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17 July 2008

Mrs L Evans  
Headteacher  
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Dear Mrs Evans

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Geography and History

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 01, 02 and 03 July 2008 to look at work in geography and history.

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. For History, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a particular focus on the use of information and communication and technology (ICT) in history and the provision for gifted history students.

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 data, analysis of students' work and observation of three lessons.

## Geography

The overall effectiveness of geography is good.

### Achievement and standards

Achievement in geography is good and standards are above national expectations.

- The standards students attain at the end of Year 9 are above average, with increasing numbers of students attaining higher levels. Students

write confidently, in particular in explaining physical processes and the cause and effect of geographical events. They are able to use a wide range of geographical vocabulary accurately.

- Standards in Key Stage 4 are above average. Students perform particularly well in decision making exercises and their coursework is generally of good quality. Their work is well presented.
- There is some variation in the performance of boys and girls in both key stages and the department is aware of this and the reasons behind it.
- The progress students make in lessons is good as a result of the good teaching they receive.
- Students are aware of their end of key stage targets but are less sure of the steps they have to take to attain these.
- Students' attitudes towards learning are excellent. The relationships with their teachers are very positive and this is reflected in their outstanding behaviour. They enjoy geography.

### Quality of teaching and learning of geography

The quality of teaching is good.

- All lessons are planned in detail and include clear learning outcomes that are shared with the students.
- Teachers are confident in their subject knowledge and this is demonstrated well through the quality of their explanations and in their questioning.
- A wide range of learning activities is used in lessons, including a very good focus on developing students' thinking skills. These activities engage the students and help ensure they are fully involved in their learning.
- There are good opportunities for students to take part in discussions and undertake independent learning.
- Lessons are well structured and teachers use timed tasks effectively to ensure learning proceeds at a good pace.
- ICT is used well to support whole-class teaching.
- In mixed ability classes, the different learning needs of students are effectively met through, for example, the provision of targeted support materials.
- Learning support assistants work well with individuals and groups of students ensuring they are fully engaged in learning.
- Students' work is marked regularly with good comments made on the quality of geography. There is not enough focus however in the teachers' comments to indicate to students the steps they need to take to improve in order to reach their targets.

## Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is good.

- The curriculum provides breadth and balance and a good coverage of physical, environmental and human themes.
- The Key Stage 3 curriculum is regularly reviewed and includes a number of contemporary units such as the geography of crime and fashion. The new curriculum requirements in Key Stage 3 are being addressed
- The GCSE specification builds well on students' prior learning.
- A range of methods are used to assess each unit of the Key Stage 3 curriculum against National Curriculum levels. The assessment criteria are made available to students and there are opportunities for self and peer assessment.
- There are good opportunities for fieldwork, including international visits, across all years.
- Geography classrooms have vibrant, relevant displays that help support learning.

## Leadership and management of geography

Leadership and management of geography are good.

- The head of geography leads and manages the department effectively and has a clear rationale for the subject that is supported by a good self-evaluation.
- A strength of the head of geography is her ability to induct and develop new members of staff so that they quickly become high quality teachers.
- The geography improvement plan is well focused and manageable, and effectively supports whole-school developments.
- The setting by ability in the humanities subjects has helped ensure equal access to the curriculum and tailored specific support to those individual students who require it.
- There are good procedures in place for monitoring the quality of work in geography and good practice is regularly shared amongst the team.
- The department actively seeks the view of students in its evaluation of its work and these provide a useful perspective on provision.
- The department has good information about the performance of the students but is not using this as well as it could to inform target setting.
- Senior leaders have a very good understanding of the quality of geography and are committed to ensuring that all students have the opportunity to study the humanities in both key stages. There is good governor involvement in the subject.

## Subject issue

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

- The department is meeting well the school's focus on improving students' writing through providing good opportunities for extended writing for a range of audiences across the curriculum.
- There is a good focus on ensuring students use geographical vocabulary accurately and this is supported through the classroom display of key terms.
- Teachers' marking identifies spelling and grammatical errors and provides corrections.

