

Alexandra House
33 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

T 08456 404040
F 020 7421 6855
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk



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Mr London
Headteacher
Hall Mead School
Marlborough Gardens
Upminster
Essex
RM14 1SF

Dear Mr London

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Geography 2009/10

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 03 and 04 June 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 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 six lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is satisfactory with some good features beginning to develop.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards are satisfactory.

- Students enter the school with average to above average ability but have had a wide range of geographical experiences.
- By the end of Key Stage 3, they now make steady progress in the acquisition of geographical knowledge, skills and understanding due to raised staff expectations and a more stable teaching staff than in the recent past.

- Standards at GCSE were below the national average in 2008 but current students are projected to be closer to the national average in 2009.
- There are still some gaps in the knowledge of the cohort that experienced numerous changes of teacher last year but overall they are catching up well.
- Students, as yet, still have too few opportunities to fully develop their practical skills through 'hands on' fieldwork although some useful 'virtual work' compensates somewhat for this situation.
- Students use ICT confidently building on the school's specialist status. The use of geographical information systems (GIS) is developing appropriately but it is too often hindered by technical problems.
- There are good quality opportunities to work collaboratively in Year 7 and the new combined history and geography curriculum is stimulating the students' interest. This together with the improved approach resulting from the introduction of a focus on 'thinking skills' work, results in students achieving well in this year group.
- Behaviour in lessons is very good. The numbers opting to take the subject at GCSE is again on the increase with three rather than two GCSE classes planned for September 2009 reflecting fresh optimism for provision in the subject.

Quality of teaching and learning of geography

The quality of teaching and learning is good.

- During the inspection good teaching was observed in all year groups, with the majority of lessons judged to be good.
- Lessons are well planned and develop learning using interesting resources, including ICT.
- Tasks are well matched to meet the specific needs of different learners and those with learning difficulties are especially very well supported.
- Questioning is effective and draws in most students. They cover a good range of controversial topics that encourage debate and develop ideas such as in the work done on migration to the United Kingdom.
- Assessment is used regularly to gauge progress, although there was limited evidence in some of the student's books of the re-teaching of the points that were less well grasped.
- Students are managed well throughout the school. Expectations for good behaviour and manners are demanding and the vast majority of students rise to meet these expectations.
- Lessons start promptly but occasionally the pace could be brisker to prevent some students becoming too passive.
- A good range of teaching approaches encourage engagement and interest.
- Scrutiny of books shows some variability in the sequence of topics covered across the same year group. This makes it unnecessarily complex for senior staff to monitor the delivery of the work.

- Students' work is marked regularly but there is a slight inconsistency in the quality of the feedback.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is satisfactory.

- The curriculum transition at Key Stage 3 is developing appropriately.
- The spiral curriculum ensures skills are revisited and the topics are now relevant and interesting with no over reliance on text books.
- The new scheme of work includes elements that encourage students to become responsible global citizens. They have for example begun to explore sustainability in greater detail.
- The GCSE course prepares students for the coverage of examination content and requirements, in the recent past the course has not suited all students; so a new syllabus is being introduced from September 2009 which will have a broader appeal and meet students' needs better.
- Field work opportunities in Key Stage 3 and 4 are just adequate and there are plans to develop them further; although links across subjects such as science have yet to be fully utilised. The offer of residential fieldwork was not taken up by enough students to make it viable.
- There are some good opportunities to write extensively as seen in the work on China. Numeracy and ICT are well supported by the department.

Leadership and management of geography

Leadership and management of geography are improving and are now good.

- The new head of department has made a very good start on revising and modernising the curriculum and the department is actively weighing the options to further develop the post-14 provision. As yet the changes have not had sufficient time to fully impact on standards.
- The department recognised its weakness and is working hard to improve. Monitoring by senior managers is greatly assisting the process and there is good evidence of rapid improvement.
- The subject development plan rightly focuses on the key priorities of raising standards and curriculum improvement.
- Staff have adequate opportunities to keep up with recent developments and are aware of current issues in the subject. There is good quality professional development although more remains to be done to support staff with the use of GIS.
- The department handbook is out of date and does not provide enough back up for non-specialist teachers who cover geography if any staff are away.
- Resources to support learning in geography have been improved.
- The classrooms do not sufficiently promote and celebrate geographical study through good visual displays. The fabric and decoration of the building is poor and the main teaching classrooms can be stuffy.

Subject issue

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

- There has been too little time to fully consider how geography is expected to contribute to promoting community cohesion given the urgent need to improve standards when the new head of department arrived in September. Consequently, this aspect is not yet identified within the geography policy, strategic planning or within most schemes of work.
- Nevertheless at Key Stage 3, students are developing a good understanding and awareness of people, places and cultures. They show the ability to empathise and are supported in challenging stereotypes.
- Work on migration and interdependence is covered using up-to-date and relevant resources for example, in studying how garments are sourced and made students develop an understanding of poverty, exploitation and controversial issues.
- The approach in lessons encourages the development of reasoned thinking to enable students to challenge and critically examine their attitudes and to value those who live in tough circumstances such as the slum dwellers in Brazil.
- Collaborative working gives students a chance to develop positive working relationships with learners from different backgrounds such as through the exchange with a German Gymnasium. This is also the case with the impressive annual work that groups of students undertake in Kenya and The Dominican Republic. However, more can be made of the geographical aspects of such projects.
- The limited learning opportunities outside the classroom somewhat restricts opportunities to engage actively with other communities particularly in the more ethnically mixed adjacent boroughs.

Areas for improvement

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

- further develop the fieldwork offered so that all year groups get hands on opportunities to build their skills
- ensure that as the new geography policy and documents are prepared sufficient note is made of where community cohesion will be promoted
- check that the geographical learning associated with the school's good international links is fully promoted.

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