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Mrs M Eva
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Eva

Ofsted survey inspection programme – geography

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 12 and 13 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 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 inadequate.

Achievement in geography

Achievement is inadequate overall because there has been significant underachievement at GCSE for several years.

- Many students enter the school with standards in geography that are below average. Low literacy levels hamper their progress, particularly that of the boys.
- By the end of Year 9, most students have made steady progress, given their starting points, and reached expected levels of achievement for their age in geography.

- The number of students opting for geography in Key Stage 4 has remained fairly constant at around 30% of the year group. However, over the last three years, the standards at GCSE have declined significantly. Boys' achievement is, in particular, well below national averages, while girls are below the national average. These results are significantly lower than in other subjects taken by these students.
- Students spoken to have a satisfactory understanding of recent geographical topics, but are less confident at making connections with knowledge learnt in previous years.
- Students' behaviour is good and relationships in lessons are positive. Geography contributes well to students' personal development, especially to their moral and cultural development.

Quality of teaching of geography

The quality of teaching is satisfactory overall.

- Teachers have good subject knowledge and lessons are mostly structured well with a variety of timed activities. However, sometimes the tasks set are insufficiently well defined in terms of the teacher's expectations and the timing of activities is less effective.
- Good attention is paid to literacy within geography. Key words are emphasised and students are generally encouraged to offer extended answers.
- Students report that they enjoy their geography lessons, particularly where they are active or when the lessons have a practical aspect, such as the lesson observed on water movement during a tsunami.
- Appropriate information and communication technology (ICT) is made available for GCSE students to research their coursework assignments, but it is used insufficiently in Key Stage 3. Although teachers use digital projectors in lessons, this approach is not enhanced with interactive whiteboards, hence the quality of visual stimulus is only satisfactory.
- The college's intranet is underused by the geography department as an aid to students' learning.
- Marking is regular and helpful comments for improvement are made on students' work, but these are not always followed up by either the students or their teachers.
- Assessment information is not used sufficiently to inform targeted support where it is needed to raise students' achievement, especially in Years 10 and 11.

Quality of the curriculum in geography

The quality of the curriculum is satisfactory.

- New curriculum plans for Key Stage 3 have begun to be drawn up; these meet the aspirations of the new National Curriculum and will allow greater focus on a smaller range of topics.
- A new modular GCSE course has been well chosen from September 2009. This has the potential of raising achievement at Key Stage 4 and boosting students' confidence.
- The college's work with international days has been effectively embraced within the schemes of work reflecting the school's specialism.
- Fieldwork takes place under the auspices of the humanities faculty. At present, geography is underrepresented in these visits. Students' geographical activities are insufficiently challenging and do not encourage independent learning.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in geography

The effectiveness of leadership and management in geography is satisfactory.

- An appropriate action plan is now in place to reverse the poor geography results at GCSE over the last three years and to bring them in line with the good results of most other subjects. The college has proven capacity in recent years to make excellent progress and improvements.
- An appropriate link has been established with an outstanding geography department in another school to further raise standards and achievement.
- The number of teachers has been enhanced this academic year by the addition of a trainee teacher. This further strengthens the team.
- Resources to support the subject are adequate, but insufficient use has been made of the guidance and support offered by professional subject organisations.

Subject issue

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

- Students collaborate well with each other in the classroom and with their teachers; they share ideas and contribute to the harmonious atmosphere of lessons.
- Whole-college international initiatives are well embedded in the work of the school and are supported well and often led by the geography teaching staff. Students reported very positively on these aspects of the college's work.
- The college works very closely with local partners, including the local university and has recently become a Trust School.
- Fair trade and global sustainability are understood well by students and they recognise their role for ensuring that they become responsible citizens.

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

- ensure that early intervention is put in place for underachievement in Key Stage 3, to boost achievement for students when they reach GCSE
- make better use of monitoring and attainment data within the department to ensure students in Key Stage 4 are targeted sufficiently well for additional support
- improve the geography provision in humanities fieldwork exercises in Key Stage 3 and ensure that fieldwork activities have a greater enquiry-based approach in GCSE
- develop a greater use and integration of ICT approaches to learning, including the development of the department's intranet opportunities
- create a more exciting visual stimulus in lessons, by using modern technologies more effectively.

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

Jenny Smith
Additional Inspector