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Mr M Quinn  
Headteacher  
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Dear Mr Quinn

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Geography

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 13 and 14 May 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 students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of data, analysis of students' work and observation of five full lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is outstanding.

Achievement and standards

Achievement is outstanding and standards are good.

- Students enter the school with at least average basic literacy and numeracy skills although they have had an inconsistent range of geographical experiences.
- In Key Stage 3 they make excellent progress in their geographical skills and understanding; due in large part to the superb range of first hand fieldwork undertaken in all year groups. Geography also contributes

exceptionally well to students' skills in information and communication technology (ICT).

- Students continue to make very good progress in Key Stage 4. Results have improved and they were significantly above the national average in 2008.
- The department attracts not only higher attaining students but also some more marginal candidates who mature and do exceptionally well due to the lively hands on approach to learning and the good individual support offered. Students with learning difficulties make especially good progress.
- In the sixth form, with a large mixed ability group, the school also gained significantly above average results at AS level. Overall, students of all abilities make excellent progress.
- Substantial numbers of students attain their GCE target grades of A and B and a good number of students then continue their geographical studies at university.
- Some lessons involve individual work and a good proportion build team skills and cooperation. This leads to the excellent behaviour observed throughout the inspection.

#### Quality of teaching and learning of geography

The quality of teaching and learning are both outstanding.

- Lesson planning at all levels is robust and includes excellent differentiated tasks and approaches to support all learners. The sequence of lessons is well considered and builds skills in a dynamic manner.
- Students are clear what they are learning and have begun to undertake self and peer-assessment. They have good access to information about their current level of learning and take pride in reaching new higher standards.
- All lessons seen were good and three were outstanding. Teachers make the maximum use of ICT and lessons are engaging and exciting. Students learn very effectively to think through issues and how to put their points of view across in both written and oral work.
- Students are good at debates and they are keen to use new technology; not just in their superb presentation of work but also in analysing patterns in data and in locating information from many sources on the internet.

#### Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is outstanding.

- The topics studied are carefully selected and provide an excellent range of first hand experiences. Field work is of the highest quality and each trip progressively builds on students' skills. For example, their

knowledge of rivers, first gained through simulation on a small scale in the playground, builds well over time and students undertake more extensive river work locally at GCSE and in depth in Wales in the sixth form.

- The optional field trip to Iceland during the summer holiday has had a very strong impact on students' knowledge of physical geography in Key Stages 4 and post-16. The simulated experience of an evacuation following a volcanic eruption had a profound effect on their understanding of emergency situations and disaster relief.
- All elements of geography are woven into a strong spiral curriculum which allows good reinforcement of geographical knowledge, skills and understanding. This especially helps those that learn more slowly. It also meets new requirements at Key Stage 3.
- Cross curricular work is developing and involves ICT to an exemplary standard. The links with history and modern foreign languages are also beneficial. The school has more students taking a modern foreign language than is the norm. Students' enthusiasm for learning languages and about other countries is clearly evident. The students clearly see themselves as part of the global community. This is further supported by their Religious Education curriculum.

#### Leadership and management of geography

Leadership and management of geography are outstanding.

- There are very effective management systems that ensure that you and the senior management team have a firm grasp on the standards reached by pupils in geography. Data is detailed and is analysed very thoroughly by the geography department. The subsequent action plan is well focused and has led to sustained development and improvement.
- The strong team of specialist geographers are very ably led and are proactive in taking on new initiatives. The head of department leads by being an excellent professional role model and she has created a highly effective collegiate approach amongst the team. She also very successfully develops geography subject leaders of the future.
- The team shares its expertise and supports trainee and newly qualified teachers well. Supply teachers are also well supported by the strong policies and procedures and the excellent on-line assessment data available for all students. Staff professional development is excellent.
- The department's self-evaluation includes a cycle of reviewing different year groups. Self-evaluation is detailed and accurate. There is no hint of complacency and the department continually aims for improvement.
- The ICT related work in geography enjoys national repute and ensures that the staff are at the cutting edge of developments, particularly with use of geographical information systems (GIS). Students' think of geography as a modern subject and it enjoys a high status in the school.

- The department is aware of the need to develop further the breadth of the type of courses offered post-16 but they are judiciously weighing the various possibilities. They are looking for a course that will compliment other provision locally.

### Subject issue

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

- Links through the Catholic Church have a very positive influence on students' understanding and empathy with peoples from across the world. The geography department builds well on this school ethos. For example, the recent visit of the Archbishop from Cameroon highlighted how students' efforts made a big difference to a parish in his diocese. The money they raised supplied pumps for wells and the students understand the value of clean water to the well-being of the people of Cameroon as well as its importance in their own lives.
- Links within the local community and parishes are well fostered and the school has imaginatively encouraged work with older, younger and disabled citizens. The geography department is using these links well to develop a course on the geography of health.
- Students are lively and aware of the world around them. They have taken projects to the local council and taken part in numerous Fair Trade events.
- The well maintained school site is an outstanding feature of the school and is well used for field work and for a good variety of community groups. The extended school initiative and school transport planning also involve the students in learning about the human geography of the locality; the geography department took the lead on the school travel plan with practical activities such as traffic surveys.
- The various geographical studies offered by the school enhance pupils' understanding of localities near and far and include such diverse activities as considering the pros and cons of increasing local employment by building industrial units and the more distant issues around the destruction of the rainforests.

### Areas for improvement

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

- develop the breadth of courses offered post-16 to meet the needs of learners requiring a more practical education.

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

Mo Roberts  
Her Majesty's Inspector