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Mrs Miles
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Dear Mrs Miles

Ofsted survey inspection programme – geography

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 02 and 03 December 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 how effectively geography teaching and the curriculum promotes community cohesion.

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 six lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is good.

Achievement and standards

Achievement is good and standards are above average.

- Standards at GCSE are steadily improving and are now above the national A* to C average in geography. In 2008, the percentage of students attaining the very highest grades was also above the national average.
- Students studying GCSE geography compile a comprehensive set of notes about key aspects of the subject which helps them access the

highest grades. There is a very good focus on the main concepts and processes and students demonstrate a good understanding of these.

- Standards at the end of Year 9 are above average with a high proportion of students attaining the higher National Curriculum levels.
- Year 9 students are able to write extended pieces of prose that include a clear explanation of human processes, such as migration, and make good reference to cause and effect. They draw accurate maps and are able to describe in some detail the resulting patterns.
- In lessons students make good progress. They know their targets and most have a good idea of what they have to do to improve.
- There are very good relationships between the staff and students, particularly in Key Stage 4. Older students are more able to self direct their own learning.
- Students enjoy geography as indicated in the increasing numbers choosing to study the subject at GCSE.

Quality of teaching and learning of geography

The quality of teaching and learning is good with some outstanding practice.

- Teachers' lesson planning is detailed. Clear learning objectives are identified and these are linked well to geographical enquiry questions. Assessment is an integral part of the planning process.
- Lessons have a clear structure with teachers using starter activities to engage students in their learning from the outset and plenary sessions to recap the main learning points.
- Teachers use a broad range of activities and different student groupings to actively involve students in their learning and ensure that lessons have good pace and challenge.
- Teachers have at least good subject knowledge as demonstrated in their explanations and they use questioning very well to check students' geographical knowledge and understanding. Praise is used effectively to confirm students' learning.
- Where teaching and learning are outstanding, the different needs of all students are met very well through a range of planned activities that fully absorb students in their learning and challenge them to consider their current understanding of, and approach to, their work.
- Information technology is used well by most teachers to support whole-class teaching but it is used less extensively by students in lessons
- The quality of day-to-day marking is too variable. The best practice clearly indicates to students why their work merits a certain level and what they have to do to improve on this.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is good.

- The curriculum across both key stages is broad and balanced ensuring good coverage of the physical, human and environmental aspects of geography.
- The new curriculum requirements in Key Stage 3 are being addressed through the systematic introduction of new units of work planned around key concepts, skills and knowledge.
- The schemes for each unit of work are planned in detail and identify the main concepts and skills. Assessment is also an integral part of each unit.
- The programme of fieldwork is a strength of the curriculum with opportunities for visits in each year group ensuring that there is a progressive development of students' fieldwork skills.
- The specialist geography rooms have very good displays that provide for a vibrant learning environment.

Leadership and management of geography

Leadership and management of geography are good.

- The joint leadership of the subject works well with good use being made of individual teacher's particular strengths.
- The department handbook has a good overview of the aims and purpose of geography, but some other aspects require updating.
- A strong feature of subject leadership is the thorough analysis of the examination data and the subsequent planned strategies to raise attainment, which are having a positive impact on GCSE results.
- Subject leaders have undertaken a comprehensive evaluation of the department using a wide range of evidence and paying particular attention to the view of students.
- Regular monitoring of teaching and learning is a feature of the work of the subject leaders and they have a good understanding of the areas that can be improved.
- Subject leaders are encouraging a collaborative approach to planning to ensure consistency across the department.
- There is a useful year-based assessment portfolio of exemplar work at different levels, which provides good support for teachers when marking formal assessments.
- There is a good range of resources in the department, with increasingly effective use being made of the interactive whiteboards.

Subject issue

The effectiveness of geography teaching and the curriculum in promoting community cohesion is good.

- The department has a clear view of how it can contribute to the promotion of community cohesion and has undertaken a thorough audit of the contribution of the curriculum to this.
- Specific units within the curriculum such as my place in the world, globalisation, population and development provide a strong basis for students to understand different issues across the world and how these impact on all of us.
- The broad range of fieldwork and local, regional and international visits, all play an effective role in developing students' understanding of different communities and environments.

Areas for improvement

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

- ensure that when planning for mixed ability classes an appropriate range of activities are devised, and subsequently implemented in the lessons, so that the needs of all learners are fully met
- improve the quality of day-to-day marking to that of the best
- prioritise the areas identified in the department self evaluation into a succinct action plan with measurable success criteria.

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