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Dear Dr Ireland

Ofsted survey inspection programme – geography

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 04-05 March 2008 to look at work in geography.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a focus on how literacy is being used to enhance learning 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. All feedback letters will be published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half-term.

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

The overall effectiveness of geography is good with a number of strong features.

Achievement and standards

Standards are broadly average in the main school, representing good achievement overall. In the sixth form, standards and achievement are both good.

- Most students enter the school with below average standards. They make good progress overall so that the great majority reach the

national expectation by the end of Year 9. Students who are more able make similarly good progress and they reach above average standards.

- The progress made by average and below average ability boys in Years 7-9 is, however, only satisfactory in comparison with the faster progress made by girls.
- In recent years, GCSE examination results have been on a falling trend. In 2007, results were below average. This partly reflected the declining attainment of the cohorts choosing the course. However, although girls did well in 2007, boys underachieved.
- In response, the department has taken swift and determined action and has largely rectified this situation. Standards are higher in the work seen and most students are on course to reach challenging targets. The progress being made by boys' is better than it was but remains less certain than the progress being made by girls.
- The small groups of students in the sixth form make good progress from their generally average starting points to reach above average standards by Year 13.
- The department is successful in imparting an interest in world issues and events. Many students develop a good appreciation of the relevance of geography to their lives.
- Students' attitudes to learning and their behaviour in lessons are generally good. They are very good in the sixth form.
- A minority of boys, particularly in Key Stage 3, are reluctant learners. Their behaviour is well managed by their teachers but they do not always give of their best.
- Students generally enjoy their work in geography and they appreciate the work of their teachers in providing interesting lessons and in supporting their learning. Consequently, there is a rising trend in the numbers opting to take the GCSE course.

Quality of teaching and learning of geography

The quality of teaching and learning is good.

- The specialist classrooms impart a positive ethos about learning geography. Displays are interesting, informative and helpful.
- Teachers have a very good command of their subject. They provide accurate and interesting presentations using information and communication technology (ICT). This is underpinned by a very good knowledge of national curriculum and examination requirements.
- Lessons follow a common structure and teachers make good use of the Secondary National Strategy. Planning is detailed. It is clearly focused on learning outcomes and takes account of the needs of different ability groups.
- Teachers strongly convey their enthusiasm for the subject and make good use of topical examples and case studies. They use a wide range of methods and techniques to promote geographical thinking. Specific skills are taught well.

- Effective use is made of time. Lessons begin promptly with starter activities to engage students and deadlines are set for the completion of tasks.
- A strength of the department's work is the robust system of checking students' progress through regular assessments. At Key Stage 3, for example, assessments are firmly embedded in the scheme of work and are based on problem solving and independent learning.
- Consequently, students have a good grasp of how well they are doing. They are shown how their work is assessed and this process helps them improve the standard of their answers.
- Marking is very good. Teachers' comments are often specifically aimed at helping students' improve the quality of their work. Students in each key stage strongly appreciate the guidance that this gives them.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is good.

- The curriculum is based on a very clear rationale and meets students' needs and external requirements well. It is very well organised and managed.
- Provision is regularly reviewed and varied in order to promote higher standards and students' enjoyment of learning.
- The school web-site is used well to encourage independent learning, particularly for older students. They appreciate the recent initiative to e-mail their work directly to their teachers to be marked. Students also like the ease of understanding the comments and changes suggested by their teachers in response.
- The curriculum is enriched well in a variety of ways. Students in all year groups participate in fieldwork. Their interest is also aroused by the interesting displays on computer screens placed in corridors.
- The new suite of computers attached to the teaching rooms is enhancing learning opportunities.
- Initiatives such as establishing International School status, organising international exchanges and introducing a Fair Trade action group are further enhancing provision.

Leadership and management of geography

Leadership and management of geography are very good.

- The head of department provides strong leadership based on a very clear vision for improvement. The department is very well organised and managed.
- There is a common purpose evident from the consistently good quality of teaching and continued development of learning opportunities.
- New technologies are being used effectively to improve the quality of learning.

- The department is influential within the school. It is at the forefront of whole-school developments as it is a lead subject for the Humanities element of the Specialist College. For example, geography teachers are providing coaching opportunities for other staff.
- The work of the department is rigorously evaluated. Consequently, improvement planning is good. Swift action is taken to overcome any weaknesses and to promote higher standards.
- Good detailed analysis of GCSE and A Level progress and attainment data is undertaken to inform future action. In contrast, Key Stage 3 data has not received the same attention. However, the recent improvement to school systems is providing a detailed electronic data base to facilitate this process.

Subject issue

The extent to which literacy is being used to enhance learning in geography is good.

- The use of active learning methods in lessons encourages students to articulate their ideas and opinions.
- There is a good emphasis on encouraging students to make links between geographical factors in order to promote higher-order thinking and communication skills.
- The development of writing skills receives a great deal of attention to help improve answers. For example, a good range of different types of writing is undertaken. Students are also taught how to take notes, to draft their responses and how to structure their writing. A Year 8 lesson on creating 'Brilliant Conclusions' effectively promoted these skills.
- The systematic use of assessment techniques helps students understand how to reach higher levels in their writing. However, the quality of writing of the highest attaining students lacks fluency and control.
- Students are reminded about how to spell technical vocabulary. However, the importance of accurate spelling in writing is not emphasised enough.

Inclusion

The provision for inclusion in geography is good.

- Teachers use active learning methods well to engage all groups of students in learning. They use questioning appropriately to check and extend students' understanding
- Teachers know their students well and securely plan the next stages of learning. Consequently, lessons effectively meet the needs of different ability groups.
- Teaching assistants lead the learning of individual students well.

- Teachers provide extra help to students who need it. For example, GCSE students attend extra coursework sessions and access the school website for homework and for revision.

Areas for improvement

The areas for improvement, which we discussed, include the need to:

- continue to pursue the strategies identified in the department action plan to raise attainment in GCSE examinations
- develop and strengthen strategies to boost boys' achievement at Key Stages 3 and 4
- analyse the data available on Key Stage 3 attainment and progress in order to sharpen understanding of any relative weaknesses in standards and provision.

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

Yours sincerely

Ralph Higgs
Additional Inspector