## Areas for improvement

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

- use the available performance data more robustly to inform target setting particularly at Key Stage 4
- ensure that day-to-day marking provides students with the information they need to take the small steps required to move towards meeting their targets.

## History

### Achievement and standards

Students' achievement is outstanding in Key Stage 3 and good in Key Stage 4. Standards are well above average in Key Stage 3 and average in Key Stage 4.

- Standards in Key Stage 3 have improved substantially in recent years.
- Standards in Key Stage 4 have varied over the past few years and last year were below average. In part this was due to the slow response of the department to the increased number of lower-attaining students who now study history. However, appropriate action has since been taken and standards are now higher.
- The small number of students from ethnic minority backgrounds do as well as other students but there is a difference between the performance of girls and boys which the department is addressing successfully.
- Students' personal development is well supported by history. The moral dimensions of almost all curriculum topics are explored and there is a strong emphasis on helping students understand the background to contemporary events.

## Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning is good.

- There are the excellent relationships between staff and students and students' have a very positive attitude to the subject. Teachers are therefore encouraged to provide interesting experiences and in return students learn – often rapidly.
- Teachers know their subject well and are good at presenting it in different ways. Students have to listen but there is also plenty of opportunity for them to take initiatives, evaluate evidence and make sound historical judgements.
- Assessment information is being used increasingly well to ensure that what is taught meets students' needs and that students are very clear on how well they are doing and what they need to do better.
- Support staff are well deployed. They do their job quietly and sensitively and have a significant impact.

## Quality of the curriculum

The curriculum is good.

- The principal strength of the curriculum is that it is constantly evolving. As such it is not static and is changed to address different needs and interests as they are identified. There is an increasing tendency in the Key Stage 3 curriculum to choose topics that draw on the past to help explain the present. The department has not shied away from identifying its links with citizenship.
- The focus on the modern world in Key Stage 4 is also a reflection of staff and student interest in the present.
- The curriculum is enriched by numerous visits to historical sites, visitors to the school and a range of activities, such as the re-enactment on the school site of the Battle of Hastings.
- The department has been thinking about the implications of the new Key Stage 3 National Curriculum and plans for Year 7 are already well established.

## Leadership and management

The leadership and management of history are outstanding.

- The leadership provided by the head of department is a prime reason for the success of recent innovations and the improvement in both standards and achievement. He is passionate about history, teaches it well and this provides important encouragement for both colleagues and students.
- He has accurately analysed the strengths and weakness of the department, providing a sound basis for the changes. A good example

is his identification of variations in the quality of teaching and ways to address this.

- His willingness to work with external bodies such as the local history adviser and the examination board – the latter to improve students' performance in extended writing – has been particularly successful.
- He is very well supported by yourself and other senior managers who are keen to maintain the role of history in the curriculum.

Subject issue: the use of ICT in history

- Very good use is made of ICT. The department benefits from the school's specialist status and thus can draw on students' already established competence.
- Good use is made of white boards; there is frequent use of film and still photography. However, the most impressive use is to support students' research for evidence. Web-based evidence is used effectively; students well understand that it is unacceptable to simply 'cut and paste'.
- Students appreciate well the need to be discriminating in the use of potential history evidence. A good example was the teacher drawing attention to Google's warning about the interpretation material on the Jews.

Subject issue: provision for gifted history students

- The basis for the school's provision for gifted historians is setting. This works very well and students of all abilities benefit as work is successfully targeted to address different needs.
- There is also a register of gifted students from all subjects who are selected mainly on their performance in tests in Years 6 and 7.
- History students on the register are offered enrichment activities such as a project on Portsmouth dockyard and the chance to hear visiting speakers. These activities are successful.
- The relationship between the register and upper sets in history is insufficiently clear. In addition, history work identified as high quality on the inspection was produced by students not on the register.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- reviewing the arrangements for identifying gifted historians.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop history 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 Dowgill  
Additional Inspector