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Dr J Ferguson
Principal
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Dear Dr Ferguson

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Geography

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 01-02 October 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 effectively geography teaching and the curriculum promote 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 students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of data, analysis of students' work and observation of five lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is satisfactory with good features.

Achievement and standards

Overall, standards are good and achievement is satisfactory.

- Although standards on entry to the school are generally above average, the school draws from over 40 primary schools, with students having a wide variety of different geographical experiences.
- By the end of Key Stage 3 most students achieve above average standards. Most make satisfactory progress, and some groups such as higher attaining students make good progress.

- Standards are above average at the end of Key Stage 4. In 2008, 72.3% achieved the GCSE pass rate of A*-C and this has improved year on year. The majority of students met their targets and some exceeded them. The school's data analysis and scrutiny of work shows that most students make satisfactory progress overall.
- In 2008, staff absence had a detrimental impact on standards and progress in the sixth form. As a result, fewer than expected students achieved A-B grades at both AS and A2. Historically, students make satisfactory progress to achieve average standards at Advanced Level. All students have achieved a pass grade of A-C in the previous three years, in part, because the small numbers opting for geography allow for more personalised learning and individual attention.
- Students' attitudes and behaviour in lessons are good. They are well behaved and keen to learn. Many take a pride in their work, although scrutiny of books and folders shows some do not present their work carefully enough. Teachers enjoy good relationships with students in lessons.

Quality of teaching and learning of geography

The quality of teaching is satisfactory.

- There are examples of good teaching which are typified by a variety of teaching and learning activities that involve students and sustain their interest well. These have a brisk pace and carefully build on previous learning. For example, students identified that the recently introduced assessment for learning strategies, such as 'market place' are making lessons more interesting, challenging and enjoyable.
- Teachers have good subject knowledge and know the systems well. However, opportunities are sometimes missed to challenge and extend students. For example, although teachers use a range of questioning techniques which are widely distributed and help increase student participation, they are not always challenging enough to extend students' thinking.
- The department has rightly identified the need to improve students' independent learning skills. In some lessons, students are too passive and reliant on the teacher to provide them with information, which they accept without question. In addition, some lessons are over-dominated by teacher talk and in others unclear explanations are given, which confuse students.
- Scrutiny of books shows some inconsistency in the work covered where some books show work studied in greater depth and detail than others.
- Students' work is marked regularly and most are clear how well they have done and understand what they need to do next to improve. Diagnostic feedback is given to students after their work is assessed at key times, such as at the end of units of work, which gives them clear guidance.

- In discussion with students, many remain unsure about what level they are working at, the level they are working towards and precisely what they need to do to achieve it.
- A common assessment and tracking system has recently been implemented throughout the school which will further help teachers to intervene at an early stage when students are identified as not making sufficient progress
- Satisfactory opportunities are provided for students to use information communication technology (ICT) to develop or extend their geography work. Opportunities are less frequent in Key Stage 3 than the other key stages.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is good.

- This is a period of curriculum transition in the department at Key Stage 3, GCSE and Advanced Level. The changes have been managed well.
- The recently introduced 'Learning to Learn' curriculum builds on the four dimensions of the revised Key Stage 3 curriculum, incorporating a good range of key geography themes and skills. Good cross-curricular links are established with other subjects such as English, history and physical education (PE).
- The Key Stage 3 scheme of work fully meets national requirements. The geography team has already begun to consider revisions to its Years 8 and 9 curriculum in light of national guidance.
- Field work opportunities in Key Stage 3 are satisfactory. Students enjoy the traffic management and shopping field study in Leamington Spa and the Year 8 visit to Cadbury's World helps them increase their understanding of Fair Trade.
- The recently changed GCSE course has been successfully implemented and is an increasingly popular subject option, with significantly more students opting for the subject year on year.
- Students enjoy immensely the high quality GCSE fieldwork in Llandudno and the Advanced Level residential course at Flatford Mill, Suffolk which supports them well in their studies.

Leadership and management of geography

Leadership and management of geography are good.

- The head of department is dedicated and committed to improving provision and students' progress. She carefully monitors standards and uses the outcomes to implement changes in order to raise standards further.

- Self-evaluation is generally accurate. Within this, the geography department has an understanding of strengths and weaknesses and what needs to be done to improve further. These are incorporated into an appropriate plan of action.
- Good opportunities have been taken to keep abreast of current developments in the subject and the geography team has a good awareness of the current issues impacting on the subject. However, there are few opportunities to network and liaise with other geography departments to share ideas and good practice.
- The department is not yet fully aware of the range of geography experiences that students enter the school with.

Subject issue

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

- The whole school community cohesion policy, which should guide the work of the department, is not yet complete. Consequently, community cohesion is not yet identified within geography policy, strategic planning or within most schemes of work.
- The department supports community cohesion and understands the importance of delivering it through the geography curriculum. A good range of opportunities are provided throughout the school to learn about local, European and global issues.
- In the main, students enjoy good relationships with teachers and each other. Most students are appropriately engaged in their learning. They value each other and relationships between learners from different backgrounds are positive.

Areas for improvement

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

- continue to increase expectation and challenge in geography lessons
- further increase opportunities for students to become independent learners and develop their critical thinking skills
- reduce inconsistencies in subject content provided for students in the same year group
- use the assessment and tracking system to highlight and intervene at an early stage with those students who are not making sufficient progress.

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