

02 April 2007

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Dear Dr Jenkin

Ofsted survey inspection programme – English & Geography

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during our visit on 26-27 March 2007 to look at work in English and 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. All feedback letters will be published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half-term.

English

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a particular focus on provision for poetry

The evidence used to inform the judgements made included: interviews with staff and students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of six lessons. The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Standards are broadly average. Students are currently making good progress.

- Attainment in English on entry to the school is broadly average.
- At Key Stage 3 there has been a steady rise over recent years in the number of pupils reaching the expected level in national tests. Standards were above average in 2005 and students had made good progress. This was followed by a dip in 2006 to broadly average and students made satisfactory progress. The number of students at the higher levels was above average.

- Students in Year 9, including those with learning difficulties and disabilities (LDD) are making good progress; their standards are above average and they are on track to meet their target.
- Standards at GCSE, although variable, are broadly average. Year 11 students, including those with LDD, are currently making good progress.

Quality of teaching and learning of English

The quality of teaching and learning in English is good.

- Teachers make good use of assessment information to plan a range of activities which meet students' needs.
- Lessons offer a good level of challenge and engage interest.
- Students make good progress through the good opportunities they are given for discussion.
- Teaching assistants offer effective support.
- Marking offers generally very thorough advice to students on how to improve their work, although there are some missed opportunities for this.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is satisfactory.

- The curriculum offers breadth and balance at both key stages.
- Key Stage 4 units are clearly linked to GCSE assessment objectives.
- Schemes of work are clear and their effectiveness is regularly reviewed. They are linked to a clear assessment programme.
- New units have been developed to meet identified needs.
- The addition of a media studies option in Key Stage 4 means that students have a wider choice of courses although this is not yet available to all.

Leadership and management of English

The quality of leadership and management is good.

- Increased awareness of performance data has led to recent marked improvement in the identification of areas of relative weakness.
- Students have clear targets and good tracking identifies under-achievement.
- There are good intervention and individual support programmes which involve students in tracking their own improvement.
- Students are making good progress in response to improved provision.
- The subject leader has no opportunity to monitor lessons.

Subject issue: Poetry

Provision for poetry is satisfactory.

- There is adequate provision for the teaching of a satisfactory range of poetry.
- Pupils have enough opportunities to write their own poetry.
- In lessons observed, the teaching of poetry was good.

- Younger students are enthusiastic about poetry, especially about writing it. They are less confident when discussing their tastes and preferences in the poetry they have read.
- GCSE students do not enjoy their study of poetry, although they feel well-prepared for their examination.

Inclusion

Inclusion is good.

- The improved provision for boys means that they respond enthusiastically.
- There is disparity in attainment between boys and girls, although there are some early signs in younger pupils that this is decreasing.
- Work is planned to meet the needs of all pupils, including those with learning difficulties and disabilities.
- The recent inclusion of media studies at GCSE offers improved choice.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- to give the subject leader the opportunity to carry out regular lesson observations in order to improve the sharing of good practice
- to extend the availability of GCSE media studies to all who would benefit from it.

Geography

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of geography, the visit had a particular focus on the global dimension.

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

The overall effectiveness of geography was judged to be satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards are satisfactory.

- Standards at Key Stage 4 have fluctuated between average and below average in the last three years, as shown by GCSE results. Achievement in Key Stage 4 was below average in the last two years. Pupils in Year 11 however, are making satisfactory progress as a result of improvements in teaching and learning, arrangements for coursework and a greater focus on tackling underachievement. These improvements have yet to be sustained.
- Standards at Key Stage 3 are broadly average and pupils make satisfactory progress including those with learning difficulties and disabilities.
- Pupils make satisfactory progress in lessons as result of sound teaching.
- Pupils enjoy geography because of the range of interesting topics covered and because they take part in activities which help them to learn effectively. As a result, pupils behave well in lessons and have positive attitudes to their work.

Quality of teaching and learning

Teaching and learning are satisfactory.

- Teaching and learning are not yet good because lesson planning for groups of pupils with different abilities does not always enable enough pupils to make good progress.
- A major strength in teaching and learning is that pupils are encouraged to think for themselves and share ideas with others as they develop a good understanding of different topics. This approach is helping to improve learning although pupils' factual knowledge of different places is not always secure.
- Guidance on how to achieve particular levels or grades in each piece of assessed work is good as students know their targets and what is needed to achieve or exceed them. Day-to-day marking is inconsistent and sometimes leaves pupils unaware of how well they are doing or how to improve their work.
- Teaching assistants are well deployed in lessons and provide effective support for pupils with learning difficulties and others who need help.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is good.

- There is good range of topics at different scales and locations which captures pupils' interest in aspects of physical, human and environmental geography. It enables pupils to deepen their knowledge and understanding as they go through the school.
- The curriculum is effective in helping pupils to make sense of important issues which are relevant to them. Activities are usually based on questioning and problem solving approaches which encourage pupils to develop their own answers and solutions.
- The fieldwork programme is good. The recently introduced international fieldwork at Key Stage 4 is helping to raise standards of coursework. A weakness in this provision is that the Key Stage 4 field trip is not attended by all the pupils.
- Provision for the use of information and communication technology in geography is limited to occasional use for presentations and internet research. Pupils do not have enough opportunities to communicate geographical information through maps.

Leadership and management

Leadership and management are satisfactory

- A recent reorganisation of leadership and management arrangements means the geography subject leader now works closely with the head of the humanities faculty. As a result there is much more rigorous attention given to identifying and tackling underachievement effectively.

- The subject leader, together with the head of faculty, has a good idea of the main strengths and weaknesses of the subject. Analysis of examination performance is thorough.
- Subject development plans indicate tasks to be carried out but do not clearly indicate desired outcomes for pupils or whether targets have been met.
- Schemes of work provide clear and helpful guidance on teaching and learning although provision for groups of pupils with different abilities is not fully developed. The schemes of work are not underpinned by a clear statement of the aims and values of the geography department.
- The subject leader is improving the quality of teaching in geography as a result of recent professional development.
- The number of pupils opting for geography at Key Stage 4 has more than trebled over the last two years. The proportion of Year 10 pupils studying geography is now above the national average.

Subject issue: the global dimension

Pupils' learning about the global dimension is good.

- The range of topics studied includes relevant, global issues such as the sustainability of air travel which is considered in the follow up to a visit to a major airport.
- The department played a central role in a 'World Geography Day' event linking the school with visitors from other countries. This has led to the development of initial links with a Ghanaian community.
- The subject is at the heart of the school's intermediate award for international status.

Inclusion

The provision for inclusion is satisfactory.

- Pupils' achievement is satisfactory and there is an increasing focus on reducing underachievement. All are actively included in learning activities in lessons.
- The curriculum makes good provision for pupils' needs but planning does not always ensure the needs of all groups of pupils are well met in lessons. The successful international fieldwork visit in Year 10 is not available to all pupils.
- Pupils feel they are treated fairly in geography and have increasingly positive attitudes towards the subject.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include the need to:

- ensure that the current improvements in achievement in Key Stage 4 are sustained in this and subsequent years
- improve the planning and provision in lessons for groups of pupils with different abilities
- ensure that subject development plans are properly reviewed and focus on improving outcomes for pupils as identified in the subject's self-evaluation.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop English and Geography in the school.

As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority/Local Learning and Skills Council and will be published on Ofsted's website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Patricia Walker
Additional Inspector