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Mrs A Hazeldine
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Dear Mrs Hazeldine

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Geography

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 17 and 18 September 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 focused on how effectively geography teaching and the curriculum promote 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 10 lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is satisfactory.

Achievement in geography

Achievement in geography is satisfactory overall but there are disparities across the key stages.

- The numbers of students opting for geography at both GCSE and A level have declined in recent years.
- Over the last two years, there has been a slow improvement in standards at GCSE. Last year, both standards and achievement were satisfactory. Currently, standards are good and achievement is also improving.

- The very small numbers of students taking geography post-16 mean that results fluctuate from year to year. Student achievement at this level is satisfactory.
- Standards and achievement at Key Stage 3 remain inadequate. In part this is because of the disruption caused by frequent changes of staffing and the heavy reliance on non-specialist teachers. However, it is mainly the result of not challenging students sufficiently.
- Poor literacy skills hamper progress, especially among boys.
- Students develop geographical skills better than knowledge and understanding.
- Behaviour is generally good and relationships are positive. However, when lessons are mundane, students are easily distracted. This can lead to low-level disruption and weak learning, especially in the lower school.

Quality of teaching of geography

The quality of teaching is satisfactory.

- Teachers are actively encouraged to use a wide range of teaching and learning approaches. However, these are not always used effectively or appropriately to promote learning.
- Students perceive a majority of their lessons to be relevant, especially when they are able to explore topical issues linked to poverty, sustainability and interdependence.
- Information and communication technology is used on a regular basis to support teacher exposition but is used less frequently as an interactive tool to stimulate learning. Students rarely engage with new technology in a practical way.
- At Key Stage 3, assessment is not sufficiently rigorous to provide an accurate indication of students' progress or their strengths and weaknesses. Teachers are more secure in assessing the progress of students in examination classes where they are familiar with the examination criteria.

Quality of the curriculum in geography

The quality of the curriculum in geography is satisfactory.

- The revised curriculum for Key Stage 3 has the potential to be good. It covers an appropriate range of topical and relevant issues. However, at present, several units of work remain incomplete.
- Students have satisfactory opportunities to undertake fieldwork across all key stages and comment positively on these experiences.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in geography

The effectiveness of leadership and management in geography is satisfactory.

- The lead geographer has a clear vision for the subject but his efforts to develop the subject are limited by frequent changes of staff.
- Suitable support has been provided to non-specialists to enable them to teach the curriculum. However, the emphasis has been on managing lessons rather than on presenting students with sufficient challenges and ensuring that they learn and progress.
- Monitoring has not been sufficiently frequent or rigorous to focus support where it is most needed to bring about improvements. Frequent changes of staffing have not helped this process.
- A lack of relevant subject-specific staff development has hampered the spread of good practice. Limited use is made of the support available through subject associations and the local authority.
- Resources to support learning are adequate but are not always used to best effect to enhance learning in the subject.

Subject issues

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

- The geography curriculum provides a range of opportunities for students to investigate topical issues related to sustainability, diversity and interdependence, as well as a broad range of cultures and places.
- Students are beginning to understand that there is a rich local and cultural heritage which encourages them to consider their own sense of identity.
- The department is aware of links with schools in other localities but has not yet utilised these to enhance learning in geography.
- In geography lessons, students are generally encouraged to work collaboratively and to respect each other's opinions.
- Community cohesion is recognised in some modules of work. However, planning does not progressively build up students understanding of key concepts relating to culture and identity.

Areas for improvement

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- developing a stable team to manage the subject and to take collective responsibility for enhancing provision
- improving learning, particularly at Key Stage 3, by presenting students with greater challenges
- focusing on completing a curriculum at Key Stage 3 which is both relevant and meets the needs of learners
- improving the quality and rigour of monitoring procedures at all levels

- making more use of the resources and professional advice offered by subject associations and the local authority to support improvements.

As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and will be published on the Ofsted website. It will also be available to the team for the next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Leszek Iwaskow
Her Majesty's Inspector