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Mr M Roffe
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Dear Mr Roffe

Ofsted survey inspection programme – geography

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 18 and 19 November 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 five lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is good.

Achievement and standards

Standards and achievement are both outstanding overall.

- Students enter Year 7 having had a wide variety of differing geographical experiences. Overall, standards are above average when they enter the college.
- By the end of Key Stage 3, most students make good progress to achieve well above average standards.

- Standards at the end of Key Stage 4 have been exceptionally outstanding and consistently high in recent years. In 2008, fewer students achieved the highest levels compared with previous years. Nevertheless, 94% achieved the GCSE pass rate of A* to C which is well above the national average.
- In the sixth form, students make good or better progress and achieve above-average standards at A Level year on year. In 2008, 73% students achieved a pass grade of A to B, which is a significant improvement on previous years. Most make good progress because the smaller numbers opting for geography allows for more personalised learning and individual attention.
- In Key Stages 3 and 4, girls achieve better than boys. Post-16, there is no significant difference between the achievements of girls and boys.
- Students' attitudes and behaviour in lessons are excellent. They are well behaved and keen to learn even when they are set challenging tasks. Most take a pride in their work. Teachers enjoy very positive relationships with students.

Quality of teaching and learning of geography

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

- Teaching is at least good, with a high proportion that is outstanding. Teachers' planning is thorough and their subject knowledge is excellent. A variety of teaching and learning activities are presented which require students to collaborate and participate. This involves them fully in lessons and sustains their interest well.
- Most lessons have a brisk pace and carefully build on previous learning to extend students' thinking. Questions are widely distributed and this increases student participation.
- Resources are carefully selected to make lessons interesting and these fully engage and challenge pupils.
- Information and communication technology (ICT) is used well by teachers to support lessons. Although improving, opportunities for students to use ICT to support learning are more variable, particularly in Key Stage 3. In addition, although the department has resources and information ready for inclusion on the college's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), this has not yet been uploaded which means students are unable to access and make use of it.
- A good range of assessment activity has been recently introduced including better marking, self assessment and target setting. These are variably implemented. For example, students' work is marked regularly but, in Key Stage 3, clear guidance is not always given to inform them precisely what they need to do next to improve. In addition, although most students know their targets, many are vague about the next steps required to get to the next level.
- Insufficient use is made of data to track students in Key Stage 3 and target those who are not making expected progress at an early stage.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is satisfactory.

- Due to major college curriculum restructuring, the revision of the Key Stage 3 curriculum has been delayed. As a result the Key Stage 3 curriculum is judged unsatisfactory because it does not meet the statutory requirements of the new programmes of study.
- There are inequalities in the curriculum received by students in Year 7 due to timetabling issues and teaching by non-specialists.
- In Key Stage 3, satisfactory opportunities are taken to use field work and real examples to motivate and inspire students. Recent changes such as the appointment of Education Visit Assistants (EVA) and a revised programme of visits are being implemented to improve this situation.
- The curriculum for Key Stage 4 and examination classes is good. The GCSE geography course remains popular in Years 10 and 11 with high numbers opting to study the subject. The well planned and delivered curriculum contributes to pupils' good progress.
- Pupils enjoy immensely the high quality GCSE fieldwork in Norwich and Brancaster and the A Level residential course to Cranedale which supports their good achievement.
- Fieldwork experiences in Gresenhall, Bala, central Wales and Morocco are highly appreciated and contribute greatly to the profile of the subject and pupils' learning. Although valuable, some students are not able to participate which could disadvantage them in future studies.

Leadership and management of geography

Leadership and management of geography are good.

- Geography is a popular and successful subject in the school. The head of department works tirelessly and is committed to improving provision and students' progress.
- Self-evaluation by the geography department is accurate. It has a good understanding of strengths and weaknesses and what needs to be done to improve further.
- There are clear policies to steer the department. However, although these, such as the marking policy, are often discussed and agreed as a team their use and implementation are not checked frequently enough to ensure consistency of approach.
- The excellent geography team is very experienced and all work to their strengths. Regular team meetings focus on the day-to-day management issues but less attention is paid to the strategic direction of the subject.
- Professional development opportunities are used appropriately to support development of the department.
- The department has good capacity for ongoing improvement.

Subject issue

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

- The department supports community cohesion exceptionally well and understands the importance of delivering it through the geography curriculum. An excellent range of opportunities are provided throughout the school to learn about local, European and global issues.
- The department has participated fully in the British Council 'International Schools Award' (ISA), Eco-Schools and the School Waste Action Team (SWAT) which has had an excellent impact on its' work. The visit to Dweba School in Eastern Cape, as part of the IAS work on 'Exploring South Africa', has been used effectively to support the work of the school.
- 'International Ambassadors' have worked in feeder primary schools in the locality to share work on Namibia following the visit by college staff. Evaluations show these inputs have been very positively received.
- Through this work, staff and students show a very good understanding of how places, people and cultures are all interrelated. Current schemes of work have been systematically revised as a result of this work.
- Students enjoy excellent relationships with teachers and each other. Most students are fully engaged in their learning. They value each other and relationships between learners from different backgrounds are very positive.

Areas for improvement

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

- modify and adapt the Key Stage 3 curriculum in the light of national guidance so that it fully meets expectations
- ensure that all students have a core fieldwork entitlement which helps to develop their field work skills appropriately
- ensure that policies and strategies that are implemented are regularly checked to ensure consistency of approach and that a greater focus in team meetings is on the strategic direction of the subject.

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