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Mr D Brixey
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Brixey

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 11 and 12 October 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 seven lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is good.

Achievement in geography

Achievement in geography is good.

- The proportion of students attaining GCSE A* to C grades has fluctuated over the last three years. However, when compared with national results, the school's results are regularly above average. There has been a steady improvement in the percentage of students attaining the A* and A grades and this is now broadly average. Based on their starting points, the progress of students studying GCSE is good.
- Teacher assessment of students' performance at the end of Year 9 indicates that the standard reached by the large majority is above national expectations. These students are making good progress. Not enough students, however, achieve the highest National Curriculum levels.

- By the end of Year 13, the standards students attain are broadly average and over the last few years, there has been a steady improvement in the proportion attaining the higher grades. For the last two years, students have made good progress.
- The progress made by most students in lessons across all year groups is good. GCSE students are enthusiastic in their learning and demonstrate a good understanding of geographical processes and can accurately recall a wide range of specific places they have studied. All students appreciate the relevance of the subject.
- The very large majority of students enjoy geography and this is reflected in their engagement in lessons and good behaviour. GCSE students work well without direct teacher supervision and can concentrate for significant periods of time on the tasks in hand.

Quality of teaching in geography

The quality of teaching in geography is good.

- Teachers have high expectations of students and this is evident in their generally detailed planning. The expectations, however, need to be more explicit when focusing on those aspects of planning that relate directly to learning for the higher attainers.
- Teachers communicate their enthusiasm for geography very effectively to the students and, as a result, they understand the importance of geography in understanding the world they live in.
- High levels of subject knowledge and expertise are deployed well by teachers in their planning and teaching.
- A broad range of teaching strategies is used by teachers to engage students effectively in their learning. Some of these are very innovative. Resources used are usually of high quality.
- Teachers effectively use a variety of maps as part of their everyday teaching and good use is made of information and communication technology by both teachers and students. Geographic information systems are used occasionally to support students' learning and the department is aware that this is an area for further development.
- Learning activities are organised well so students have good opportunities to work collaboratively. Where appropriate, students are provided with opportunities to make decisions about their own learning and work well independently. They enjoy this and rise to the challenge.
- Students in all years are aware of their targets and know what it is they have to improve and how to do this. This is due to the regular formal assessment by teachers and grading of students' work supported by high-quality written feedback.
- Marking of students' work completed in class and at home is frequent and as well as checking for completion, teachers provide short-term targets to show students how to improve their work. Teachers also pay close attention to correcting students' spelling.

Quality of the curriculum in geography

The quality of the curriculum in geography is good.

- The curriculum in Key Stage 3 is broad and balanced and includes themes in human and physical geography as well as the discrete study of places. This is strongest in Years 8 and 9.
- Detailed schemes of work are in place for each unit of work that link to key geographical concepts and skills and indicate how learning is to progress within each theme. However, there is no overview to show the coverage of the concepts and skills across the curriculum or how these are developed over the three years.
- Students have good opportunities to develop their geographical skills across Years 7 to 9. However, this is not the case with fieldwork.
- The examination specifications for Key Stages 4 and 5 meet the students' needs well and ensure continuity in their learning.
- Current initiatives are integrated into the curriculum as and where is appropriate. From Year 8 upwards, there is a good focus on the global dimension.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in geography

The effectiveness of leadership and management in geography is outstanding.

- The subject leader has a clear, well-articulated vision for geography. Staff share a common purpose to raise standards and to ensure that students have a high-quality experience. Good practice is shared readily and collaborative working is a feature of the department.
- Across the department, there is a high level of subject expertise, which is enhanced by regular professional development. Very effective use is made of the initiatives provided by the subject associations and these have had a positive impact, for example, in increasing the number of students opting to study geography.
- Self-evaluation and the monitoring of performance are regular, rigorous and accurate and result in a well-focused, manageable improvement plan. Targets set are aspirational yet attainable.
- The recent recognition of the work of the department through a national quality award reflects the hard work and success of the subject leader and staff in bringing about improvement and their commitment to providing the highest quality learning of geography.
- The subject area is a vibrant learning environment with high-quality displays including a significant proportion of students' work.
- Good use is made of the school's virtual learning environment to allow students in all years to access work in geography out of school hours.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- ensuring that there is more challenge for the higher attainers so they are able to readily access the highest National Curriculum levels and examination grades
- reviewing the Key Stage 3 curriculum to ensure that there is clear progression across the three years in the key geographical concepts and skills, and in fieldwork.

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

As 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. A copy of this letter is also being sent to your local authority.

Yours sincerely

Paul Dowgill
Additional Inspector