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Dear Ms Lenihan

Ofsted 2009/10 survey inspection programme – Geography and Modern Languages

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 21 and 22 September 2009, with Pam Haezewindt HMI, to look at work in geography and modern languages.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a focus on how effectively geography teaching and the curriculum promote community cohesion. In modern languages it had a focus on whether schools are reaching the benchmarks for provision in Key Stage 4, and on how information and communication technology (ICT) is used by teachers and students to improve language learning.

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.

Geography

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 four lessons in geography.

The overall effectiveness of geography is satisfactory.

Achievement in geography

Achievement in geography is satisfactory.

- Students join the school with geography skills and knowledge that are below average.
- The school's data show that standards of attainment are above average by the end of Key Stage 3. However, school leaders know that the teacher assessments have previously been overgenerous due to a lack of standardisation and moderation. Girls' attainment is significantly above that of boys at all levels.
- In Key Stage 4, the subject is increasing in popularity and more students are opting to study the subject at GCSE. In 2009, a higher percentage of students achieved both A* to A and A* to C grades with no significant difference between the attainment of boys and girls. Outcomes are now much closer to the national average.
- Most students make satisfactory progress in their learning. The majority of students achieve, and some exceed, their challenging targets. However, a number, mainly boys, do not achieve as well as they should.
- Attitudes and behaviour are generally good. However, some students disengage with their learning when the pace of lessons slackens. Teachers enjoy good relationships with students.

Quality of teaching of geography

The quality of teaching is satisfactory.

- Work is generally planned well with a variety of activities designed to engage and interest students. Teachers have secure subject knowledge and use appropriate geographical vocabulary.
- Students satisfactorily acquire knowledge, develop understanding and learn and consolidate their skills. They work effectively when provided with suitable tasks and guidance.
- Where activities are interesting and practical, students show high levels of enthusiasm and interest. However, some activities go on for too long which slows the impetus of the lesson. As a result, some students lose interest and concentration.
- A range of assessment for learning techniques was observed in lessons. When used well, these effectively promoted interest, collaboration and participation. Questioning techniques helped increase students' engagement, but opportunities were missed to extend their thinking because some questions were insufficiently challenging.
- Assessment data are not always used effectively to inform teaching and learning or to intervene at an early stage when students are making less progress than expected.
- 'Opening Mind' capacities are assessed regularly in Year 7 but an evaluation of key geography skills in themes is not made. Consequently, the department is unaware of the progress made by students in the subject throughout Year 7.

- Marking is inconsistent. The best examples give students clear guidance about what they need to do next to improve, but this is not common. Although most students know that they have targets, many are vague about what they are and precisely what they need to do to achieve them.
- Homework is used appropriately to support activities taught in lessons.

Quality of the curriculum in geography

The quality of the curriculum is good.

- In Year 7, the 'Opening Minds' competence-based curriculum aids transition from primary school, helps students establish good learning skills and supports their collaboration and engagement.
- Geography themes are at the heart of many of the 'Opening Minds' teaching units. Aspects such as fairtrade, sustainability, global warming and skills such as mapping, investigation and reporting are given high priority.
- The Key Stage 3 curriculum in Years 8 and 9 has been successfully modified in line with the new programmes of study. Newly constructed schemes of work are interesting and appropriate.
- The department has successfully reviewed the Key Stage 4 curriculum and is successfully implementing the new programmes of study.
- ICT is used well by teachers and students to support their geography work. However, there are insufficient opportunities for students to use geographical information systems (GIS) to further increase their skills of map analysis and interpretation.
- Fieldwork is satisfactory. Although Bramingham Wood is visited in Year 7, opportunities are not always taken in Years 8 and 9 to use fieldwork and real examples to motivate and inspire students. Year 11 students speak positively of their residential visit to Overstand to study coastal landscapes.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in geography

The effectiveness of leadership and management in geography is satisfactory.

- In September 2009, the school was awarded the secondary geography 'Quality Mark'. This was coordinated by the subject leader who has recently moved to another school. The portfolio of evidence is very detailed and thorough.
- The department is at a point of transition and is being led by the head of humanities in the interim.
- Suitable professional development opportunities are used to support the development of the subject. Beneficial links have been established with a humanities college in Milton Keynes and with the local authority.

Appropriate training and support are provided for colleagues in the geography department.

- A varied range of monitoring and evaluation activity has been undertaken. Outcomes are suitably summarised in an accurate departmental evaluation document. Priorities for further development and improvement are correctly identified.
- The department is subscribed or affiliated to a number of professional bodies and associations and makes good use of support and resources.

Subject issue

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

- Community cohesion is supported well by the geography department. The good curriculum provides a broad range of opportunities throughout the school to learn about local, European and global issues. This is supported well by the 'Opening Minds' programme.
- There are effective plans that promote engagement with a range of community groups beyond the school and the immediate community.
- A range of resources is available for use by teachers to support teaching and learning and promote community cohesion. Students develop a good understanding of the need to value diversity. Relationships between learners from different backgrounds are positive.
- The impact of this work is felt strongly. Students behave well. In the main, they enjoy good relationships with teachers and each other. Most students are appropriately engaged in their learning.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- further raising standards in geography at Key Stage 4 by ensuring that students, particularly boys, achieve their targets
- ensuring that accurate assessment outcomes are used effectively to inform teaching to target the needs of all students and further increase rates of progress
- implementing an appropriate approach to assessing the development of students' key skills in geography through Year 7
- increasing fieldwork opportunities in Key Stage 3 so that students are provided regularly with first-hand opportunities to support the curriculum and increase their geographical skills.

