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Mr S Munday
Principal
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Dear Mr Munday

Ofsted survey inspection programme – geography 2008/09

Thank you for your hospitality and co operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 14 and 15 January 2009 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 outstanding.

Achievement and standards

Both achievement and standards are outstanding overall.

- Standards on entry to Comberton are broadly average although students have a wide range of differing geographical experiences in feeder primary schools. However, the department is not fully aware of the range of geography experiences that pupils enter the school with.

- Throughout Key Stage 3 most students make excellent progress to achieve exceptionally high standards by the end of Year 9. The department has increased the proportion of students achieving the higher levels as a result of better assessment and targeting. Development plans show this as an area for further development and improvement.
- Throughout Key Stage 4 most students continue to make outstanding progress. GCSE examination results are well above average. In 2008, almost two-fifths of students achieved A* to A, with nine-tenths achieving A* to C.
- Geography is an increasingly popular and successful subject in the school. In both key stages, there is no significant difference between the achievements of girls and boys.
- Behaviour is very good, reflecting teachers' high expectations. Most students are highly interested and motivated in geography lessons.
- Students at all levels demonstrate good research skills and expertise in literacy and information and communication technology (ICT). For example, they demonstrate their proficiency in Year 7 by producing detailed travel guides to Antarctica and in Year 9 have written in-depth newspaper reports about earthquakes and their impact.

Quality of teaching and learning of geography

The quality of teaching is outstanding overall.

- Teachers have excellent subject knowledge. They plan and structure their lessons well, carefully building on previous learning to extend students' thinking.
- Students are fully engaged and challenged because most lessons have a brisk pace with resources carefully chosen to make them stimulating and interesting.
- Strategies such as active learning skills, as used in a Year 9 lesson on international trade patterns, promote challenging discussions and develop students' thinking skills very well.
- Newly appointed teachers use class plans to target questions effectively. In all lessons, student participation is increased because questions are widely distributed. However, supplementary questions are not always used to challenge or extend thinking. Understanding is checked well through the use of mini-plenaries and teachers respond quickly and flexibly to support or extend learning, when required.
- Students speak very highly about their geography lessons. They describe teachers as friendly, enthusiastic and helpful and lessons vibrant, interesting and enjoyable. One student enthused 'the geography department is a great community; it's an ecosystem of the school.'
- A broad range of assessment techniques is used to support learning. Homework is set and marked regularly. Coursework assessments are planned at appropriate times in each unit. These are marked in detail using the excellent summary sheet as a framework to provide thorough

guidance for students. 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 Key Stage 3 curriculum has been successfully modified in line with the new programmes of study. Students are provided with a firm foundation of understanding and skills in Year 7 which is extended in breadth and depth in subsequent years.
- Interesting topics and themes have been developed in comprehensive schemes of work. New themes on migration and China been developed and introduced. Appropriate opportunities are taken to link with other departments such as Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) where work on Spain is being developed.
- The Key Stage 4 syllabus is due to change from September 2009. The department has investigated and discussed alternatives and has agreed the new syllabus to be implemented. Work is at a preliminary stage to devise the subsequent scheme of work.
- All schemes of work identify appropriate opportunities for creative, reasoning, empathetic, active, tenacious and everlasting (CREATE) thinking. These skills are explicitly used or referred to in most lessons which helps develop students' interest and encourages participation.
- The field work programme is good. In Key Stage 3, a number of opportunities are presented to students such as studying micro-climates around the school and a field trip to study coastal erosion at Walton on the Naze. GCSE students enjoy immensely their three day residential fieldtrip to consider the future of the Isle of Purbeck which results in work of exceptional quality.
- ICT work is good although further hardware and software is required to improve this aspect and increase access further. For example, ICT development work is planned to integrate and develop the use of geographical information systems to develop students' skills of map analysis and interpretation.

Leadership and management of geography

Leadership and management of geography are outstanding.

- The head of department provides outstanding leadership and management of the excellent geography team. Despite recent staffing changes, the department continues to work to an exceptionally high standard. New colleagues have been inducted well into the department and the school.
- Self-evaluation is accurate and thorough. A wide range of formal and informal monitoring and evaluation is undertaken and the outcomes are used well to identify areas for improvement. Regular team meetings and

discussions ensure that all members of the department have a precise understanding of strengths and development areas.

- 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. These are evaluated at appropriate times.
- Continuing professional development is used effectively to provide appropriate training and development opportunities, both in school and with other providers including Cambridge University.

Subject issue

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

- Community cohesion is well supported by the college and geography department. This work 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.
- Schemes of work have been systematically revised to take account of this work. In each unit, clear and explicit links to community cohesion are identified, accompanied by a series of key questions.
- Effective international links have been established with different communities such as Spain, South Africa and China. These provide students with the opportunity to study key geographical features of those countries whilst at the same time increasing their understanding of wider global issues.
- The environmental club has achieved the bronze 'Sustainable Schools Award' and students have participated in online global conferences with other students from around the world.
- All lessons are taught in mixed ability groups and teachers ensure that all members of the class are treated equally and all opinions and contributions are valued. Misconceptions are challenged and tolerance encouraged.
- 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.
- The deputy principal with responsibility for Equal Opportunities and Community Cohesion has developed a successful model for promoting community cohesion throughout the college. For example, the 'People People' role helps to promote positive relations, encourages students to treat each other with respect and spreads tolerance about different cultures and beliefs. This work has been widely disseminated locally and nationally.

Areas for improvement

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

- develop and implement the Key Stage 4 scheme of work
- further develop the use of geographical information systems to enable better analysis and interpretation of map information by students.

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