

Alexandra House
33 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

T 08456 404040
F 0207 421 6855
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk



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Mr H Gilbert
Headteacher
St Ivo School
High Leys
St Ives
Cambridgeshire
PE27 6RR

Dear Mr Gilbert

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 students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of data, analysis of students' work and observation of seven lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is outstanding.

Achievement and standards

Both achievement and standards are outstanding overall.

- Although students have a wide variety of differing geographical experiences in feeder primary schools, standards on entry to St Ivo are broadly average.
- By the end of Key Stage 3, most make good progress to achieve above average standards.

- Students make outstanding progress in Key Stage 4 and 5. GCSE and post-16 examination results are well above average. Students' coursework is of an exceptionally high quality.
- In all Key Stages, there is no significant difference between the achievements of girls and boys.
- Behaviour is very good, reflecting teachers' high expectations. Students show high motivation and interest in geography and develop their literacy and information and communication technology (ICT) skills well through the subject. Students at all levels show good study skills.

Quality of teaching and learning of geography

The quality of teaching is outstanding overall.

- Teachers' planning is thorough and their subject knowledge is excellent. Lessons are very well structured, have a brisk pace and carefully build on previous learning to extend students' thinking.
- Lessons are stimulating and engaging. Resources are carefully selected to make lessons interesting and these fully engage and challenge students. Very occasionally, lessons fall below these high standards because teachers try to cover too much ground.
- Excellent use is made of video projection, ICT and active learning strategies. Plentiful opportunities are provided for challenging discussions during which students contribute ideas and develop their thinking skills.
- Questions are widely distributed which increases student participation. Teachers continually check students' understanding and, when necessary, respond quickly and flexibly to support or extend learning.
- All students speak highly of the quality of teaching and the variety of work provided for them. They report that 'we can go to any teacher in the department if we have any question or problem and they will help us.'
- Assessment is accurate. Marking is regular with most teachers using the departmental guide consistently to assess work. Coursework assessments are planned carefully, marked in great detail and provide good guidance for students. External moderation reports confirm the accuracy of the departments' judgements. Increasingly, students are active partners in assessing the outcomes of individual lessons or units of work.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is outstanding.

- The geography department has successfully modified the Key Stage 3 curriculum in line with the new programmes of study. Topics and themes are carefully selected to provide students with a firm foundation of understanding and skills in Year 7 which is extended in breadth and depth in subsequent years.
- The integrity of the subject has been retained, but at the same time the department has introduced appropriate and relevant cross-curricular links.

Literacy and art and design skills are used regularly to support teaching and learning activities. As part of the schools' humanities status opportunities to work closely with the history and drama departments are also being fully utilised.

- The geography scheme is continually being adapted and developed. For example, ICT, literacy and numeracy links, assessment for learning opportunities and topics such as the Olympics have recently been included.
- There is a strong field work programme. In Key Stage 3, a number of opportunities are presented to students such as studying micro-climates around the school and a river study at Stibbington. GCSE students have produced some excellent coursework following their study of St Ives and enjoy immensely the high quality coastal fieldwork at Dunwich. The A level residential course to Snowdonia coupled with other opportunities such as the urban studies of central Cambridge and London Docklands supports their outstanding achievement.
- ICT work is good. An excellent website supports the work of the department very well. The development of facilities such as web logs, (blogs), podcasts and wikis make this site interactive and collaborative as well as informative. Further ICT development work is planned to integrate and develop the use of geographical information systems to further increase students' skills of map analysis and interpretation.

Leadership and management of geography

Leadership and management of geography are outstanding.

- 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.
- The excellent geography team is very well led and managed. They all work to their strengths and are willing to adopt new initiatives and made these work effectively. They provide a considerable amount of time to developing and improving the subject for the benefit of students.
- Self-evaluation is accurate and all members of the department have a clear understanding of strengths and weaknesses and know precisely what needs to be done to improve further. A range of formal and informal monitoring and evaluation is undertaken. A protocol for peer assessment has been discussed and agreed and is poised for implementation.
- Student data is collected and robustly analysed to identify trends and seek reasons for differences in the performance of different groups.
- The geography department handbook is a comprehensive document which provides excellent guidance about the work of the department including accurate plans for further improvement and development.

Subject issue

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

- Community cohesion is exceptionally well supported by the geography department and it is delivered effectively through the broad geography curriculum. An excellent range of opportunities is provided throughout the school to learn about local, European and global issues.
- The school has the Eco-Schools silver award with the geography department a driving force behind this initiative. It has forged strong and effective links with Waitrose, the Co-op and a local Fairtrade shop in the town. Eco-schools committee meetings are regularly attended by representatives from Huntingdon District Council. Together, initiatives such as 'bags for life', promoting locally sourced food and developing the school's allotment combine to raise all students' awareness of issues such as Fairtrade, global issues and sustainability.
- Effective links have been established with parents and carers from different communities such as Pakistan, Bangladesh and Eastern Europe. Visits to Kenya, South Africa and Iceland have provided students with the opportunity to study key geographical features of those countries whilst at the same time increase their understanding of wider global issues.
- Through this wide range of work, staff and students show a very good understanding of how places, people and cultures are all interrelated. Schemes of work have been systematically revised to take account 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:

- develop the use of geographical information systems to enable better analysis and interpretation of map information by students
- implement the agreed peer observation programme to provide increased opportunities for all geography teachers to observe each other and share ideas and strategies in order to improve teaching and learning further.

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