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Dear Mr Lamberton

Ofsted survey inspection programme – geography

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 23 and 24 February 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 on assessing 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 lessons in Key Stages 3 and 4 and the sixth form.

The overall effectiveness of geography is good.

Achievement and standards

Achievement is good and standards are high.

- Students achieve well from starting points that are slightly above national average in geography. Standards are high at the end of each key stage reflecting good progress. Students' achievement in geography is strong in relation to other departments in the school.

- Students develop good knowledge, skills and understanding with particular strengths in their understanding of physical processes and sustainable development issues. Students' understanding of the human geography of the British Isles and their locational knowledge are relatively weaker aspects.
- The writing skills of students are good since good opportunities are provided for extended writing, the learning of key vocabulary and note taking. Students whose literacy skills are weaker do not always receive sufficient support to enable them to respond confidently to the high levels of challenge.
- Geography contributes well to students' personal development, particularly their social and moral development. Relationships between students and with staff are positive; attitudes to learning are good. Students acquire good team working skills as a result of the many opportunities provided for them to work collaboratively.

Quality of teaching and learning of geography

The quality of teaching and learning is good.

- Teachers use a wide range of teaching and learning activities that students enjoy. The quality of teaching and students' enjoyment of learning increases with each stage of education.
- Most of the teachers are geography specialists and they display good subject knowledge which enables them to plan for student progression and use open ended questions to explore and extend students' understanding. However, questions are not consistently targeted to meet individual students' needs and teachers do not consistently consider how students' prior learning might contribute to their development of new knowledge and skills.
- Students learn actively about geography through teachers' planning for enquiry and discussion. Fieldwork skills are taught well overall and in each key stage, but students do not experience a wide range of activities in every year. Independent learning is limited by the lack of access to computers in classrooms.
- Teachers ensure that students have access to a wide range of resources to support learning. These are being further enhanced through the use of interactive whiteboards for teaching and the growing use of current topical materials particularly in Year 7 and the sixth form.
- Good use of targets and effective marking ensure that students know how well they are doing. They also understand what is required to make the next steps in their learning as teachers make increasing use of assessment criteria and students are helped to judge the quality of their own and others work. The impact of these developments is positive but is reduced when assessments are done after tasks are completed rather than the criteria being used to inform students' thinking as they undertake their work.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is good.

- The curriculum is planned well around key questions to encourage students' understanding of geographical concepts through contributions from the whole department.
- Topics within the curriculum are helpfully revisited in increasing depth as students progress through the key stages. This helps students to develop their skills strongly and prepares them well for examinations. From Year 9 students can opt for environmental science as well as geography. Since some of the teachers teach both subjects, curriculum links are strengthened and students benefit.
- New schemes of work, already in place for Year 7, are being designed appropriately to meet national requirements, stimulate wider geographical thinking and promote interactive and relevant learning.
- Themes are well chosen to ensure curriculum balance but it is less clear what consideration has been given to students' prior experience of geography at Key Stage 2.
- Curriculum planning ensures that the highest attaining students are challenged and those with specific learning difficulties are supported.
- Links between geography and literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology are not sufficiently explicit within the curriculum and the choice of learning tasks and resources are not consistently personalised to meet individual students' needs.
- Teachers adhere to curriculum planning so that there are no gaps in coverage and the time available for the subject is used well. Homework is relevant and varied and makes a good contribution to students' learning.
- A good proportion of students continue with their geographical education at university after leaving the sixth form since the curriculum promotes enjoyment and provides a good basis for a range of courses.

Leadership and management of geography

Leadership and management of geography are good.

- The head of department is conscientious, reflective and keen for the department to build on its strengths as well as address those areas in which further improvement would be beneficial. All the teachers of geography work cohesively as a team and play their part in developing the department. The department evaluates itself and has good capacity to improve.
- Lesson observations and scrutiny of students' work using common whole school proforma are systematically used to ensure the quality of provision in the department. However, they place insufficient emphasis on the impact of teaching on students' progress. It is also not

sufficiently clear how identified strengths will be shared or how areas for improvement will be supported and development checked.

- Students' opinions about their learning have been sought both formally and informally. Although students say they can always express their opinions because relationships are strong, the department are aware this needs to be a more consistent feature of improvement planning.
- The department development plan shows good responsiveness to whole school priorities and national initiatives. Although department specific priorities arising from departmental reflection and discussion, are included and are relevant, aspects identified from checking and evaluating are not always present in the plan.
- Staff in the department have good access to professional development opportunities through external training, collaborative internal training and research opportunities. These are valued. The department also benefits from membership of a subject association to promote creative thinking amongst staff. Newly qualified teachers receive strong support.
- The department makes effective use of achievement and attainment data provided by the school to track students' progress. Where appropriate, the department raise students' targets to make them even more aspirational and this helps ensure good levels of achievement.

Subject issue

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

- The range of teaching and learning strategies used in the department make a positive contribution to students' behaviour and their attitudes to learning and each other.
- Increasing opportunities for students to learn about and make links with their wider local area promote students' awareness of their roles as responsible citizens.
- The curriculum is well planned to develop students' understanding of how their personal actions may have a global impact.
- The department recognises that students have more limited opportunities to develop their awareness of socio-economic, faith and ethnic diversity. The promotion of community cohesion through the use of topicality within the curriculum and by choosing a wider range of locations and places to study is under consideration in the revised planning.
- The school has undertaken an audit of how different curriculum subjects help promote students' social, moral, spiritual and cultural development and is in the process of analysing the outcomes to inform whole school planning for community cohesion.

Areas for improvement

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

- review the way checking and evaluation inform improvement planning and are directly linked to their impact on achievement
- plan specifically to promote community cohesion in all its dimensions, particularly when developing the new curriculum
- widen students' locational knowledge
- increasingly personalise learning to match students' needs and take account of prior learning.

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

Sonya Williamson
Her Majesty Inspector