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12 July 2011

Ms S Powell
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Dear Ms Powell

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 28 and 29 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 inadequate.

Achievement in geography

Achievement in geography is inadequate overall with some variations across key stages and classes.

- Standards at GCSE have varied from year to year but are currently satisfactory overall. Students make satisfactory progress because they are conscientious and eager to learn and are well prepared for their examinations. Heavy guidance supports these outcomes.
- Despite some weak teaching, a majority of GCSE students succeed because the clearly structured lesson outlines and revision notes ensure that they cover the content required.
- The more conscientious students use text books and independent research to complete their work. The less motivated have work which is incomplete and there is less evidence of progress. All but the most able students find

it difficult to apply their learning to situations and problems they are unfamiliar with.

- At Key Stage 3, standards are low. There is a focus on coverage of content and geographical skills are less well developed. Currently, fieldwork skills are ignored and mapwork skills are taught in isolation rather than integrated into the study of places.
- Students have positive attitudes to learning which, in part, compensates for some of the weaker teaching. However, although behaviour is generally good, there is some low level disruption in those lessons which students find less engaging, lack challenge or there is a lack of clarity about what they are expected to do.

Quality of teaching of geography

The quality of teaching in geography is inadequate because in too many lessons it does not meet the needs of the students.

- Teaching varies across classes, but too much is barely satisfactory and fails to challenge and engage students sufficiently. It is better and more focused in some examination classes.
- Weak teaching is exemplified by too much teacher talk, weak questioning which often interrupts or anticipates students' answers. There is often a lack of clarity in the instructions so that students are confused about what is expected of them.
- Although lesson structure is often detailed, delivery is often confused. Tasks set frequently focus on recall rather than on the acquisition of geographical skills and application to show understanding. Too many tasks are low level, particularly at Key Stage 3 and the more able students, in particular, are rarely challenged. There is also too much emphasis on note taking and students are occupied rather than motivated.
- Assessment is more secure at GCSE where teachers are able to apply examination criteria more effectively. At Key Stage 3, assessment is not robust. Too many judgements about the level of students' outcomes are arbitrary and not based on valid evidence or a secure understanding of standards.
- Students' work is marked regularly but varies across classes in terms of the quality of feedback to help them to improve their work.

Quality of the curriculum in geography

The quality of the curriculum in geography is inadequate.

- The curriculum contains too much content and lacks any cohesive structure to enable students to progressively develop their geographical skills, knowledge and understanding.
- There is a lack of focus on the concept of place. As a result, students' learning about different localities is often shallow.

- At Key Stage 3, students currently have no opportunities to experience fieldwork. The development of related geographical skills is ignored except for those students who opt for the subject at GCSE. Basic examination requirements for the controlled assessment are met through comparative studies of Bluewater and Gravesend.
- Although technology is used to support teacher exposition and students' independent research skills, requirements are not met to use geographical information systems (GIS) to develop geographical thinking and interpretation.
- The curriculum is currently being reviewed, at the insistence of senior leadership, using outside consultancy help. The proposed structure addresses many weaknesses but schemes of work or the resources are not yet in place to enable improvements to be implemented.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in geography

The effectiveness of leadership and management in geography is inadequate.

- Monitoring of provision by senior leaders has identified weaknesses in the delivery, organisation and development of the subject. Both internal and external support is being provided to develop the curriculum and make it more relevant to students, meet statutory requirements as well as improve the overall quality of teaching.
- Self-evaluation acknowledges some weaknesses and there is a desire to improve but little evidence of clear and manageable strategies of how this is to be achieved. As a result, progress is slow and there is very limited evidence to show capacity to improve.
- Specific professional development in the subject has been mainly limited to examination updates rather than to secure and drive improvement. Teachers have not used the support or resources provided by the subject associations to support provision. Although teachers have attended training in GIS, this has not been implemented into the teaching programme.
- Resources to support learning are adequate – although there is an overemphasis on a limited range of text books which narrows the range of teaching approaches used.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- developing the capacity of teachers to manage the subject effectively and ensure that improvements in provision are made quickly and are sustainable
- restructuring the curriculum, especially at Key Stage 3, so that it meets students' needs and aspirations and entitlements are fully met, especially for fieldwork
- improving teaching by:
 - making more effective use of questioning to challenge and deepen responses from students

- broadening the range of strategies to engage and motivate students
- ensuring that assessment is rigorous, accurate and supports planning and next steps in learning
- making more effective use of the support and resources provided by the subject associations.

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

Leszek Iwaskow
Her Majesty's Inspector