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Mr A Toone
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Dear Mr Toone

Ofsted 2009-10 subject survey inspection programme: geography

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and students, during my visit on 22 and 23 January 2010 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.

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

The overall effectiveness of geography is inadequate.

Achievement in geography

Achievement in geography is satisfactory.

- Students enter the school with standards that are generally below average in geography, although this is often related to weaknesses in basic literacy and numeracy, rather than specific gaps in students' geographical knowledge and understanding.
- Students make satisfactory progress in Key Stage 3 and good progress in Key Stage 4 to achieve standards that are broadly in line with age-related expectations. However, only a small minority of students opt for geography at GCSE.

- At GCSE, the average and below-average ability students make at least satisfactory and often good progress. However, students do not demonstrate the more detailed knowledge and understanding required to achieve the highest grades; none achieved an A or A* grade in 2009.
- Students have a satisfactory grasp of basic skills in geography, such as graphicacy. However, there are insufficient opportunities for them to develop their skills in literacy and numeracy. In particular, they are given few opportunities to practise extended writing, or to rehearse their writing through structured oral work and discussions.
- In the Key Stage 3 lessons observed, the students' progress was rather uneven. The higher attaining students tended to make most rapid progress because they were able to work independently on structured questions.
- When work was poorly differentiated, the more able students were given too little opportunity to extend their learning. Weaker students also made very limited gains, particularly when they were unable to take advantage of pair or group discussions to consolidate their understanding.
- Students have a limited understanding of the places chosen for particular case studies, and a weaker knowledge and understanding of wider geographical issues, including recent events and topical concerns.
- Geography makes only a limited contribution to students' personal development because objectives linked to this are not embedded in either long-term plans or lesson objectives.

Quality of teaching of geography

The quality of teaching in geography is satisfactory.

- Relationships between teachers and students are good, and the students' generally good behaviour is a positive influence on their learning and progress in geography.
- Lessons tend to rely heavily on text books and work sheets: teachers plan what students will learn, but learning activities are not always considered carefully. Teachers use only a limited range of teaching and learning styles, with too little emphasis on paired work, role-play and group decision-making. Some students spend too much time completing low level tasks that do not advance their geographical knowledge, skills or understanding.
- Although lessons taught in the specialist classroom make effective use of new technology to structure the learning, information and communication technology (ICT) is not routinely used by the students themselves.
- Teachers have access to baseline assessment information on all their students, but do not use the information or students' target grades sufficiently well to inform their planning or to ensure that tasks meet the needs of all students.
- Students know their current working level in geography and their target levels or grades, but procedures for assessing their progress are weak.

- Students' work is checked regularly, but marking lacks geographical evaluation. Students are unclear about what they have done well or what they need to do to achieve their target level or grade. They do not routinely receive good oral feedback to support their progress.

Quality of the curriculum in geography

The quality of the curriculum is inadequate.

- Curriculum plans ensure that a broad range of geographical topics is covered and identify the resources to be used. However, they do not focus sufficiently on developing the students' skills in literacy, fieldwork, ICT or their wider personal development.
- Insufficient guidance is provided on learning activities and learning styles for particular groups or individual students. The department has made no clear start in developing new schemes of work to meet the requirements of the National Curriculum.
- The geography curriculum lacks enrichment or local relevance. Planning for Key Stage 3 does not give sufficient consideration to developing students' prior learning and does not take account of the increased emphasis on topical issues and extending students' experiences.
- Fieldwork is not used to enrich the curriculum. Fieldwork and other arranged visits are conspicuous by their absence and too many opportunities are missed to make geography relevant to the everyday lives of the students or to ensure that it makes a positive contribution to their social and moral development.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in geography

The effectiveness of leadership and management in geography is inadequate and shows inadequate capacity for further improvement.

- The subject leader is an experienced teacher who uses his sound subject knowledge and detailed understanding of the examination requirements to ensure that students make good progress in their GCSE geography. However, weaknesses highlighted in the curriculum and in teaching and assessment, demonstrate that the development of key areas of provision has been neglected.
- There is no clear vision for continued improvement. Ambition is not embedded in teaching and assessment, particularly at Key Stage 3, and strategies to raise standards in geography have not been successfully implemented in recent years.
- There is little evidence that teachers keep their subject knowledge up to date and make use of the resources and training provided by the subject associations.

Subject issue

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

- Opportunities to promote community cohesion through geography are missed. The department has not analysed sufficiently well how its provision and students' developing personal and geographical skills and understanding might contribute to this.
- There has been no specific audit of geography provision or of the students' needs with regard to community cohesion. The geography curriculum covers key aspects of people's socio-economic differences and cultural backgrounds, but these are taught within the context of each topic and are not linked specifically to the promotion of community cohesion.
- Students have only limited opportunities for discussion of topical local and global issues, or for role-play and decision-making in lessons to help them to understand their wider influences, roles and responsibilities.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- reviewing and updating the geography curriculum to ensure that it better meets the learning needs of students, and benefits from enrichment, particularly at Key Stage 3, by:
 - introducing case studies and units of work that are more relevant and topical for the students
 - planning more systematically the development of students' skills in fieldwork, literacy, ICT, numeracy and their wider personal development
 - evaluating the contribution that geography currently makes to community cohesion and how this can be strengthened.
- strengthening the quality of learning and students' progress by:
 - focusing more sharply on the specific outcomes that different groups should achieve in each lesson
 - considering more carefully the learning activities that best support and promote the students' learning
 - ensuring that marking evaluates more rigorously the students' progress and provides clearer guidance on their next steps for improvement in geography.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop geography in the school.

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 your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Paul Brooker
Her Majesty's Inspector