

Aviation House
125 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

T 08456 404040
F 020 7421 6855
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk



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Mrs M Seddon
Headteacher
Holy Family Catholic High School
Virgins Lane
Thornton
Liverpool
L23 4UL

Dear Mrs Seddon

Ofsted survey inspection programme – geography

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 19 and 20 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; and observation of five lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is satisfactory.

Achievement in geography

Achievement in geography is satisfactory.

- Over the last three years, there has been a gradual decline in standards at GCSE. Currently, standards are average and achievement is satisfactory.
- The small numbers of students taking geography post-16 mean that results fluctuate from year to year although they are consistently above national averages. Student achievement at this level has ranged from very good to outstanding in recent years.

- Achievement at Key Stage 3 is satisfactory overall. When students receive specialist geography teaching they make good progress and attain above average standards. However, heavy reliance on non-specialist teachers means that students' rates of progress are too variable across this key stage.
- Curriculum limitations lead to the highest attaining students and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities not making the progress they could.
- Students' knowledge and understanding of physical geography is better than that of human geography.
- Students' behaviour is very good. The best teaching provides good opportunities for students' personal development. Fieldwork makes an increasing contribution to students' social and moral development as well as their developing geographical skills.

Quality of teaching of geography

The quality of teaching is satisfactory.

- Teachers use a wide range of teaching and learning approaches that successfully motivate students, particularly in Key Stage 4 and the sixth form. Relationships are positive.
- Where teachers have good subject knowledge they provide clear explanations and use good questioning skills; tasks are matched well to students' needs and interests and students see their relevance because they are linked to their own experiences and are set in meaningful contexts.
- The quality of the learning environment and a lack of access to information and communication technology (ICT) in one of the teaching rooms limit opportunities for interactive learning. Displays are not used well to promote enjoyment of geography or to celebrate and support students' learning.
- ICT is used insufficiently to support teaching and learning. However, opportunities to access computers to promote independent learning and research skills are developing through increasing use of the City Learning Centre and school ICT rooms.
- Teachers' use of assessment to support teaching and learning is satisfactory and improving. Opportunities for students to assess their own work, and that of their peers, help them to understand how to improve. Formal assessment includes a wide range of tasks that promote equality of opportunity well.
- Target-setting and achievement data are not yet used rigorously to plan lessons that are matched well to the needs of different groups of students.
- Marking is frequent and thorough. There is good emphasis on the presentation and completion of work but too little emphasis from non-

specialist teachers on how students might develop their geographical skills and knowledge. Students do not have sufficient time to respond to the comments made.

Quality of the curriculum in geography

The quality of the curriculum in geography is inadequate.

- Although the overall curriculum for Key Stage 3 has been revised, it does not promote progression in key geographical concepts or allow space for topical issues sufficiently well. The choice of places to be studied limits students' personal and academic achievement and their understanding of community cohesion.
- Schemes of work for Key Stage 3 do not meet fully the different needs of groups of students in relation to content, tasks, resources or approach. There are no schemes of work for Key Stage 4 or post-16.
- Opportunities for students to undertake fieldwork are being increasingly planned into the curriculum. Students enjoy these experiences and they enhance students' understanding of a range of geographical concepts.
- The school grounds, the local area and homework tasks are not used well to ensure the progressive development of fieldwork skills.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in geography

The effectiveness of leadership and management in geography is satisfactory.

- The subject leader has a clear vision for geography but additional responsibilities and the time other teachers of geography need for their main subjects limit the opportunities for the vision to be put into practice. Despite this, there is a strong positive ethos across the department.
- Suitable support has been provided to non-specialists to enable them to teach the curriculum; but this has been largely informal.
- Departmental self-evaluation is broadly accurate in most areas, though insufficient emphasis has been given to the impact of the curriculum on raising standards.
- Formal opportunities for monitoring and evaluating the work of the department are developing and have led to identifying appropriate improvement priorities. However, actions planned are not yet sufficiently precise and do not draw on a wide enough range of information.
- The subject leader has benefited from opportunities to meet other geographers across the authority and from senior leadership guidance.
- Limited use is made of the support available through subject associations or from sharing best practice in departmental leadership and management within the school.

Subject issues

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

- Students work collaboratively in lessons and respect each other's views.
- The curriculum provides satisfactory opportunities for students to understand socio-economic and cultural differences in different parts of the world through their studies of development issues.
- Fieldwork in the local area increasingly enables students to understand changes in their community.
- Students have a limited understanding of the range of diversity within the United Kingdom and how this might impact on their lives.

Areas for improvement

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

- increase the impact of the curriculum on raising achievement through a more rigorous review of provision and greater consideration of students' views, needs and interests
- improve the rigour of monitoring and evaluation procedures to identify and remedy weaker practice
- make more use of the resources and professional advice offered by subject associations
- provide formal opportunities for the team of geography teachers to contribute to departmental self-evaluation and to benefit from the sharing of best practice
- improve the quality of the learning environment and access to ICT to develop teaching and learning.

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

Sonya Williamson
Her Majesty's Inspector