

Alexandra House
33 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

T 08456 404040
F 020 7421 6855
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk



27 November 2008

Mr D Blow
Headteacher
The Ashcombe School
Ashcombe Road
Dorking
Surrey
RH4 1LY

Dear Mr Blow

Ofsted survey inspection programme – geography

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 06 and 07 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 on how effectively the geography teaching and 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 eight lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is good. There are some outstanding features as well as some areas for further development.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards are both good.

- Students make rapid progress during Key Stage 3 and their standards at the end of Year 9 are well above average. Students develop their skills well where they are challenged through structured enquiries; for example, through investigation whether a hotel should be built in a Kenyan national park. However, their skills to ask and answer their own geographical questions are less well developed.

- The proportion of students taking the GCSE course has improved over the last three years and is now well above the national average.
- At GCSE, students make good progress and achieve standards that are well above average because teaching is consistently good, work is very well planned, and students know how to achieve their challenging targets. Different groups, including boys and girls, have similar levels of good achievement.
- In the sixth form, students make outstanding progress and their standards are high. For example, Year 12 students have a very good understanding of the causes of desertification in Burkina Faso and possible remedies. Year 13 students were skilled at critically evaluating their coursework investigations of a river or stretch of coastline.
- Students' personal development is outstanding and makes a significant contribution to their good progress. They enjoy fieldwork, as well as investigative and practical activities which require them to apply their geographical knowledge and understanding.
- Relationships between students and teachers are very good. Students are keen to contribute to lessons. Their behaviour and attitudes to work are excellent.

Quality of teaching and learning of geography

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

- The quality of teaching is always good and sometimes outstanding. Common strengths of the teaching include:
 - high quality planning that includes a variety of learning activities, uses stimulating learning resources and contributes to students' brisk pace of learning
 - very good use of information and communication technology by both teachers and students as, for example, when Year 11 students used aerial images of Brighton to investigate the structure of a town
 - teachers' having very good subject knowledge so that they are able to ask challenging questions to extend students' knowledge and understanding
 - teachers' making careful use of assessment to ensure that work is well matched to students' learning needs including the provision of opportunities for students to assess their own work
 - very effective class management that helps to involve all students in their learning.
- Teaching is best in Year 9 and exam classes. Where geography is taught by non-specialists in Years 7 and 8 it is also of good quality because staff have good teaching skills and receive effective guidance about geography teaching.

- Clear targets are set for each student. Teachers' good quality marking gives specific guidance about how to improve their work although students do not always respond consistently to this advice.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is good with some outstanding features.

- A new, good scheme of work is being piloted with Year 7. There are also well structured and detailed schemes of work for all courses. These are continually being updated and improved.
- There is fieldwork in each year group with especially good provision at A Level.
- Students in each year enjoy making good use of geographical information systems (GIS). The school provides GIS training for teachers in other schools.
- As a language college, the school has a wide range on international links, including a school in Tanzania. Geography is beginning to make greater use of such links as a contemporary learning resource.
- The school has a Sustainable Schools Award and leads a network of schools in sharing good practice about education for sustainable development. In addition, the school has the Eco-Schools Silver Award. These contribute to students' good understanding of sustainable development.

Leadership and management of geography

Leadership and management of geography is outstanding overall.

- The geography teachers work as a very effective team. The department has continued to improve its effectiveness despite significant changes to geography staffing in the current school year.
- The impact of very good professional development for staff in both geography and leadership is evident in many aspects of the department's work.
- The good quality monitoring and evaluation is helping the department to improve the range and quality of teaching strategies. However, the focus is primarily on teaching and only satisfactory emphasis is currently being given to students' learning.
- There is an excellent evaluation of students' views at the ends of some modules of work. Students identify the work that they enjoyed and their suggested improvements. The department gives due consideration to their developmental points

Subject issue

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

- Lessons help to develop a good understanding of the lives of people from different backgrounds and cultures around the world through, for example, the study of migration in Brazil.
- Students are also able to consider the impact of their own lives on local and global environments.
- Students are encouraged to critically evaluate the action taken by governments and non-governmental organisations in response to global issues. However, they have only satisfactory opportunities to use their citizenship skills in relation to geographical issues that affect themselves and those around them.
- Although all students learn about the diversity of communities around the world, there is limited learning about the diversity of communities within Britain, particularly in Key Stage 3.

Areas for improvement

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

- ensure that all students respond to comments and advice provided through their teachers' good marking
- strengthen enquiries into local issues so that students have opportunities to utilise their citizenship skills in a more practical way
- develop students' knowledge and understanding of contrasting localities in other parts of Britain, especially in Key Stage 3.

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

Mike Milton
Additional Inspector