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Mr R Kolka
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Kolka

Ofsted 2010-11 subject survey inspection programme: geography

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and students, during my visit on 25 and 26 May 2010 to look at work in geography.

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 students' work and observation of three lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is satisfactory.

Achievement in geography

Achievement in geography is satisfactory.

- Students' attainment at GCSE, when measured against the national average in geography, has been low for the past few years.
- Students in the current Year 11 are on track to attain GCSE results that will be much closer to the national average.
- The standard of students' written work is in line with expectations for high attainers but below expectations for middle and low attainers. Weak literacy skills have a detrimental impact on the quality of written work for a significant number of students, particularly in Key Stage 3.

- Given the low starting points, students' progress is satisfactory. In the lessons observed, progress was generally good but written work indicates a more variable rate of progress over time.
- Students' behaviour in lessons is good; they enjoy geography and most are keen to learn.

Quality of teaching of geography

The quality of teaching in geography is good.

- Teachers are confident and have good up-to-date subject knowledge that they apply effectively in their planning and teaching.
- Planning clearly identifies individuals and groups of students and their specific needs and includes outcomes that are phrased to ensure progression in learning. The learning activities, however, are not always planned sufficiently well to ensure that all students make appropriate progress.
- Teachers use a broad range of strategies effectively and employ different student groupings to engage students in their learning. These activities are supported by a variety of well-produced resources and information and communication technology (ICT).
- A broad range of formal assessments is used well to assess students' progress against their annual targets. Students know their targets and their current levels of performance.
- Day-to-day marking is a strength of the department. Teachers provide students with detailed written feedback on a regular basis informing them of the improvements required in their work. Students know their short-term targets and can articulate clearly how they can improve their work.

Quality of the curriculum in geography

The quality of the curriculum in geography is satisfactory.

- The curriculum overall provides a broad and balanced entitlement and covers a range of physical, human and environmental themes.
- Until recently, the GCSE curriculum did not meet the needs of a significant number of students effectively. The new GCSE course has been much more successful in engaging the students.
- The department is responding well to national initiatives in Key Stage 3, for example, through the development of cross-curricular units to promote personal learning and thinking skills.
- There are detailed schemes of work for each unit, however these have not been fully audited against the current Key Stage 3 requirements. As a result, it is not clear how effectively the key concepts and processes are being taught.

- Although the use of ICT is planned explicitly across the curriculum and increasing use is being made of the online learning environment, geographic information systems technology does not feature.
- Fieldwork opportunities are present in all years except Year 11. These are not planned to progressively develop students' skills and there is too much emphasis on a narrow range of themes.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in geography

The effectiveness of leadership and management in geography is satisfactory.

- The curriculum leader has a good grasp of the strengths and weaknesses of the department, is aware of the need to prioritise the raising of attainment and appreciates how this can be achieved.
- Current improvements in students' attainment and the strategies employed to achieve them demonstrate good capacity to improve.
- Geography is a popular subject with relatively high numbers of students opting to study the subject at GCSE.
- The departmental improvement plan focuses on raising attainment but does not include measurable success criteria. All relevant policy documents are in place.
- The quality of teaching and students' work is monitored regularly but insufficient emphasis is placed on students' progress in their learning.
- The department meets on a regular basis and has a good focus on joint planning. This helps in sharing ideas and ensuring a consistent approach.
- Access to subject-specific continuous professional development is generally limited to GCSE examination courses, but the curriculum leader keeps up-to-date with current developments through a range of geography websites.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- increasing significantly the proportion of pupils who attain a grade C or above at GCSE
- ensuring, when planning activities, that suitable consideration is given to providing materials that all students can access effectively and so make progress at a similar rate
- reviewing the Key Stage 3 curriculum to ensure full coverage of the key concepts and processes so that it meets the range of students' needs and ensures progression in their learning.

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

As I explained previously, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and will be published on the Ofsted website under the URN for your

school. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Paul Dowgill
Additional Inspector