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Mrs A Saunders
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Dear Mrs Saunders

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Geography 2009/10

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit, on 24 and 25 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 five lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is good, with outstanding features.

Achievement in geography

Achievement is good.

- Students enter Year 7 having had a diverse range of geographical experiences in their primary schools. On entry, their standards are broadly average, but cover a wide range.
- The quality of students' learning is good. By the end of Key Stage 3, most students make good progress, to achieve above average standards. In 2009, over four-fifths achieved Level 5 and above and just over a half achieved Level 6 and above. Last year, attainment was slightly lower than

in previous years, because fewer girls and students with special educational needs achieved their targets.

- For the past three years, the GCSE pass rate of A* to C is has been consistently above the national average, but has reached a plateau at 74%. Although around a fifth achieved A grades in 2009, none achieved the highest A* level. This was because a number of higher attaining students underachieved with their coursework and new setting arrangements did not have the expected impact.
- In the sixth form, most students make good progress to achieve above-average standards at A Level. In 2009, three-fifths of students achieved a pass grade of A-B. Fewer students are opting to study geography because of greater choice, but those who select the subject are fully committed and engaged.
- Students' attitudes and behaviour in lessons are excellent. They are keen to learn, especially when they are set challenging tasks. Most take a pride in their work. Teachers enjoy extremely positive relationships with students.

Quality of teaching of geography

The quality of teaching is good, with outstanding features.

- Teachers' planning is thorough and their subject knowledge is excellent. Lessons are very well structured, have a brisk pace and carefully build on previous learning to extend students' thinking.
- Lessons are stimulating and engaging. Resources are carefully selected to make lessons interesting and these fully engage and challenge pupils. Very occasionally, lessons fall below these high standards because teachers try to cover too much ground.
- Excellent use is made of video projection, information and communication technology (ICT) and active learning strategies. Plentiful opportunities are provided for challenging discussions, during which students contribute ideas and develop their thinking skills.
- Careful use of questioning ensures participation by a wide range of students. Teachers continually check students' understanding and, when necessary, respond quickly and flexibly to support or extend learning. Good support is also provided by the teaching assistant.
- All students speak very highly of the quality of teaching and the variety of work provided for them. They are extremely positive about their teachers' enthusiasm and dedication. One student stated proudly that 'the teachers at Simon Balle have given me a love of geography'.
- Recent monitoring and evaluation activity correctly identified that some aspects of assessment required modification and improvement. Swift action has been taken to remedy these weaknesses. Scrutiny of books shows an improvement in the quality of marking. For example, students' work is now marked more precisely in Year 10, with clear guidance on what they need to do next to improve.

- A more rigorous approach to data analysis is being implemented. The school's data capture system is being used more effectively to identify and tackle underachievement at an earlier stage.

Quality of the curriculum in geography

The quality of the curriculum in geography is outstanding.

- The geography department has successfully modified the Key Stage 3 curriculum in line with the new programmes of study. Topics and themes are carefully selected to provide students in Year 7 with a firm foundation of understanding and skills which is extended in breadth and depth in subsequent years.
- 'Building Learning Power' in Year 7 provides excellent opportunities for students to develop skills such as participation, enquiry and team work.
- Appropriate and relevant cross curricular links support teaching and learning activities. Full use is made of opportunities to work closely with other departments, such as history, science and mathematics.
- The geography scheme is continually being adapted and developed. For example, a bridging unit has been devised and introduced in Year 12, to provide students with a short foundation course before starting on their A Level studies.
- There is a strong field work programme which helps develop students' knowledge of different locations well. The school grounds and neighbouring woods are utilised well for a range of different activities. Fieldtrips to Hertford, Southend, Malham and Norfolk enhance the curriculum well. Students enjoy this work immensely.
- ICT work is good. Staff and students use weblogs to access information and resources and as an effective method of communication. Geographical Information Systems (GIS) are used routinely to increase students' skills of map analysis and interpretation. The department also works closely with other departments to support the development of this work.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in geography

The effectiveness of leadership and management in geography is outstanding.

- Geography is a popular and successful subject in the school. The head of department is energetic and enthusiastic. He has an excellent understanding of the department's strengths and weaknesses and is committed to improving provision and students' progress. He has built on the strong legacy developed by the previous post holder.
- The excellent geography team is extremely well led and managed. All the staff work to their strengths and are willing to adopt new initiatives and make these work effectively. They dedicate a considerable amount of time to developing and improving the subject for the benefit of students.

- Self-evaluation is accurate and all members of the department have a clear understanding of strengths and weaknesses and know precisely what needs to be done to improve further. A range of formal and informal monitoring and evaluation is undertaken.
- Student data is collected and robustly analysed to identify trends and seek reasons for differences in the performance of different groups.
- The geography department folder is comprehensive and provides excellent guidance about the work of the department, including accurate plans for further improvement and development.

Subject issues

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

- Community cohesion is exceptionally well supported by the geography department because it is delivered effectively through the broad geography curriculum. The school has achieved the International School and Eco School awards, with the geography department being the driving force behind these initiatives.
- An excellent range of opportunities is provided throughout the school to learn about local, European and global issues.
- As part of its humanities status, the school has established effective links with other institutions. For example, geography master classes have been delivered to Year 5 pupils in local primary schools and a local network of secondary geography teachers has been established. The latter has been so successful that it is being seen as a model for other parts of the county.
- The department has forged strong and effective links with the wider community. For example, as part of the 'Building Learning Power' day, parents and carers, community figures and visiting speakers all contributed to a successful collaborative event. Initiatives such as 'reduce, reuse and recycle', promoting locally sourced food and developing the school's allotment combine to raise all students' awareness of fairtrade, global issues and sustainability.
- Effective links have been established with different communities in South Africa and Sweden. Visits to Barcelona, Sicily and Iceland have provided students with the opportunity to study key geographical features of those countries, while at the same time increasing their understanding of wider global issues.
- Through this wide range of work, staff and students show a very good understanding of how places, people and cultures are interrelated. Schemes of work have been systematically revised to take account of this work.
- Students enjoy excellent relationships with teachers and each other. Most students are fully engaged in their learning. They value each other and relationships between learners from different backgrounds are very positive.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- implementing the recently modified assessment strategies and using the outcomes to improve further rates of progress for all students
- ensuring all students, particularly girls and those with special educational needs, achieve their targets throughout Key Stage 3
- increasing the number of students achieving grades A* to C, especially at the highest level at GCSE.

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

Paul Weston
Her Majesty's Inspector