise arguments well when representing different viewpoints.
- Students are generally very well behaved, reflecting teachers' high expectations. Most are motivated, take pride in their work and are keen to learn even when they are set complex tasks. They are increasingly evaluating their own work from Year 7 onwards.

Quality of teaching and learning of geography

The quality of teaching is good with outstanding features.

- Teachers have very good subject knowledge, plan lessons thoroughly and set clear learning intentions which are shared with students.
- A wide variety of teaching activities are used very well to promote and progress learning. In a Year 10 lesson on rivers, clear explanation, effective questioning and a broad range of tasks designed to involve students' in their learning helped them to describe confidently the differences between the upper and lower course of a river.
- Interactive whiteboards are used imaginatively to support learning. Lessons on tourism were introduced using a series of images, accompanied by music which stimulated interest and helped students understand different types and categories of holidays.
- Most teaching is well structured and clear so that this ensures a brisk pace to learning.
- Some lessons are satisfactory rather than good because work is not always matched sufficiently well to students' needs, which slows their progress. For example, some lessons move at too brisk a pace with too little time for reflection or the opportunity to share ideas. Some students say that occasionally, their lessons are over-reliant copying information or using text books.
- In lessons, most work is well planned and matched to students' differing learning needs with boys and girls given equal access.

Teachers take care to widely distribute questions and involve all students in discussions.

- The progress of all students is carefully tracked so that underachievement is identified and swift action can be taken to address this.
- Most classes are provided with good homework opportunities to support and re-enforce learning. However, this is inconsistent. Some homework activities lack challenge, requiring students to complete tasks not finished in lessons.
- The quality of assessment is good overall. Students are regularly made aware of assessment criteria. Coursework assessments in Key Stage 3 are carefully planned to assess each geography strand through unit assessments. Some assessments and self-assessment sheets are used inconsistently.
- Students mostly know how well they are progressing towards their targets because of the marks and comments they receive on their work.
- The quality of marking varies because specific reference to improvements in geographical knowledge, understanding and skills are not always made. This does not help students know what they need to do next to improve.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is good with outstanding features.

- The school has a good scheme of work which is revised regularly to take account of changes. The school has recently revised its Key Stage 3 curriculum and now operates a two year programme. This allows more time to be devoted to Key Stage 4.
- Topics and themes are carefully selected at Key Stage 3 to provide students with a firm foundation of understanding and skills in Year 7 which is extended in breadth and depth in subsequent years.
- Although the school has some understanding of geography coverage in Year 6, it does not have an accurate picture of the themes studied in the three or four main feeder primary schools.
- The geography department, in collaboration with the science and physical education (PE) departments, is pioneering a new integrated curriculum for Years 7 and 8 from September 2008. Care has been taken at the planning stage to consider how units build on each other and progressively develop students' geographical understanding and skills in a range of stimulating contexts.
- The GCSE geography course is a popular option in Years 9 to 11, where the extremely well planned and delivered curriculum contributes to students' outstanding progress. A new syllabus is to be implemented in September 2008.
- The implementation of curriculum changes from September 2008 including the International Baccalaureate, the new Key Stage 4 syllabus and Key Stage 3 curriculum are resulting in a period of intense work for the teachers. This needs to be carefully managed to prevent overwhelming the department.

- High quality fieldwork experiences in Key Stages 3 and 4 to Dovedale, the Isle of Wight and the Lake District result in students' very good achievement. Students say that they enjoy these immensely.
- In response to 'disappointing' Key Stage 4 outcomes in 2007, the school has implemented a number of exciting and innovative initiatives which are having a good impact. The department has invited young geographers to the 'A*-A club' prior to examinations to support and prepare them better. In addition, the weblog on the schools website in an innovative way of sharing resources and materials to support learning.
- There are limited opportunities to use information and communication technology (ICT) in the subject. Students do have the opportunity to use ICT to support their learning. These are mainly as homework tasks as for example in the Year 7 newspaper article about Montserrat.
- The department recognises that further training is required to develop geographical information systems throughout the school.

Leadership and management of geography

Leadership and management of geography are outstanding.

- The head of department leads the geography team very effectively. This innovating team has worked very well together to explore new ideas and approaches and incorporate them into their teaching. This includes using interactive technologies, developing the collaborative Key Stage 3 curriculum, and supporting the fieldwork programme. Resources and plans are developed jointly and shared.
- The head of department has attended network meetings in the Solihull area, regional conferences in Leicester and examination board meetings. Outcomes are appropriately disseminated at team meetings.
- The department's work is monitored closely through observation of lessons, and scrutiny of plans and students' work. Students' progress is tracked closely so that underachievement is identified and can be tackled.
- The department's self-evaluation is accurate. In conjunction with the detailed annual departmental review by the head of college, this provides the school with an accurate assessment of the department's performance.
- The clear vision of the head of department, a successful track record, and a detailed strategic plan places the department in an excellent position for future development.

