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Mr A Biddle
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Dear Mr Biddle

Ofsted 2011–12 subject survey inspection programme: geography

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and students, during my visit on 15 and 16 June 2011 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 five lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is good.

Achievement in geography

Achievement in geography is good.

- Attainment in 2010 GCSE examinations was above, but not significantly different from, the national average. This continued a trend of strong improvement in recent years. Results are set to improve further in 2011.
- The department monitors carefully the performance of individuals and groups and no significant differences exist in the attainment of any groups.
- Examination results in the sixth form are broadly average and most students make at least the progress expected of them.

- Attainment at Key Stage 3 is improving year-on-year and a majority of students are attaining levels above national expectation by the end of Year 9.
- The progress students make in lessons in all years is good. Appropriate to the level at which they are working, students demonstrate a good understanding of key geographical ideas and skills and are able to apply their prior learning well. They can describe the characteristics of places at a range of scales, understand physical processes and are able to pose geographical questions.
- Students' behaviour is at least good and they work effectively in groups and pay attention to their peers. They enjoy geography and are aware that much of the subject content has a direct relevance to them.

Quality of teaching in geography

The quality of teaching in geography is good.

- Geography teaching is consistently good. All staff are enthusiastic geographers with up-to-date subject knowledge which they apply well in their teaching.
- Teachers plan well-structured lessons that help secure good progress. They use a broad range of activities to engage students effectively in their learning. Students appreciate the variety of tasks in lessons.
- Information and communication technology is used well in lessons to provide stimulating, and often challenging, resources to support learning.
- Students enjoy the opportunity to engage in more in-depth project style work where they are required to undertake independent learning. Although planned in some parts of the curriculum, the opportunity for independent learning in lessons is infrequent.
- Students' work is assessed regularly through frequent marking and more formal level-based assessments. Students are provided with useful assessment criteria and are becoming more involved in assessing their work against these.
- Although there is some variation in the quality and style of written feedback, students in all years are clear about their target grades and know what they have to do to improve and how to do this.

Quality of the curriculum in geography

The quality of the curriculum in geography is good.

- The Key Stage 3 curriculum has been reviewed in light of National Curriculum changes and provides the students with a broad-ranging, relevant experience of geography. It ensures that students have a good understanding of geographical themes at a range of scales and places.
- The curriculum is underpinned by detailed schemes of work and the key concepts of the curriculum are identified within these. Each unit of work is reviewed on a regular basis.

- The good range of fieldwork experiences for students, across all years, is a strength of the department as the programme progressively builds up this particular set of skills.
- The use of the virtual learning environment is developing rapidly both as a curriculum resource for staff and students as well as a repository for key departmental documents. Its use to support weekly homework in Key Stage 3 is very effective.
- The GCSE specification has recently been reviewed and changed so as to better meet the needs of the students.
- There is good emphasis throughout the curriculum, in all key stages, on developing key skills, in particular geographical enquiry and map skills, including the use of geographical information systems in the upper year groups.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in geography

The effectiveness of leadership and management in geography is good.

- The joint subject leaders work very effectively as a team and have a good understanding of the strengths of the department and areas requiring development. Their self-evaluation of the subject is accurate.
- The subject improvement plan has a clear focus on raising students' attainment through improving the quality of teaching and the curriculum.
- The joint subject leaders ensure that the curriculum is kept up to date and is relevant to students' needs and that this, and teaching, is informed by current best practice.
- A good range of monitoring is undertaken including lesson observation, work scrutiny and seeking the views of students through the virtual learning environment. This information is used well to inform self-evaluation.
- The staff have good access to geography-specific professional development as and when required and the subject leaders lead on certain aspects of the school's own in-service training.
- The increasing expectations of the subject leaders, improved examination results and increasing number of students opting to study geography at GCSE and A level are testament to the good capacity for sustained improvement.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- ensuring that students receive regular, planned opportunities to progressively develop the skills of independent learning starting in Year 7
- fully embedding the concepts that underpin the Key Stage 3 curriculum in all aspects of the department's planning and assessment
- developing the use of geographical information systems in the Key Stage 3 curriculum.

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 published on the Ofsted website. It may be used to inform decisions about any future inspection. Except in the case of academies, a copy of this letter is also being sent to your local authority.

Yours sincerely

Paul Dowgill
Additional Inspector