Modern languages (ML)

The evidence used to inform the judgements made included interviews with staff and students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of six lessons.

The overall effectiveness of ML was judged to be good.

Achievement in languages

Achievement in languages is good.

- Both attainment in external examinations and teacher assessment at the end of Key Stage 3 are generally above average, although attainment in French at Key Stage 4 is not as good as in Spanish, particularly for girls. The department is aware of this and looking to introduce aspects to the course that will better motivate girls.
- Progress in lessons is mostly good. Where it is very occasionally less than good, a small group of students, usually a few boys, pays less attention or are too chatty and the teacher has to stop to ensure the lesson runs smoothly.
- Almost all students demonstrate enjoyment in their learning. Teachers plan and teach their lessons well. A particularly lively Year 8 Spanish lesson had students constantly out of their seats while interacting with the language.
- Students' knowledge of why it is important to learn a language is good and they cite numerous reasons for learning one.
- Languages contribute well to students' personal development.

Quality of teaching of languages

The quality of teaching is good.

- In general, teaching is animated and very focused on learning and improvement.
- Planning is good and thought is consistently given to differentiation.
- Interactive whiteboards are used well to present vocabulary and phrases, both for new learning and consolidation. Students also use them enthusiastically for games, particularly in starters and plenary exercises.
- Students are willing to take risks and perform for others. This is particularly brave since assessment for learning is very regular and includes peer assessment.
- Lessons are generally balanced with a mixture of activities both lively and calm; a mixture of resources is also used well.

- At times, the target languages could be used more by teachers for conducting the lessons. Students are not helped sufficiently to use the languages for routine transactions in lessons.
- Some lessons require more focus on pronunciation and intonation.
- Assessment is built into lessons well and helps students to see how they can improve. Students' achievement is monitored regularly. They receive good support and guidance, particularly where they are found to be underachieving, through study support after school which is generally well attended.
- Students needing English as an additional language (EAL) also benefit from support through a lunchtime club held in the languages department which is well attended. While EAL support is mainly in classrooms, it is good that the staff are based in the ML office so that liaison can take place.

Quality of the curriculum in languages

Overall the curriculum is good.

- Spanish and French are taught in Key Stage 3. Students are allocated to a language according to form group, but the school will accommodate parents' preferences. In Key Stage 4, students have the opportunity to take both languages.
- The time provided for languages is suitable, and better in Key Stage 4 than in Key Stage 3. However, in Key stage 4, blocking all periods together on one day to accommodate the delivery of diplomas across the Campus Luton Partnership, is not helpful. Students find this the most difficult aspect of their language learning.
- The Key Stage 3 schemes of work are tailored to the school. Activities in lessons meet the students' needs and ensure that they enjoy learning. At Key Stage 4, staff follow the examination syllabus schemes as they, understandably, have not yet had time to tailor them.
- After-school activities support students' increased achievement. Spanish is offered as an extra option for GCSE and is taught after school with good take-up. Staff are dedicated in the time they put in to provide a broader programme than that on the timetable, although there are no clubs or taster days.
- Arrangements are being made for a joint trip with humanities to France. The department has an ongoing priority of developing trips abroad as they were abandoned, previously, due to lack of take-up.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in languages

Leadership and management are good.

- The senior leadership team has an accurate picture of languages provision. The relatively small department is strong. It has been encouraged to, and has taken advantages of, leadership opportunities. It is devoted to building up provision and enabling students to achieve well, which they are now doing.
- Self-evaluation is perceptive and the departmental development plan is focused appropriately on improvement.
- The department leads the way in such areas as assessment for learning.
- The languages area and classrooms are decorated exceptionally well with displays to support learners and celebrate their work, as well as indicating how important languages are in the wider world.

How close the school is to reaching the benchmarks for language take-up in Key Stage 4

- The school has not reached the 50% benchmark for language take-up set by the government. In Year 10, currently 16% of students learn a language, including those who take it after school.
- The department offers optional Spanish in Year 10 after school for students who do not have the space on their timetable and this is proving popular. The department hopes that, with its development of ICT resources and facilities, including video conferencing, it will attract more young people.
- The school believes that its very broad curriculum, judged outstanding during last year's inspection, and its performing arts specialism mitigate against high take-up.

How well ICT is used to improve language learning

This is satisfactory.

- All language classrooms have electronic whiteboards and all teachers use them to enhance language learning. Students also have opportunities to do so.
- Students say that they occasionally use ICT in lessons for presentations but not on a regular basis; some use it more than others.
- The languages department is leading the way in developments with the school's learning platform, but there is still a long way to go before it will support students' language learning.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- ensuring teachers take every opportunity to speak Spanish or French so that they provide good role-models for listening and speaking, including pronunciation
- helping students to use the target languages for routine transactions in lessons and beyond

- ensuring that students have equal access to a broad range of ICT and that it develops their language learning well
- improving the time allocated to languages in Key Stage 4
- improving take-up in Key Stage 4.

We hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop geography and languages in the school.

As explained in our 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

Paul Weston
Her Majesty's Inspector