Subject issue

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

- Good attention is paid to literacy. Lessons include a good range of learning activities and resources which provide varied opportunities for reading, writing, speaking and listening.

- As well as defining and displaying the geographical vocabulary used by each year group, students have regular opportunities to undertake different forms of writing including stories with a sense of place, newspaper reports, persuasive leaflets. For example, Year 7 students write poems about volcanoes and Year 8 students write a visitors' information booklet about Niagara Falls.
- Students are keen to answer questions, work well collaboratively and confidently read their work to the class when the opportunity is presented.
- Students read an appropriate range of material, including from a range of geographical texts and computer presentations. However, opportunities are not always taken to use fiction or non-fiction texts to support or add additional interest to geography lessons.

Areas for improvement

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

- continue to develop, implement and evaluate the new Key Stage 3 curriculum, linking with other subjects where appropriate
- develop the use of geographical information systems to enable better analysis and interpretation of map information by students
- ensure common assessments are carried out consistently and that clear guidance is provided to students so they know and understand what they need to do next to improve.

Art and Design

The overall effectiveness of art, craft and design was judged to be outstanding.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards in art are outstanding

- In Years 7 and 8, students' work in two and three dimensions using a range of art media, techniques and approaches, is of a good standard. They enjoy their work in, for example, drawing from observation, painting, collage, batik, wire sculpture and clay. Key drawing skills develop in Year 7 and Year 8, often from low starting points. Students learn to understand and apply important concepts of line drawing, and the representation of light and shade in an imaginative way. They collaborate well to produce very good quality, large-scale group pieces based on, for example, Chinese kites.
- Students' personal development through art is very good, and they begin to think and act like artists. For example, they responded very well to a project with a visiting artist which challenged them to use a T-shirt as the "canvas" for mixed-media exploration of their own identity. In another project, they explored the theme of the consequences of environmental pollution. Students' knowledge of artists and art movements is very well developed, and is often reflected in the way they respond practically to projects they undertake.

- The students use sketchbooks effectively to record visual ideas and artistic references. Homework in Years 7 and 8 is completed diligently and often to a very high standard. Their preparation plays a key role in maximising their time and skills in class.
- Work in Year 9 shows that boys and girls make very good and often exceptional progress in the subject. Students quickly develop technical skills which are excellent for their age group, and they gain confidence in expressing visual ideas. Their use of photographic and digital image manipulation gives them access to high levels of visual exploration, well beyond those usually associated with Key Stage 3 work. Year 9 students demonstrate very good knowledge of artists and their work, and they can articulate sophisticated ideas and views. Students' work shows good creative development and a willingness to make imaginative responses.
- In Years 10 and 11 students rapidly develop the skills to experiment visually and confidently in two and three dimensional media. They are able to use a range of techniques, and are confident when working on a large scale. Their drawing shows the benefit of the good grounding in techniques they have received in previous years. Their grasp of composition is good, and the use of colour is lively and creative.
- Students attain consistently high standards in General Certificate of secondary education (GCSE) examinations, and this reflects the depth and range of work seen in the art rooms and in student portfolios. Exceptional achievement at GCSE by girls last year was not matched by that of boys, but the school has worked hard to improve their examination performance by focusing on individual portfolios and targeted guidance.
- Sixth form work for the International Baccalaureate (IB) examination shows students exploring and investigating ideas in a mature and thoughtful way, building on GCSE skills and taking their work confidently on to the next level of personal expression. Their work continues to develop creatively and shows a willingness to experiment and take risks in pursuing themes. Sixth form students are willing to explore and able to respond to, new and challenging themes and ideas.
- Students' attitudes to the subject are very good. They are keen to explore, investigate and develop their creativity and personal identity through the subject. Students enjoy art, respond conscientiously to challenges given and understand how the subject relates to society.

Quality of teaching and learning of art

Teaching and learning are outstanding.

- Teachers demonstrate very good subject knowledge, covering a wide range of techniques, genres and periods. Their understanding of contemporary practice in visual art and its links with broader arts practice in, for example, film and music, provide a very good base for promoting high achievement in art and design. Teachers are able to use their strong practical skills to demonstrate techniques confidently. Their very wide range of knowledge of artists and art practice help to challenge students to develop their ideas and work creatively.

