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Mr S Nokes
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Nokes

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 4 and 5 May 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 10 lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is outstanding.

Achievement in geography

Achievement in geography is outstanding.

- Attainment is exceptionally high. In GCSE and A-level examinations in 2010, the majority of students achieved the highest A or A* grades.
- When students start in Year 7, the standard of their work varies rather more widely than in the core subjects of mathematics and English. However, students of all abilities make rapid progress in their learning because work is challenging and teaching is consistently good or better.
- The students acquire knowledge and develop skills exceptionally well, particularly at Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form. Older students have an in-depth knowledge and understanding of complex geographical processes, both human and physical. This secure grasp enables them to analyse and synthesise information from different sources to reach carefully validated conclusions.

- The vast majority of students aspire to succeed and demonstrate impressive commitment and great independence. They assume responsibility for their own progress by working hard and taking pride in their achievement. Students are routinely encouraged to apply what they have studied to wider contexts and to research issues for themselves.

Quality of teaching of geography

The quality of teaching in geography is outstanding.

- Teachers use their subject expertise to set work that is consistently challenging. They communicate their enthusiasm and have very high expectations, in terms of both the quality and quantity of students' work. Issues are explored at levels that stretch students of all abilities.
- Lessons are well planned, often making excellent use of stimulating resources to engage the students' interest and curiosity. They are encouraged to participate in learning through skilful questioning and carefully prepared pair and group activities.
- Very good use is made of multimedia resources and information and communication technology, including geographical information systems (GIS), to introduce and explore a wide range of topical issues.
- Excellent relationships between adults and students ensure that lessons proceed at a rapid pace and that students feel confident to express their views and seek support when they need it.
- Teaching is underpinned by ambitious target-setting, which motivates students well. Teachers use a range of techniques to assess students' understanding in lessons and guide their further progress.
- Marking is regular and constructive, but much is rather perfunctory. Even when teachers take time to be evaluative, comments are not sufficiently sharply focused on what students need to do to achieve the very highest levels.

Quality of the curriculum in geography

The quality of the curriculum in geography is good.

- The curriculum is well designed to match the students' needs and aspirations and to ensure effective continuity and progression in their learning. It is broad, balanced and well informed by current initiatives in the subject.
- Students are encouraged to reflect on a wide range of local and global issues. Complex geographical concepts are investigated in depth, so that students develop an excellent awareness of global concerns.
- Some units of work have been suitably revised to enliven topics and avoid unnecessary repetition. Imaginative resources and engaging activities promote lively and stimulating lessons and ensure that students value and enjoy the subject. Several topics are cleverly planned to engage the boys' curiosity, such as 'Why did Zack Slater break his ankle?'

- The curriculum is designed so that students progressively develop a broad range of skills in the use of maps and GIS. Students have good opportunities to develop and consolidate key geographical skills of enquiry, although opportunities for fieldwork are limited to Key Stages 4 and 5.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in geography

The effectiveness of leadership and management in geography is good.

- Leadership is well informed by current developments in geography and maintains a relentless focus on maintaining high standards. The department has a strong track record of success and improvement based on challenging target-setting, systematic self-evaluation and effective improvement planning.
- Outcomes and provision are systematically evaluated as part of whole-school review processes. The subject leader plays a key role in the day-to-day monitoring of standards, provision and students' progress.
- The subject leader communicates high expectations to staff about securing improvement. High ambition is shared among those involved in teaching the subject, and effective strategies are in place to strengthen teaching and share best practice.
- Geography is well established as a popular and successful subject. Out-of-classroom learning is seen as an essential component of the subject, but it is underdeveloped at Key Stage 3.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- sharpening the focus of curriculum planning and increasing the impact of marking by detailing the expected geographical skills, knowledge and understanding outcomes that students should be developing
- embedding fieldwork into the Key Stage 3 curriculum.

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

Paul Brooker
Her Majesty's Inspector