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Mrs O'Neill
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Dear Mrs O'Neill

Ofsted survey inspection programme- geography

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 26 and 27 March 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 observations of a faculty meeting and six lessons in Key Stages 3 and 4.

Despite the fact that students' achievement and teaching and learning are satisfactory overall, there are many aspects of the curriculum and the leadership and management of the subject that require improvement. As a result, the overall effectiveness of geography is inadequate.

Achievement and standards

Achievement is satisfactory and standards are broadly average.

- Students enter and leave the school with standards that range from below average to broadly average in geography. They make satisfactory progress overall.

- Students' knowledge and understanding of international locations is good although there are weaknesses in students' knowledge and understanding of locations within the British Isles.
- Students' independent learning skills are limited by inadequate planning for fieldwork and enquiry and a lack of opportunity to use computers to support learning.
- Standards at Key Stage 3, which had been low for some years, are now on a rising trend.
- There are currently no students studying geography in Year 11 and 18 students in Year 10.
- The behaviour and attitudes of students are good. They engage in learning and are supportive of each other when working in pairs. Relationships with teachers are positive, particularly in Key Stage 4.

Quality of teaching and learning of geography

The quality of teaching and learning is satisfactory.

- Behaviour management is good. Although girls are less well motivated than boys, all students want to do well.
- Well phrased learning objectives are used to plan lessons but learning time is lost when students have to write them down. It is not made sufficiently clear to students what they need to do to achieve their objectives.
- An adequate range of teaching and learning strategies are used overall. However, students in each key stage say they would prefer more interactive lessons with more opportunities for independent investigation and study outside the classroom.
- Although one to one interventions support students' understanding, levels of challenge are too high for lower attaining students and too low for those who are capable of attaining the highest levels and grades.
- Teachers' support for students' individual literacy and numeracy needs is in the early stages of development.
- Marking is inconsistent. At its best it uses grades and levels and refers to the next steps needed in learning. However, too much is too general with comments at the ends of units only focusing on effort and presentation. Marking in Key Stage 4 only provides students with their test results.
- Learning is enhanced by teachers' use of open ended questions but since they are not consistently targeted at individual students and learning is not probed consistently by follow up questions, students' achievement is limited.
- Homework provides satisfactory opportunities for independent learning.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is inadequate.

- The curriculum has not been designed to meet the individual needs and interests of the Buile Hill students. It is too reliant on published schemes of work and does not build sufficiently well from students' own experiences.
- In Key Stage 3 the curriculum does not plan for progression in understanding. Links are not made with students' prior learning about geography from the primary schools. Analysis of assessment outcomes does not inform planning.
- Curriculum planning does not formally take students' views into account or take account of any analysis of strengths and weaknesses in the existing curriculum.
- Curriculum planning does not give sufficient consideration to how geographical learning can contribute to students' learning in literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology (ICT).
- The curriculum in Year 7 has not been adapted to meet the requirements of the new National Curriculum. Initial planning, although rooted in sound geography, emphasises content at the expense of wider understanding and the development of transferable skills.
- Opportunities for learning outside the classroom are inadequate.
- The revisiting of topics is a good feature of the curriculum and students appreciate the additional time given to discussion and explanation.

Leadership and management of geography

Leadership and management of geography are inadequate.

- Issues previously identified for improvement by whole school review systems, including weak aspects of the curriculum, the development of ICT, extending fieldwork and increasing the range of assessment strategies, have not been addressed sufficiently well.
- Checking and evaluation in the department is underdeveloped. The analysis of strengths and weaknesses does not lead to priorities for improvement planning.
- Development planning is not subject specific and does not reflect the school's key priorities.
- Departmental self-evaluation gives insufficient emphasis to the impact of provision on students' standards and achievement.
- Although the department has access to an appropriate range of continuous professional development opportunities there is limited evidence of their impact on teaching, learning and curriculum planning.
- Data provided at whole school level is used to set accurate targets for students. However, the department does not make use of checks for any discrepancies in achievement by gender, ethnicity or attainment.

Strengths and weaknesses in different aspects of geography are not identified from assessment strategies.

- Although appropriate policies are in place and are well linked to whole school policies, they are not fully adhered to in the departments' daily work.
- The department has access to a good range of resources to support teaching and learning.

Subject issue

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

- The provision in geography gives satisfactory opportunities for students to learn about the similarities and differences between people and places around the world. The curriculum provides less opportunity for them to learn about differences within their own national and local communities.
- Although teaching encourages students to consider their roles and responsibilities as citizens, opportunities for in depth discussion of attitudes and values are limited.
- Case studies about countries such as France and Ghana enable students to understand links between people, places and localities. However, these contexts are not well linked to students' interests or experiences and there are insufficient opportunities to consider ethnic and faith issues.

Areas for improvement

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

- ensure that the curriculum meets statutory requirements and students' needs and interests
- develop checking and evaluation systems so that they focus on raising achievement and lead to appropriate subject specific improvement actions
- tailor teaching to the learning needs of students
- extend the range of assessment strategies and ensure that the information gained from assessment informs lesson and curriculum planning
- make learning more interactive and investigative.

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's Inspector