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Mr A Rodchester  
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Dear Mr Rodchester

Ofsted survey inspection programme – geography

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 25 and 26 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 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 students' work and observation of eight lessons.

Although standards at GCSE are good, senior managers have identified weaknesses in provision overall. HMI agree that overall provision is weak.

Achievement and standards

Standards at GCSE are good; they are satisfactory elsewhere. Students make inconsistent progress in lessons and achievement is satisfactory overall.

- Students enter the school in Year 7 with a very mixed experience of geography. Many have a very limited knowledge and understanding of the subject and have poorly developed geographical skills.

- At Key Stage 3 students gain a broad understanding of places and geographical processes. However, their studies frequently lack depth and their learning at times can be superficial.
- Mapwork skills are developed sporadically. Students have had no opportunities to develop fieldwork skills.
- Numbers of students taking GCSE fluctuate from year to year. Students frequently practise and develop exam techniques and are well supported, which enables them to attain good grades. However, few students attain the higher levels.
- Through their study of the subject, students gain much factual geographical knowledge, but investigation and enquiry skills are underdeveloped. They are not independent learners.
- Very few students choose to take geography beyond GCSE. This small number make satisfactory progress overall and benefit from more individual support.
- Relationships between students and teachers are good. However, few opportunities are presented for them to work collaboratively.

### Quality of teaching and learning of geography

The quality of teaching varies and learning is satisfactory overall.

- Although some good teaching was observed during the visit, this was inconsistent across classes. Evidence from students' work and through discussions confirmed that learning is satisfactory overall.
- Although students commented positively about their enjoyment of the subject, they identified that they were 'comfortable' rather than 'challenged' in lessons.
- Students identified that there is a heavy reliance on 'working through a text book' with very limited opportunities for collaborative work or opportunities to utilise new technology. This is supported by evidence in their exercise books and in teachers' planning records.
- Where better teaching was observed, students were more actively engaged, materials were up-to-date and there were more opportunities to discover, debate and ask questions.
- Where teaching was weak there was too much guidance from the teacher to ensure all students came up with the correct answer, an over-reliance on low level tasks and overuse of worksheets. Students were not being encouraged to think and learn independently or to develop skills of geographical enquiry.
- Teachers are much more confident in assessing students' progress in examination classes where they are familiar with marking criteria. At Key Stage 3, assessment is not based on robust structures linked accurately to level descriptors. As a result, the quality of assessments is not secure and students are unclear about how they can improve.

## Quality of curriculum

There are weaknesses in the curriculum which are recognised and being addressed by senior management.

- Adequate time is allocated to the teaching of geography to enable the subject to be delivered.
- Schemes of work tend to focus on coverage with little indication of how the lessons are to be delivered. Some of the resources and exemplars are also dated.
- There is no overview of the proposed new Key Stage 3 curriculum which makes it difficult for teachers to plan adequately for progression in geographical learning.
- The teaching programme for Year 7 continues to focus on heavy coverage of content. This is not in the spirit of the new expectations which are intended to encourage more flexibility and depth in learning in geography.
- There is no evidence that the new GCSE, which is to be taught from September, has been planned for.
- There are few opportunities for students to learn about and debate topical issues. For example, tourism is taught in a factual way and doesn't take into account recent behaviour change caused by the world economic crisis.
- The current Key Stage 3 programme does not provide sufficient fieldwork opportunities to support students' learning.

## Leadership and management of geography

There are weaknesses in the leadership and management of geography which have also been identified by senior management, causing them to provide suitable support.

- There has been limited development of the subject over a period of years to enable teachers to keep in step with current developments. This is reflected in weak provision at Key Stage 3 where the curriculum has little relevance to, and fails to meet the requirements of, students. There is also a poor understanding of progression in the subject through the school.
- Students' attainment is analysed well at Key Stage 4 but is less well understood at Key Stage 3. This has made it difficult to plan for improvements in provision.
- Internal monitoring of provision within the department has not been rigorous enough to provide a realistic picture of the strengths and weaknesses in the subject.
- Resources are adequate, but at times dated. There is too much reliance in many lessons on a narrow range of resources.

- The department has not made sufficient use of subject specific support provided by the local authority and subject associations to inform current developments or support learning in the classroom.
- A suitable plan has been put into place by senior management to ensure greater accountability but also to support improvement.

### Subject issue

Currently, geography teaching and the curriculum do not promote community cohesion sufficiently well to meet expectations identified in whole school policy.

- Students know about a variety of places around the world but only have a superficial understanding about relevant issues such as migration or interdependence.
- Geography's contribution to community cohesion is not easily identified in the planned teaching programme.
- Topical issues linked to promoting community cohesion are rarely explored in geography lessons as there is a strong focus on completing a heavily structured and content focussed curriculum.
- There is a heavy reliance in geography lessons on a basic text which may touch on community cohesion but rarely explores it.
- Students respect each other in lessons but are given infrequent opportunities to work collaboratively or to develop positive mutual working relationships.
- The school has developed links with schools in other localities, notably the Caribbean, but these are not exploited in geography to support learning.

### Areas for improvement

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

- ensure that the support package for geography leads to improvements in classroom provision linked to greater accountability
- produce a coherent teaching programme, especially at Key Stage 3, that supports learning in geography and is relevant to students
- make more effective use of subject specific support provided by the local authority and subject associations to improve classroom skills and ensure greater awareness of current developments in the subject
- ensure that geography empowers students to discover, discuss and debate real and relevant issues which support their understanding of community cohesion
- develop fieldwork and the use of geographical information systems (GIS) to meet requirements.

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

Leszek Iwaskow  
Her Majesty's Inspector  
Specialist Adviser for Geography