- The ability of teachers to promote and support individual, expressive work is excellent and plays a key role in the high standards achieved. For example, in a lesson which took the work of a contemporary portrait artist as its starting point, the adventurous technique of tearing and reworking into a charcoal drawing was very successful. Students gained confidence from the skilful way the activity was presented and explained by their teacher, and subsequent individual support was skilful and focused on progress.
- Students' homework is set regularly, with attractively produced information sheets used very effectively to motivate and inspire them to become involved.
- Work in portfolios demonstrates the impact of strong teaching over time. The clear focus on individual progression, enabling students to build their subject skills, knowledge and understanding to reach high standards, is evident. Teaching makes very good use of visual reference material which provides students with a full range of artistic references, and allows them insights into art practice over time, including contemporary work in a range of techniques and genres.
- The school make excellent use of outside agencies to enhance teaching and widen the scope of students' experience in art and design. For example, the work of an artist in residence gave students additional experience in developing personal responses through art. Visits to galleries allow students to work with gallery educators who bring different perspectives and help to engender new ways of thinking about the subject.
- Teaching ensures that assessment is sufficiently rigorous to promote progress. But it is also flexible enough to respond to the individual needs of students and their personal approaches. Assessment plays a very effective part in identifying where students are working creatively and shows them how further creativity can be developed. Assessments are very effectively used in lesson planning to ensure that lessons reflect the prior attainment of the students.
- Teachers know their students well and the care, support and guidance they provide is very good. The students receive very good advice when they are considering future choices of examination courses in Year 9, Year 11, and, in the sixth form, routes into higher education.

Quality of the curriculum

The curriculum is good with some outstanding features.

- The curriculum in Years 7 and 8 is broad and balanced. There is adequate coverage of National Curriculum requirements. Very good teaching ensures that students are able, in the time available, to develop key art skills including drawing, painting, printing, collage, textiles work, construction and clay work, as well as learning about and responding to the work of artists.
- The development of ideas and imaginative responses is a strong element of the art and design curriculum. From Year 7 onwards students are engaged in work which requires a personal response. Very good use is made of observational work to provide students with key drawing skills, and a wide variety of two and three dimensional media

- extends their range of expression and enhances their awareness of line, tone, texture and colour as elements of the language of art.
- The study of artists, and the links with working artists and galleries helps students develop a mature understanding of the way artists think and work.
 - Not all students continue with art through to Year 9 because they make choices about GCSE subjects at the end of Year 8. For those students who do continue with art and design, commencing their GCSE course in Year 9 and continuing through to Year 11, the curriculum is excellent, and provides for very good progress in the subject. For those who have dropped the subject at the end of Year 8, there is a very clear limitation on the scope they have for the continuing enjoyment of art activities beyond the two years of compulsory art provision they have experienced. The school is aware that this arrangement has the potential to limit experience students' cultural and creative development through the subject. Good plans are in place from September 2008 to provide common learning experiences across subject areas to meet the requirements of the new secondary curriculum and to develop students' creative thinking.
 - The needs of sixth form students are well met by the IB curriculum which provides a distinctive route and helps the development of mature art practice.
 - The art curriculum gives very good opportunities to develop an understanding of visual and other creative arts, including references to music and film. The development of a curriculum which takes more account of the potential of ICT, and of its relevance in the creative industries is now a priority for the subject.

Leadership and management of art

Leadership and management of the subject are good with outstanding features.

- The subject leader has already established very good practice in managing the subject, and this is demonstrated by high standards and very good teaching. The subject leader has a clear vision for the future development of the subject, with a focus on broadening yet further its creative aspects. The developments necessary to bring about these improvements have been identified and are being put in place.
- There are good systems in place to monitor and support the subject. Self evaluation by the subject leader is well focused and accurate. The school's requirement for annual departmental review and target-setting is led with professional skill and clarity by a member of the senior leadership team, and is used well to identify, in collaboration with the subject leader, areas of strength and areas for development.
- Management of the curriculum is good and is becoming stronger as the new subject leader embeds her vision for the future, using new courses and curriculum opportunities to put this in place. The subject leader ensures that the existing curriculum is taught well, maximising the opportunities students have to learn and succeed in art and design.

Subject issue: the impact of assessment on individual progress and creativity

- Assessment is used very well to ensure that students make very good progress. Subject-expert teacher comments, and well-planned self assessment activities play a key role in informing the progress of students over time.
- In Key Stage 3 assessment has been adapted to meet the school's requirement for regular assessment information about students' progress relative to National Curriculum levels. Sufficient time between assessment points enables teachers to form a rounded assessment of their performance.
- The approach teachers take to assessment is broad enough to ensure that students are credited for creative and innovative work. The development of agreed criteria for success involves discussion with students who have a good and clear view of their own progress.
- There is strong evidence that assessment is promoting creativity in the subject. The curriculum provides clear assessment opportunities by linking the characteristics of creativity to students' personal development. In preparation for cross-curricular developments in the near future, the subject leader is working successfully with colleagues in other subjects to provide criteria which encapsulate the generic qualities of creative learning. The development of creativity and its assessment is being prompted by work already undertaken in art to provide a suitable curriculum for the International Baccalaureate (IB). This has had a powerful effect on teachers' perceptions of how students can learn creatively, and is influencing thinking in subject planning for Key Stages 3 and 4.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- develop ICT within the art and design curriculum
- enable students, particularly Year 9, who do not take an examination, to enrich their creative and cultural development through art and design.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop geography and art, craft and design in the school.

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

Paul Weston
Her Majesty's Inspector