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9 February 2010

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Dear Mr Vaughan

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 26 and 27 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 staff and students; scrutiny of relevant documentation; analysis of data; analysis of students' work; and observation of eight lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is inadequate because of the impact of weaknesses in the curriculum on students' achievement. However, new departmental management is aware of this, is beginning to put developments into place and has demonstrated good capacity to improve the subject.

Achievement in geography

Achievement in geography is currently inadequate.

- Standards at Key Stage 4 are satisfactory and students make good progress. However, at Key Stage 3, both standards and achievement are currently inadequate because of weaknesses in the curriculum.

- Small numbers of students opt to take the subject at GCSE. Standards are close to the national average. This represents good progress for this small group of students given their starting points on entry.
- At Key Stage 3, students are currently unable to fulfil their potential because the curriculum does not allow them to meet National Curriculum requirements. Students have no opportunities to develop fieldwork skills and only very limited opportunities to use new technology, including geographical information systems (GIS), to support learning in geography.
- A focus on literacy in recent years has improved the effective use of geographical terminology. Most students understand and are able to use key geographical terms accurately and confidently.
- In those lessons where students are challenged and actively engaged, progress is often good. However, this is inconsistent across classes, especially when work is often left incomplete and errors are not always corrected.

Quality of teaching of geography

The quality of teaching is satisfactory overall.

- Teachers are all specialists and have good subject knowledge.
- The quality of teaching varies greatly from class to class. Half of the lessons observed were good or outstanding. However, inadequate teaching was also observed.
- Teaching that was good or outstanding was characterised by relevant and appropriate tasks which motivated students and engendered interest. Often, in these lessons, topical issues were investigated; for example when students studied the recent earthquake in Haiti, the recent conflict in Iraq or explored what it is to be British.
- In these lessons, questioning was often used to good effect when students were encouraged to develop ideas and reflect on their answers. In those lessons where questioning was closed, students often became used to giving short responses and were less involved in developing their thinking.
- In good and outstanding lessons, new technology was used effectively to interact with students and provide visual stimulation to support debate. Where it was used merely to provide information, the learning was weaker.
- The quality of assessment is inconsistent across classes. Sometimes peer and self-assessment are used to inform students how they can improve. At other times, assessment tasks are inappropriate and not based on sound assessment principles.

Quality of the curriculum in geography

The quality of the curriculum in geography is currently inadequate overall.

- At Key Stage 4, the curriculum meets examination requirements and ensures coverage. However, the planning is functional rather than creative and is based on a narrow range of texts, resources and teaching approaches.
- At Key Stage 3, the curriculum does not meet current National Curriculum requirements or match students' needs. There is a lack of planning for progression in geographical skills and understanding. Key concepts, such as the global dimension or sustainability, are not covered in sufficient depth or detail.
- Students currently have no opportunity to carry out fieldwork at Key Stage 3. Equally, there are no planned opportunities for them to use GIS to enrich their learning in geography.
- The newly appointed subject leader is aware of the weaknesses in the curriculum. He is introducing new units of work such as 'Who do you think you are?' and the 'Geography of conflict' to fill the gaps in the curriculum. The long-term vision for the curriculum is secure.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in geography

The effectiveness of leadership and management in geography is now good and there is also good capacity for improvement.

- In a short period of time, the recently appointed subject leader has identified weaknesses in geography provision, particularly in the curriculum. Work is in progress to improve the subject and there is a clear vision for the future.
- Resources are adequate but currently limited in range and quality. Access to ICT by students remains an issue and limits opportunities to use GIS to support learning in the subject.
- Monitoring of provision has not been sufficiently focused on improving classroom practice. This is now a priority.
- Insufficient use has been made of the support and resources provided by the subject associations to develop teachers' classroom expertise.
- A clear plan of action is now being established to:
 - tackle weaknesses in the curriculum
 - secure high quality teaching
 - raise standards, particularly at Key Stage 3.

Subject issue

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

- Opportunities to support community cohesion through geography are currently not sufficiently identified in the planning. Weaknesses in the curriculum, particularly at Key Stage 3, hinder development of this aspect.

- The local and global perspectives are underdeveloped as part of a cohesive programme to enhance students' understanding of their role as global citizens. The European dimension is also limited.
- Recently implemented units such as 'What is Britishness?' are going some way to redress weaknesses. However, these developments are currently at an early stage of development.
- Students have positive attitudes towards each other, enjoy working collaboratively and relationships thrive, particularly in those lessons which are seen as relevant and engaging.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- ensuring, as a matter of urgency, that a relevant and appropriate curriculum is established at Key Stage 3 which better meets the needs of students and the new requirements of the National Curriculum, including fieldwork
- improving teaching to secure good progress and learning across all classes
- creating a culture of mutual development and support to improve provision progressively through subject-specific training and the use of strategies such as coaching, peer support and mutual observation
- developing new technology, especially GIS, to support learning as well as teaching.

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

Leszek Iwaskow
Her Majesty's Inspector