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23 February 2009

Mrs L Exley
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Dear Mrs Exley

Ofsted 2008-09 subject survey inspection programme: geography

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 27 and 28 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 good.

Achievement and standards

Standards at the end of Key Stage 3 are above national expectations and by the end of Key Stage 4 are exceptionally high. Achievement is outstanding.

- Students enter the school with standards that are generally in line with the national average. By the end of Year 11 the proportion of students attaining higher grades at GCSE is significantly above the national average in geography. This level of performance has been sustained for a number of years and demonstrates outstanding progress.

- By the end of Year 9 a higher than average proportion of students attain standards that are in line with or above national expectations. This is good progress. Not enough students however attain the higher National Curriculum levels.
- Students are aware of their targets and have a good understanding of what they have to do improve.
- Students' attitude towards geography is excellent and is reflected in their enjoyment of the subject and their outstanding behaviour in lessons.

Quality of teaching and learning of geography

The quality of teaching and learning is good.

- All teachers in the department consistently teach lessons of high quality and have high expectations of the students.
- The teachers are enthusiastic geographers who transfer their passion for the subject across to the students very well.
- Teachers have very good subject knowledge and, in particular, a detailed understanding of the requirements of the GCSE examination specification and what is required to attain the highest grades.
- Lesson planning is detailed and with good learning outcomes that are linked to National Curriculum levels or GCSE examination criteria. The outcomes are shared with students, usually at the start of lessons.
- Lessons have a clear structure which helps learning proceed at a good pace.
- Teachers use questioning effectively to check students' knowledge and understanding and students respond very well to this.
- Most of the lessons observed were teacher led and, although including a range of activities, there were few opportunities for students to undertake independent learning.
- A range of student groupings are used very well and are matched to the planned activities. Students enjoy and work confidently in groups.
- Students' work is marked regularly and they are provided with feedback on how to improve their work. This, however, does not always focus sufficiently on geography.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is good.

- The Key Stage 3 curriculum provides a suitable range of units covering the study of physical and human themes and specific places. The time allocated to each unit allows for its study in depth.
- The Key Stage 3 curriculum is currently being revised in light of the new requirements and the forthcoming change in GCSE specification. Plans are in place to ensure that there is progression across both Key Stages.

- Comprehensive, well structured schemes of work are in place. Formal assessment tasks are built into each unit of work but there are not sufficient opportunities for the regular assessment of students' work against National Curriculum levels.
- Plans are well advanced for the introduction of a new GCSE examination specification.
- The current fieldwork programme does not provide for the progressive development of students' fieldwork skills.
- Very good progress has been made in the development of the virtual learning environment for geography and this provides an excellent opportunity to further enhance teaching and learning and the curriculum.

Leadership and management of geography

Leadership and management of geography are good.

- The strong team of specialist geographers are very ably managed by the subject leader. Collaboration, challenge and support are key characteristics of the way in which the geography staff work.
- The geography team are willing to take on new initiatives and make them work well and professional development opportunities are used effectively in support of this.
- The department has an accurate evaluation of its current position. This is informed by a broad range of evidence including regular monitoring of teaching and students' work. There is a well-focused, manageable departmental improvement plan.
- Geography is a very popular and successful subject. Student uptake at GCSE is high.
- Very good attention is paid to 'student voice' and the information gathered is used to inform the development of the subject.
- The geography rooms are vibrant learning environments, with colourful, informative displays that focus on learning.
- The department has outstanding capacity for ongoing improvement.

Subject issue

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

- The subject leader has recently completed an audit of the curriculum against the key aspects of community cohesion.
- Staff are fully aware of the contribution geography can make towards the promotion of community cohesion, in particular in developing students' understanding of cultural diversity and their place in the world.

- Opportunities to promote community cohesion are evident in a number of units of work currently taught but these are implicit rather than clearly planned for.

Areas for improvement

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

- ensure that there is greater challenge for the more able students in Years 7 to 9
- provide more opportunities for the students to develop the skills required for independent learning so that they become self directed learners
- introduce a coherent programme of fieldwork across Key Stage 3 that progressively develops the students' skills.

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 Dowgill
Additional Inspector