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Mr Dyer
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Dyer

Ofsted survey inspection programme – geography

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 04 and 05 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 three lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is satisfactory and improving.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards are both satisfactory.

- Students enter the school with broadly average standards. They make satisfactory progress to reach average standards by the end of Key Stages 3 and 4.
- Standards are rising. In the last three years, GCSE results have risen from below average to be in line with the provisional national average in 2008. Results at the highest grades (A*/A) have also increased but remain below average.

- These improvements represent satisfactory achievement overall. However, a small, but diminishing, minority of students do not reach the challenging targets which are set on the basis of their prior attainment.
- The subject is an increasingly popular GCSE choice for students. A higher proportion take the examination course than is typical in other schools.
- Students of all ages enjoy their experience of geography, saying that it is one of their best lessons. They enjoy the variety of work they receive and the interesting places, cultures and ideas they encounter.
- Their behaviour is excellent and they willingly participate in learning activities. This contributes well to the secure progress that they make.

Quality of teaching and learning of geography

The quality of teaching is satisfactory.

- There are a number of good qualities to teaching which are improving learning. However, currently, the overall impact produces no better than satisfactory achievement.
- Very good relationships underpin the warm and welcoming atmosphere that teachers have established.
- The fundamentals of secure teaching are firmly in place. Lessons follow the structure and methods suggested by national guidance; learning objectives are made clear to students and their learning is checked in appropriate ways.
- Teachers use good subject knowledge to make clear presentations using large computer displays to engage students' interest.
- Middle and higher ability students are not consistently stretched by the work they are expected to do. Often, the same lesson activities are given to all students in the class, no matter what their ability.
- Teachers mark and assess students' work regularly to be able to monitor progress towards their targets. Opportunities for reflection and feedback are a consistent feature of lessons.
- Assessment information is not always used to get the pitch of the lesson just right, or to refine lesson objectives so that they are precise enough to check learning accurately. In some cases, this is because, at Key Stage 3, judgements about attainment at the higher levels are inflated. At Key Stage 4, not enough use is made of examination mark schemes to show students how to improve their answers.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is good.

- Schemes of work are planned in detail for Key Stage 3 topics and for the GCSE course. These contribute well to the higher standards which have been secured in recent years.

- The curriculum is regularly reviewed and refined to improve its relevance and to make it more topical. This is reflected in the interest that students' take in global issues such as 'Fair Trade' and the plight of refugees in different parts of the world.
- The curriculum is enriched well through a wide range of learning activities and the use of engaging Information Communication Technology (ICT) resources. GCSE students receive additional targeted support for coursework and examination revision. They enjoy the visit they make to an outdoor activities centre.
- The department recognises that the current opportunities to learn outside of the classroom and to develop practical fieldwork skills during Key Stage 3 are insufficient.

Leadership and management of geography

Leadership and management of geography are satisfactory with some good features.

- The subject team has responded positively to the school's drive to raise standards and to improve the quality of provision. Standards are rising, and whilst achievement is currently satisfactory, the department shows a good capacity to improve further.
- The department is managed well. A progressive curriculum has been established and a well-organised system of assessment is enabling students' progress to be tracked and reviewed regularly.
- School procedures are followed diligently to monitor and evaluate the department's work. Suitable improvement priorities are identified and pursued enthusiastically.
- External networks, such as that provided by the Geography Association are used to access good practice elsewhere. This is shown by the positive consideration being given to the recent changes to National Curriculum requirements.

Subject issue

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

- An analysis of provision has raised awareness of the contribution made by the subject and given greater focus to the work being done.
- Teachers strive to extend students' understanding of other peoples and places beyond the immediate locality. They provide a good number of opportunities for students to consider the diversity of communities in the United Kingdom and elsewhere in the world.
- Students acquire positive attitudes and values towards life in societies different to their own. They reflect seriously on issues connected to interdependence.

- Relationships in lessons are very positive and students from different backgrounds work harmoniously together.

Areas for improvement

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

- provide more consistent challenge in lessons in order to increase the pace of progress across Key Stages 3 and 4
- refine the use of assessment information to inform lesson planning and to give students a more precise understanding of what to do to improve the standard of their work
- extend opportunities for outdoor learning and the acquisition of practical fieldwork skills at 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

Ralph Higgs
Additional Inspector