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Mr S Carpenter
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Dear Mr Carpenter

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 18 and 19 October 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 seven lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is inadequate.

Achievement in geography

Achievement in geography is currently inadequate.

- Students enter the school from a range of settings with, on the whole, poorly developed geographical knowledge and understanding. Geographical skills are also weak.
- Overall, standards are low across both key stages. Outcomes for students at GCSE remain below the national average.
- Students are entered for their examinations in Year 10. Few attain the highest grades because they lack the maturity and the depth of knowledge to be able to exhibit higher level thinking and reasoning skills.
- Progress is more evident at GCSE than in Key Stage 3 because there is a clearer and more structured focus on geography. A significant minority of students make sufficient progress to attain at least a C grade in their examination.

- At Key Stage 3, opportunities are insufficient to progressively develop higher level mapping skills. Students have limited exposure to real maps.
- Fieldwork skills are also underdeveloped at Key Stage 3. At GCSE, basic examination requirements are met. Opportunities for students to use geographical information systems (GIS) in their studies are not in evidence.
- Students show broad general knowledge of key geographical terminology. For example, they are able to define the terms LEDC (less economically developed country) and MEDC (more economically developed country) but lack the depth of detail or case study knowledge to make clear links to concepts such as development and interdependence.
- Behaviour in most lessons is generally good. However, a minority of lessons are affected by some disruptive behaviour from a small number of students.

Quality of teaching in geography

The quality of teaching in geography is inadequate.

- Too much weak teaching was observed, especially in Key Stage 3 and in the delivery of the connected curriculum in Year 7. Non-specialist teachers are responsible for the delivery of much of this and currently they lack the specific knowledge, expertise and confidence to teach geographically.
- Good generic teaching skills were also observed but inappropriate use of resources or badly chosen student tasks meant that learning outcomes for most students did not reach expectations.
- In too many lessons, too much time is wasted on occupying rather than learning tasks. For example, students copied information or learning objectives into books or drew diagrams when the main objective should have been the labelling, which would have shown that students understood the processes shown.
- Students of all abilities tend to complete the same work with varying degrees of success. Weaker students, and boys in particular, leave much work poorly presented and unfinished before they are asked to move on to the next task.
- Work in topic books shows that general literacy skills are improving. However, the ability to transfer and apply these to their study of geography is hampering the progress of far too many students.
- In too many lessons, teachers dominate questioning and fail to fully involve students in developing their thinking by expecting simple responses or by often completing the responses themselves. Too much teacher talk limits learning.
- Misconceptions, such as students' reference to Africa and Asia as countries, are rarely challenged because of the lack of teachers' specific subject knowledge.
- Opportunities to use a wide range of multimedia resources to visually stimulate students' learning and support them in accessing tasks are

variable. Students themselves use computers infrequently and often for simple tasks such as general research as part of their homework.

- Assessment is insecure. Non-specialist teachers lack the expertise or exemplification support to assess students accurately at Key Stage 3. Assessment is more secure at GCSE where it is linked to clear marking criteria.
- Support staff are not being used effectively to support students' learning. Far too often, they are passive observers during extended periods of teacher talk.

Quality of the curriculum in geography

The quality of the curriculum in geography is inadequate.

- The fragmented and limited two year Key Stage 3 curriculum does not provide a solid enough base on which students can build and develop their learning, or encourage them to opt for it at GCSE. The curriculum meets requirements at GCSE.
- The connected curriculum, currently taught in Year 7 and due to be introduced into Year 8 next year, does not ensure students' full entitlement in geography. Although some consideration is given to coverage, the progressive development of knowledge, understanding and skills is insufficiently built into the learning activities. Links to themes are also sometimes artificially imposed.
- There is sometimes too much focus on generic learning skills rather than specific geographical outcomes. Episodes of geography provide a shallow learning experience. Insufficient time is allocated for more in-depth case studies and, especially, the learning about a broad range of places.
- Certain aspects are not covered with sufficient frequency or detail at Key Stage 3. For example, students have only limited opportunities to immerse themselves in studies in the immediate locality, the European dimension is sketchy and fieldwork is not yet an integral or important part of the taught curriculum.
- Mapwork skills are also poorly integrated into the teaching programme. There are few opportunities for consolidation, application or reinforcement across a range of real and relevant case examples.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in geography

The effectiveness of leadership and management in geography is currently inadequate.

- Currently the subject leader is inexperienced and lacks the authority and drive to take effective steps to develop the subject and influence curriculum change. Careful nurture and support is required to build up confidence and expertise.
- Few students opt to take the subject at GCSE reflecting the current weak profile within the school.

- Too many non-specialist teachers are expected to deliver aspects of the curriculum at Key Stage 3 without having had appropriate training and support.
- Monitoring of coverage and quality of student work have not been sufficiently rigorous in the past to recognise weaknesses and identify effective strategies to support improvement.
- Current resources to enable teachers, especially non-specialists, to deliver the subject with conviction or confidence are limited. As a result, day-to-day lesson planning is not sufficiently focused on stretching the more able, supporting weaker learners and providing sufficient challenge to improve outcomes.
- The resources and professional support provided by the subject associations have not been used to effect improvements in the subject.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- improving teaching to enable all teachers, including non-specialists, to deliver lessons confidently and effectively by:
 - improving the range and quality of the teaching resources available
 - using the support and guidance of the subject associations
 - ensuring that teachers receive subject-specific training or support to enable them to teach geographically
- improving the quality and depth of the geography curriculum at Key Stage 3 to:
 - enable students to progress in their development of geographical knowledge, understanding and skills
 - ensure that appropriate and topical case studies support study in depth
 - ensure that coverage requirements are met for all aspects of the curriculum including wider study of their own locality as well as a range of different places in the United Kingdom and the European Union
 - enable the progressive development of geographical skills, especially mapping and fieldwork skills.

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

As 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. A copy of this letter is also being sent to your local authority.

Yours sincerely

Leszek Iwaskow
Her Majesty's Inspector