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Dear Mr Barton

Ofsted 2010-11 subject survey inspection programme: geography

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and students, during my visit on 22 and 23 April 2010 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.

The evidence used to inform the judgements included interviews with nominated 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 standard of students' work on entry in Year 9 is broadly average. However, students have widely varying experiences of geography in Years 7 and 8 because they come from as many as 20 different schools.
- Year 9 students make good progress. They develop sound knowledge and understanding of how people interact with their environment and the interconnections between economies and societies.
- Students who choose geography as a GCSE option make good progress to achieve standards that are above those found nationally. Standards at AS level and A level are also above the national figures and represent good progress from students' starting points.

- There is no significant difference between the progress of different groups. Where analysis of assessment data indicates that individual students or particular groups are at risk of underachieving, specific interventions and support are provided.
- In the lessons observed, the quality of learning was at least satisfactory and often good. The extended lesson time affords students good opportunities to progressively develop their geographical skills and to deepen their understanding of complex processes. They are routinely expected to explore hypotheses, to evaluate evidence and to demonstrate creativity in their subject work.
- The study of topical issues gives students a good knowledge and understanding of wider geographical issues, including recent events and global problems. Students have a good grasp of basic skills in geography and make good use of information and communication technology (ICT) in their work; their conceptual thinking is well developed.
- Geography makes a strong contribution to students' personal development, particularly in the way that they develop positive attitudes to wider cultural, moral and social issues.
- Students' good behaviour is a positive factor in their good learning and progress in geography. They work steadily, sustain their concentration well and show enthusiasm when working independently and collaboratively.

Quality of teaching of geography

The quality of teaching in geography is satisfactory.

- Lessons are well structured and planned carefully. A good range of interesting activities and resources ensures that the 100-minute sessions are used well. Teachers have high expectations of the students and relationships are good.
- Lessons are guided by suitable objectives and are ambitious. However, learning outcomes are not always considered in sufficient detail and, therefore, the level of challenge for different groups of students is not always appropriate.
- Teachers use a wide range of teaching and learning styles, including paired work, role-play and group decision-making. The best lessons have a good balance of teacher input and independent activities and involve lively discussions and skilful questioning that engage all students.
- ICT is used well to structure lessons and to support students' learning. The use of ICT is embedded in the curriculum so that students regularly use it to research and process information and to present their findings.
- Assessment information supports students' learning and progress well, but its application could be targeted more carefully and usefully extended. Teachers have access to baseline assessment information on all their students, and students taking GCSE and A-level geography know their target grades and what they need to do to achieve them.

- In lessons, teachers have sensible methods for assessing whether students understand the work. This assessment for learning is cleverly woven into the best lessons so that the pace and quality of learning are skilfully sustained.
- Some aspects of assessment are not sufficiently precise: lesson outcomes for different students are not precise enough and marking is variable in its impact because students are not given clear enough guidance on how to improve.

Quality of the curriculum in geography

The quality of the curriculum is good.

- The department has made an impressive start in developing new schemes of work to meet the requirements of the National Curriculum. It has planned these carefully to ensure that the Year 9 course provides a stimulating introduction to students without too much duplication of topics covered in Years 7 and 8. The topics have intriguing titles that promote students' curiosity about their world, such as: 'Can you solve the mystery of the moving rocks?' and 'What connects the Totem Pole and the Toothfish?'
- The curriculum has a number of obvious strengths. It is enriched by the use of independent investigation and balances well the need to develop local relevance and the perspective on wider global issues.
- Planning for Key Stage 3 is detailed and imaginative and takes account of the increased emphasis on topical issues and extending students' geographical understanding and experiences.
- The subject leader has used web-based resources and ICT to develop some excellent resources to support the students' learning, including revision guides.
- Opportunities for fieldwork are quite limited, but are suitably planned to enrich the curriculum at each key stage. Students really enjoy their fieldwork, particularly in the sixth form, and appreciate how it extends their knowledge and understanding of geography.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in geography

The effectiveness of leadership and management in geography is good and shows good capacity for further improvement.

- The subject leader has a clear vision for the development of geography and consistently communicates high expectations to staff about securing improvement. Strategies to raise standards have been successfully implemented in recent years, particularly in the way that the ambitious curriculum communicates high expectations to staff and students.
- The subject leader makes good use of resources provided by subject associations and skilfully guides the work of the department. He works hard to support colleagues, to galvanise their enthusiasm and ensure that teachers' subject knowledge is updated.

- Departmental self-evaluation is thorough and accurate. Outcomes and provision are rigorously evaluated as part of whole-school review processes, and the subject leader plays a key role in the day-to-day monitoring of standards, students' progress and provision.
- The gathering of students' views is a notable strength. The students' voice is integral to subject reviews and is used effectively for revisions to provision and in development planning.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- focusing more sharply on the short-term outcomes expected from individual students and groups by:
 - defining more precisely the learning outcomes for groups of students in each lesson and then developing more subtlety in the differentiation of work in lessons
 - taking care to ensure that marking is more effective in guiding what individual students need to do to improve their performance and to achieve their target grade or level.

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

As I explained previously, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and will be published on the Ofsted website under the URN for your school. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Paul Brooker
Her Majesty's Inspector