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Mr A Day
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Dear Mr Day

Ofsted 2009-10 subject survey inspection programme: geography

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 11 and 12 November 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; and observation of six lessons.

Geography has been marginalised as the Academy has worked hard to meet National Challenge targets. There is now a clear determination to improve provision in the subject. The opportunity for students to take geography at GCSE has been reinstated and a coordinator was appointed in January 2009 to develop the subject. Currently, as the subject begins to re-establish itself, the overall effectiveness remains inadequate, although there are signs that implemented changes are slowly beginning to have an impact.

Achievement in geography

Achievement in geography is inadequate overall.

- At Key Stage 3, insufficient time is made available for students to study geography in sufficient depth. The greater majority choose not to study

geography in Year 9, when the GCSE course starts and limited time is available, particularly in Year 7. As a result, the standards achieved and progress students are able to make are inadequate.

- Students' progress is also hampered by poorly developed literacy skills as well as the limiting tasks which are frequently set and which fail to challenge, particularly the most able students.
- Students develop a basic knowledge of places, but the limited use of maps and the lack of fieldwork opportunities mean that geographical skills are poorly developed.
- At GCSE, results in geography were disappointing in 2008, but improved in 2009 so that standards that year were close to the national average. Few students attain the highest grades, although the numbers now opting for geography are increasing.
- Overall, students enjoy the subject but are disappointed that they have few opportunities to work practically through fieldwork or collaboratively in lessons. Behaviour in lessons is good.

Quality of teaching of geography

The quality of teaching is satisfactory overall.

- Currently, teaching is functional and focused mainly on coverage of content and dissemination of information.
- Most lessons are heavily teacher-directed, which does not allow students to develop thinking and reasoning skills. This also encourages a dependency on the teacher to provide the answers.
- Lessons are planned clearly and teachers have sound geographical knowledge. However, a limited range of teaching approaches is used and there is a heavy dependency on set textbooks.
- Good relationships are established which enable teachers to manage most classes well.
- Questioning is too frequently focused on eliciting factual recall and insufficiently on gaining reasoned responses from students.
- There is inconsistent use of information and communication technology across classes to support exposition. Students access their learning better when they are stimulated visually.
- Teaching assistants are frequently used to manage students rather than facilitate their learning.
- Students' work is marked regularly but comments do not always accurately support them in their next steps in learning.
- Assessment procedures are not yet sufficiently rigorous to inform teaching or planning and enable relevant support to be provided to those students who need it most.
- The use of revision sessions has supported students and enabled them to improve their grades at GCSE.

Quality of the curriculum in geography

The quality of the curriculum in geography is currently inadequate.

- The curriculum is currently under review and a broad framework for delivery is in place. Schemes of work are incomplete for Key Stage 3 and examination classes. An attempt has been made to ensure coverage but not progression.
- Insufficient time is available at Key Stage 3 to enable the teachers to cover requirements in sufficient depth.
- Fieldwork is underdeveloped at Key Stage 3. Students have very limited opportunities to develop geographical skills in a practical way.
- The department has not made use of geographical information systems (GIS) to develop students' ability to synthesise and analyse a range of geographical and spatial information.
- The teaching programme gives insufficient consideration to the exploration of real and relevant current issues in geography. The European dimension is also underdeveloped.
- The geography department supports enrichment days well. Students comment positively on the satisfaction they gained from the practical work covered during environmental days.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in geography

The effectiveness of leadership and management in geography is satisfactory and has the capacity for future improvement.

- Leaders are aware of the complexities of developing and raising the profile of geography after a period when it has been marginalised.
- The development plan correctly identifies the need to develop a curriculum which is relevant to students and meets their needs; the need to improve the quality of teaching and learning; and to diversify the range and use of resources, including fieldwork.
- There is a clear commitment from senior management to support this developmental process.
- There has been no subject-specific staff training to improve classroom delivery or keep geographers abreast of the latest developments in the subject.
- No use has been made of the support and resources available through the subject associations.

Subject issues

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

- The current schemes of work lack sufficient detail to enable the progressive development of key concepts linked to sustainability, diversity, equality and interdependence.
- The lack of opportunities in lessons for students to debate relevant issues, such as those linked to migration, exploitation of communities or the importance of diversity, mean they have few opportunities to express their own views and respect each other's opinions.
- Local and global perspectives may be mentioned in some lessons but often without clear links being made to enable students to debate these issues in detail.
- The rich diversity of cultures and student experiences in the school are not used effectively to enhance geographical knowledge and understanding or to develop empathy.
- Links with schools in contrasting localities exist, but are not used by the geography department to support learning.
- The European dimension is underdeveloped. As a result, students have a poorly developed understanding of their place in Europe as European citizens.
- Students behave well towards each other and mix well in geography lessons. Relationships are good.

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

- develop a curriculum which is relevant to students and which meets their needs and interests, particularly at Key Stage 3
- improve standards in the subject, particularly at Key Stage 3
- develop the expertise of teachers, through resources and the support provided by the subject associations, to enable them to engage students more effectively in their learning
- develop geographical skills through practical work and more frequent use of maps, fieldwork and GIS.

As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter 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