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Mr D Duncan
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Duncan

Ofsted survey inspection programme – geography

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit with Sara Morrissey HMI on 5 and 6 October 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 included: interviews with staff and students; scrutiny of relevant documentation; analysis of data; analysis of students' work; learning walks around the school; and observation of eight lessons.

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

Achievement in geography

Achievement is good.

- Students are drawn from a large number of primary schools and have experienced a wide range of different geographical experiences.
- By the end of Key Stage 3, all students make good progress to achieve standards in line with national expectations in geography.

- Significant numbers of students opt to take geography at GCSE. Attainment at the end of Key Stage 4 is improving and inspection evidence indicates this is currently above average.
- Effective strategies have been used to secure improvement in the numbers of students obtaining the higher grades and in eradicating underachievement. Students' geography coursework is of a good quality.
- Students acquire appropriate skills and a wide range of geographical knowledge and understanding from the challenging and enjoyable enquiry and fieldwork projects they are involved with.
- Behaviour is excellent. Students are enthused and engaged in collaborative learning in geography lessons and, as a result, develop a good range of learning and study skills through the subject.

Quality of teaching of geography

The quality of teaching is good.

- Teachers have good subject knowledge and are enthusiastic.
- Geography lesson planning is thorough and lessons are structured well, have a brisk pace and generally build well on previous learning. A particular strength of lesson planning is the way teacher assessments are used to plan activities that are generally matched well to students' learning needs. Highly effective questioning is used to challenge higher-achieving students in their learning.
- All of the geography teaching observed during the visit was either good or outstanding.
- Lessons are stimulating and engaging. Activities are wide ranging and chosen carefully to make lessons interesting and involve the students in enjoyable and active learning. For example, in one inspirational lesson observed in Year 9, visual images and music were used extremely effectively to stimulate high quality discussion on development issues and the differences in life expectancy between Gambia and the United Kingdom. However, in two Year 7 lessons observed during the visit, work was not matched precisely enough to students' learning needs. This resulted in a lack of challenge and students did not make as much progress as they should.
- Teachers continually check on students' understanding and, when necessary, respond well to provide support or extend learning.
- Good support from teaching assistants helps those students with special educational needs and/or disabilities to participate fully in lessons.
- All students speak highly of the geography department and the variety of work they are engaged in. They particularly appreciate the support and help they receive to improve their work.
- Teachers have high expectations. Students are regularly tested on their geographical vocabulary, knowledge and skills. Effective use is made of homework to consolidate students' learning. Geography teachers provide

detailed support for GCSE coursework and good levels of help with revision and examination technique. This is contributing well to raising attainment in the subject.

- The school has a good range of geographical resources and effective use is made of information and communication technology in teaching and learning.
- Assessment is excellent. Marking is regularly undertaken and provides very good subject-specific guidance for students on how to improve the content and presentation of their work in geography.
- Detailed end of unit assessments are used to level students' performance accurately and set challenging targets for further improvement.
- Parents receive very detailed and helpful reports in geography which indicate the level students are working at, where progress could be made and how this could be achieved.

Quality of the curriculum in geography

The quality of the curriculum is outstanding.

- Geography is taught as a discrete subject in Key Stage 3 and 4 and aims to ensure students become successful, confident and responsible citizens.
- The geography curriculum is continually reviewed and enhanced. Units of work are sequenced very well to ensure continuity and progression in learning and the acquisition of a range of appropriate geographical skills, knowledge and understanding.
- There are increasing links with other humanities subjects and the school's specialisms. For example, all three humanities subjects focus on the topic of migration, in conjunction with drama work on refugees.
- Detailed attention is paid to the development of students' literacy, thinking and learning skills. Excellent links have been made between geography and independent enquiry and team-building skills.
- Very good fieldwork opportunities are provided at each Key Stage.
- Classroom and corridor displays are used well to celebrate the curriculum and students' improving knowledge and understanding of the world.
- Very good use is made of a range of topical issues in geography lessons. These engage students' interest with issues linked to social justice, poverty, sustainability and natural disasters. A particular strength of the department is the emphasis it places on development issues in Year 9 and the opportunities this provides for students to learn about inequalities and to value diversity.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in geography

The effectiveness of leadership and management in geography is good.

- Geography is a popular and increasingly successful subject in the school.

- The cohesive and committed team of three subject specialist teachers is well led and managed. Members of the team work to their strengths and continually improve the quality of geography provision in the school. They keep abreast of current developments in the subject and exchange ideas with each other.
- Self-evaluation is very rigorous and accurate. A range of effective formal and informal monitoring and evaluation takes place at department, faculty and whole-school level with a strong emphasis on student outcomes.
- The school demonstrates a good capacity to improve its work in geography.

Subject issue

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

- Community cohesion is very well supported by the geography department and is delivered extremely effectively through the broad geography curriculum.
- Learning opportunities outside the classroom environment provide excellent opportunities for students to engage with other communities. Students are actively involved in improving their own school community through their nationally recognised work on sustainable building design for the new school.
- The department places great emphasis on the importance of diversity and inclusion at a school, local, national and international scale and geography has a positive influence on students' attitudes and values.
- The school has good links with France and Spain through its International School status. Currently, these links are not fully used to support learning in geography.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- improving the level of challenge in Year 7 lessons to maximise learning in geography
- using the links with schools abroad to support learning in geography.

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

Angela Milner
Her Majesty's Inspector