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Mr Griffiths
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Dear Mr Griffiths

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Geography 2009/10

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 01 and 02 June 2009 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 how effectively geography teaching and the curriculum promotes community cohesion.

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 students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of data, analysis of students' work and observation of five lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is good.

Achievement and standards

Achievement is good overall. Standards are broadly average.

- Students generally join the school with geography skills and knowledge that are below average.
- There has been a rising trend of improvement throughout Key Stage 3 in recent years. Most students make good progress from their starting points

to achieve broadly average outcomes by the end of Year 9 with increasing numbers attaining the higher levels.

- Girls achieve better than boys, although the gap is narrowing rapidly. Improved assessment, tracking and targeting coupled with the recent introduction of units designed to appeal to boys are helping to close the gap.
- Standards at the end of Key Stage 4 are broadly average. In 2008, a similar percentage to the national average achieved A*-C grades but a significantly higher proportion achieved A*-A grades. The average points score was above average. This year, fewer students are projected to achieve the higher levels but more are on target to achieve A*-C.
- The vast majority of students meet their targets and many exceed them. The school's data analysis and scrutiny of work shows that most students make good progress overall.
- Few students opt to study geography at Advanced Level. Some higher attaining students choose to study the subject at a selective sixth form college. Most students make good progress from their starting points to achieve average standards. The small numbers selecting geography allow for more personalised learning and individual attention.
- Students' attitudes and behaviour in lessons are good. They are well behaved and keen to learn. Teachers enjoy good relationships with students in lessons.

Quality of teaching and learning of geography

The quality of teaching is good.

- Teachers plan lessons thoroughly and their subject knowledge is good. A wide variety of teaching and learning activities involve students and most sustain their interest well.
- Resources are carefully chosen to make lessons interesting and these engage and challenge most students. For example, a Year 9 lesson provided a good range of activities which enabled students to examine the problems of coastal erosion in Easington and helped them to begin to understand the viewpoints of different people affected.
- A range of assessment for learning techniques is used by teachers to promote interest, collaboration and participation. Questions are widely distributed and this increases participation and extends students' thinking.
- Most lessons have a brisk pace and carefully build on previous learning to extend students' thinking. Occasionally, too much teacher talk slows down the pace of lessons. Also, plenaries are less successful because insufficient time is left for learning to be summarised or evaluated effectively.
- Information and communication technology (ICT) is used appropriately by teachers to support each lesson. Sufficient opportunities are provided for students to use ICT to develop or extend their geography work, although leaders are seeking ways to improve access further.

- Additional ICT development work is planned to integrate and develop the use of geographical information systems (GIS) to further increase students' skills of map analysis and interpretation.
- Good systems are in place for assessing student's work and tracking their progress. Work is marked regularly and increasing opportunities are being provided for students to respond to written feedback. At key times, such as at the end of units of work, student's work is assessed against national criteria and thorough diagnostic feedback is given.
- Increasingly, students are being encouraged to evaluate their own and others' work. Where it is successful, it is improving their understanding of what they need to do to get better. However, the department knows that further work is required to ensure this is applied consistently.
- Most students know what level they are working at and their target grades. However, some are not clear precisely what they need to do to achieve the next level.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is good.

- This is a period of curriculum transition in the department at Key Stage 3, GCSE and Advanced Level. These changes are being managed well.
- The Key Stage 3 curriculum is being successfully modified in line with the new programmes of study. Interesting topics and themes have been developed such as the 'Geography of Crime'.
- Students are being provided with a firm foundation of understanding and skills in Year 7. This is being extended in breadth and depth in subsequent years.
- An excellent independent learning project has been provided for students in Year 7 which compares and contrasts their own locality with Zanzibar. Parents have been encouraged to monitor students' progress which has helped increase their involvement and understanding of the subject. A number of students have completed this work to an exceptionally high standard.
- A good start has been made in introducing cross curricular dimensions and further development work is programmed over the next academic year.
- Opportunities to use field work and real examples to motivate and inspire students in Key Stage 3, such as field trips to Birmingham and Cardingmill Valley, are satisfactory. The school recognises increased opportunities are required to extend this further.
- Appropriate opportunities are provided for residential visits. GCSE students have visited the Lake District and Advanced Level students have undertaken work in Cornwall. These visits support their good achievement.
- The GCSE geography course declined in popularity two years ago. The department responded constructively to address this. A number of necessary and positive changes were made to the curriculum which has led to an upturn in numbers.

- The Key Stage 4 syllabus will change from September 2009. The department investigated and discussed fully the range of alternatives. Agreement has been reached on the new syllabus and the department is at an advanced stage of preparation to implement the new scheme of work.

Leadership and management of geography

Leadership and management of geography are good.

- This is a rapidly improving department. The head of department is passionate about her subject and she is committed to improving provision and students' progress. A number of initiatives have been successfully introduced but need time to fully embed.
- The department is forward thinking and has been instrumental in successfully leading and implementing a number of whole school initiatives.
- A broad range of formal and informal monitoring and evaluation activity has been undertaken. Self-evaluation is accurate. Outcomes are drawn together in the comprehensive curriculum review document.
- The department has a thorough understanding of strengths and weaknesses and what needs to be done to improve further. These are incorporated into an appropriate plan of action. However, the review document requires a sharper evaluation of the impact of the actions taken.
- The department has a good awareness of the current issues impacting on the subject. Local and national professional development opportunities are used appropriately to support departmental improvement.

Subject issue

The effectiveness of geography teaching and the curriculum in promoting community cohesion is good.

- The geography department supports community cohesion well and understands the importance of delivering it through the curriculum. A whole school community cohesion policy guides the work of the department. Explicit links have been identified in schemes of work.
- A good range of opportunities are provided throughout the school to learn about local, European and global issues. These have helped increase students' understanding and developed relationships with different communities. However, the impact of these has not been evaluated.
- The school has a good involvement in a range of community cohesion projects. Effective links have been established with other schools in Dudley. The head of department works as the geography curriculum advisor to a local primary school.
- In the main, students enjoy good relationships with teachers and each other. Most students are appropriately engaged in their learning. They

value each other and relationships between learners from different backgrounds are positive.

Areas for improvement

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

- continue to raise standards in Key Stages 3 and 4, especially at the higher levels
- continue to develop and implement the new Key Stage 3 and 4 schemes of work
- increase fieldwork opportunities so that students are provided regularly with first hand opportunities to support the curriculum and increase their geographical skills
- develop further the use of self and peer assessment and increase opportunities for students to respond to written feedback.

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

Paul Weston
Her Majesty's Inspector