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Ms L Austin
Headteacher
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Dear Ms Austin

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 14 and 15 June 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 without their consent.

The evidence used to inform the judgements included: interviews with staff and students; scrutiny of relevant documentation; analysis of students' work; and observation of four lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is satisfactory and improving.

Achievement in geography

Achievement in geography is satisfactory overall.

- Students' attainment at GCSE has been low for the past two years and has remained low in comparison to all other subjects in the school. However, it is now showing some improvement and current Year 11 students are on course to attain standards broadly in line with national expectations.
- Based on their starting points, students in Years 10 and 11 are making good progress. In Years 7 to 9, the rate of progress made by the large majority of students is good and is in line with other subjects. A few of the most and least able students make satisfactory progress.
- In most lessons, students make good progress in their learning. They are able to ask a range of geographical questions, can locate a variety of places accurately, and understand physical and human processes. Older

students understand that there is not always a single answer to an issue and a wide range of views need to be taken into consideration.

- Students in all years demonstrated that they are interested in the world around them; they wanted to better understand their place in the world and have a good awareness of a number of contemporary issues.
- Students' behaviour in lessons is outstanding. They engage positively in their learning and enjoy geography.

Quality of teaching of geography

The quality of teaching in geography is good.

- Teachers have clear and increasing expectations of students' performance and they demonstrate this in their planning and in lessons.
- All teachers, including non-specialists, have strong, up-to-date subject knowledge that they apply effectively in their teaching.
- Teachers' planning is very detailed and is effective in identifying the needs of different groups and individual students. Teachers produce a range of resources that meet the differing learning needs of the students.
- Teachers use a wide range of activities and student groupings effectively that fully engage the students in their learning and ensure good progress. They use information and communication technology well to support their teaching but students' use is often limited to research and presentations.
- Regular formal assessment is a good feature of the geography department. At key points in the year, teachers use a range of formal assessments to measure the progress of students against their annual target. Students know the current level they are performing at and the annual target they are expected to attain.
- Day-to-day marking is completed on a regular basis and teachers provide students with written feedback on the quality of their work. Short-term targets are not always precise and not all students are given guidance that specifically explains how they can improve in geography.

Quality of the curriculum in geography

The quality of the curriculum in geography is satisfactory.

- The Key Stage 3 curriculum is broad and balanced and covers physical, human and environmental themes. Key geographical skills are taught discretely and are not integrated effectively into the overall programme.
- A rolling programme of curriculum review is in place in Key Stage 3. Units of work are re-written regularly and new, more contemporary themes introduced.
- Detailed schemes of work for each unit are mapped against the new Key Stage 3 curriculum. However, there is no overview to demonstrate how students' understanding of the key concepts, geographical skills, and cross-curricular skills is developed progressively across the three years or how formal assessment supports this.

- Fieldwork opportunities are limited and students' understanding and development of these key skills is piecemeal.
- Until recently, the GCSE curriculum was not meeting the needs of a significant number of students. The recently introduced new GCSE course has been much more successful in engaging the students in all aspects of the course and has resulted in improved progress.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in geography

The effectiveness of leadership and management in geography is good.

- The head of department has a good understanding of the subject's strengths and weaknesses, and the key areas for development and how these can be achieved. Capacity to sustain improvements is good.
- The head of department has completed a rigorous analysis of examination performance and used the outcome to make changes that are having a positive impact on students' outcomes. This is clearly reflected in the departmental improvement plan which focuses on raising attainment and how this is to be achieved.
- The work of departmental staff is monitored regularly through formal and informal lesson observation as well as work scrutiny by the head of department. This informs improvement planning.
- The department works effectively as a team and there are good opportunities to share practice and resources.
- Access to subject-specific training is generally focused on GCSE examination courses. There are also local authority subject meetings and the head of department is working well with a geography advanced skills teacher from a local school. There have been good opportunities for all staff in the department to attend generic training events that focus on improving teaching and learning.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- increasing the proportion of students who attain GCSE grades A to C and A* or A
- providing a clear overview at Key Stage 3 to demonstrate the expected progress that students will make in their understanding of the key geographical concepts and skills, including fieldwork, and how assessment will support this
- ensuring greater consistency in the quality of short-term target-setting so that all students are aware of how they can improve their work.

I hope that 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