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Mr R Snow
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Snow

Ofsted 2009-10 subject survey inspection programme: geography

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and pupils, during my visit on 24 February 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 pupils, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of pupils' work and observation of two lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is satisfactory.

Achievement in geography

Achievement is satisfactory.

- Pupils enter the school with achievement a little above the national average and make satisfactory and sometimes good progress in the development of geographical skills, in particular mapping skills. They are excited when using new and unfamiliar maps and extend their knowledge and understanding easily when provided with appropriate geographical resources. Pupils' understanding of the shape of the United Kingdom was well documented in their accurate 'perception mapping'. (Drawing maps freehand without a map to copy).

- Pupils make good use of their geographical knowledge and are keen to bring to lessons their knowledge learnt from experiences outside school. For example, from their holidays and knowledge of the local area. Pupils' knowledge of places is usually good and is enhanced by their frequent use of computers.
- Boys and girls make similar satisfactory progress. Those pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities also make at least satisfactory progress because of the good support they receive.
- The progress pupils make year on year in geography is limited by a lack of progression in geographical concepts and enquiry-based skills and the emphasis on historical aspects of topics at the expense of geographical ones.
- Pupils are enthusiastic learners, who behave well and respond actively to their teachers and their peers. They are confident orally and willing to provide reasoned guesses at situations presented in photographs of unfamiliar places.

Quality of teaching of geography

The quality of teaching is satisfactory and sometimes good.

- The range of teaching strategies adopted by teachers in lessons observed was satisfactory and lessons were carefully prepared to provide progressive links between the various tasks and activities undertaken by pupils.
- Work was matched appropriately to pupils' differing needs, for example, in the written work provided for the most able and in the careful guidance provided for those with special educational needs and/or disabilities.
- There was good subject rigour in the work planned for pupils in the lessons observed but this was not always evident in the pupils' work scrutinised from other classes. This variability across classes means that the quality of geography teaching overall is only satisfactory.
- The teaching observed engaged pupils, created opportunities for lively discussion between pupils as well as the opportunity to challenge stereotypes. For example, in the comparison of pairs of photographs depicting scenes from India and the United Kingdom.
- Pupils are provided with comments on their work, although this is not always consistent across classes. However, pupils spoken to were able to reflect on how well they were progressing and generally knew what they needed to do to improve the quality of their work.
- Some classes in the earlier years depend too heavily on worksheet activities, with few chances for creative or individual work of which the pupils are clearly capable.
- Pupils are provided with good opportunities to research topics and countries using the computer but there is insufficient guidance provided in some instances. This results in pupils downloading many pages of information with little or no attempt to interpret or personalise their work.

Consequently they do not always understand the text that they have captured.

Quality of the curriculum in geography

The quality of the curriculum is satisfactory.

- The school is actively involved in curriculum innovation with a cluster of local schools. This creative curriculum is focused on a topic-based approach, which at present is still under development.
- Topics have a geographical input but this often takes a minor role to that of history. As yet, the school has not fully developed its ideas on progression in geographical concepts and skills, although this is a known point for development as the new integrated curriculum unfolds.
- Good opportunities are taken to adjust topics and develop whole-school assembly themes, which reflect the dynamic aspects of global geography. For example, pupils spoke knowledgeably about the recent earthquake in Haiti and its causes and consequences. The Olympics were also taken as an opportunity for pupils to follow up specific competitors' countries of origin, which provided a good stimulus for active learning.
- Good opportunities are made for both local and residential journeys to enhance pupils' learning. These include local area studies, a visit to France, the Isle of Wight and Essex Water company. However, the balance of geographical and historical aspects on these journeys sometimes tips in favour of history to the detriment of geographical studies.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in geography

The effectiveness of leadership and management in geography is satisfactory.

- The subject is led by a senior member of staff who has a clear idea of the work required to fully develop geography in the topic-based curriculum.
- Topics are researched before they are introduced and staff discuss any areas of uncertainty together. Guidance is provided for newly qualified teachers and those new to the school as the topic-based curriculum is rolled out.
- The curriculum and quality of teaching and learning are monitored through lesson observations and pupils' work scrutiny. However, these have not fully impacted or focused upon geography.
- The school has had membership of a subject professional association for many years but does not yet capitalise on this as an aid to developing the subject and ensuring the professional development of all teachers in geographical ideas.

Subject issue

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

- Pupils learn well together in the classroom and specific support for pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities is effective and well targeted. All pupils cooperate very well with each other.
- Pupils' knowledge of and contribution to their local community is good. Pupils in Year 6, for example, have been chosen to represent ideas for improvement at the 'Debate Shoeburyness' forum. They have been active participants and nine out of the 10 improvements for the local environment that were put forward have been adopted.
- Pupils also pay good attention to their school environment by putting forward ideas to the school council and a small group take part as members of the school senate, with your support to bring about change in their community.
- The similarities and differences between their own community and those of other regions and countries are developing well, with opportunities to explore stereotypical views which sometimes occur.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- ensuring that the amount of time and depth given to geographical learning is adequate and not subsumed by historical aspects of the topics studied, as the school moves towards an integrated curriculum
- ensuring that progression in geographical learning is firmly built into the planning as the integrated curriculum is put in place and understood by all teachers
- monitoring more closely the variations in the quality of teaching undertaken by different classes, to ensure that all pupils receive the very best learning and assessment experience
- making effective use of subject professional associations to maximise the professional input for teachers when teaching geography.

As I explained previously, 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

Jenny Smith
Additional Inspector