

Aviation House
125 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

T 0300 123 1231
F 020 7421 6855
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk



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Mr M Longden
Headteacher
The Toynbee School
Bodycoats Road
Chandler's Ford
Eastleigh
SO53 2PL

Dear Mr Longden

Ofsted 2010–11 subject survey inspection programme: geography

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and pupils, during my visit on 7 and 8 July 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 without their consent.

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

The overall effectiveness of geography is good.

Achievement in geography

Achievement in geography is good.

- Pupils' attainment at GCSE has been broadly average for the last three years. Results of examination modules and coursework for the current Year 11 indicate a significant improvement in their attainment this year, and this is likely to be sustained the following year.
- At the end of Year 9, the very large majority of pupils attain standards that are in line with national expectations and nearly a half of them attain levels higher than this.
- Given the pupils' starting points, the progress they make at GCSE is good and is steadily improving.
- Pupils in Years 7 to 9 make good progress in lessons. They have a good understanding of key concepts, such as sustainability, and demonstrate empathy for those who live in different situations to themselves.

- Through formal assessments, pupils display well their ability to write extended prose about places and geographical issues.
- Pupils' behaviour is outstanding and this aids greatly their good progress. They enjoy geography and most find it challenging.

Quality of teaching of geography

The quality of teaching of geography is good.

- Teachers are enthusiastic geographers, who are up to date with recent developments and have comprehensive subject knowledge, which they use to good effect in their teaching.
- Teachers use a broad range of activities, supported by high-quality resources, to promote good learning. They use the interactive whiteboard effectively to support teaching, but opportunities for pupils to use information and communication technology (ICT) are insufficient.
- High expectations of pupils and very effective classroom management allow teachers to use a variety of pupil groupings to good effect. Pupils respond very positively to this and work well in groups.
- Lesson planning does not focus sufficiently on learning outcomes. Teachers do not use data on pupils' performance well enough to tailor learning specifically to their needs.
- A variety of formal assessments are planned across each year. These allow pupils the opportunity to choose their assessment method. The assessments are marked and moderated and pupils are set clear targets for improvement.
- Teachers mark work regularly and usually set pupils targets for improvement. However, the quality of marking is variable. Pupils have good opportunities to assess their own work and that of their peers.

Quality of the curriculum in geography

The quality of the curriculum in geography is good.

- The department has responded well to the opportunity to review the Key Stage 3 curriculum and has introduced a number of new units of work that have greater relevance and are more engaging for the pupils.
- Coverage of the human, physical and environmental aspects of geography is good across the curriculum and some units explicitly cover key concepts.
- Planning at the scheme of work level aids consistency across the department. However, there is no clear overview of the expected outcomes for each unit of work, or how geographical skills and concepts are developed progressively across the units.
- All pupils in Years 7 and 8 have good opportunities for local fieldwork. Frequent opportunities, including international visits, are provided for those who choose to be involved in Year 9 and above.

- The department has successfully introduced a new GCSE specification that is having a positive impact on pupils' learning in Year 10.
- Some exciting initiatives are being developed, such as the 'geography challenge' and virtual learning environment, that enhance the opportunities for learning.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in geography

The effectiveness of leadership and management in geography is good.

- The head of department has led the subject effectively and built a cohesive team who share the common purpose of improving pupils' experience. 'Engagement and enjoyment' are at the centre of their work.
- Leadership is well informed by current developments in geography. The department has a good profile across the school and is leading on specific whole-school initiatives.
- Departmental improvement planning and self-review are detailed but are not focused sufficiently on raising standards and identifying measurable criteria to evaluate their success.
- The head of department regularly monitors the quality of the work of the department through lesson observation and work scrutiny. Good practice is shared.
- Opportunities for professional development are good, in particular focusing on the GCSE examination and with the local authority.
- The subject is popular with pupils, as seen in the 50% increase in take-up at GCSE in the last few years.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- increasing the opportunities for pupils to use ICT in lessons
- ensuring that lesson planning focuses on learning outcomes and uses assessment data to tailor planned activities to pupils' needs
- providing a clear overview of the expected learning outcomes for each unit of work and how the key concepts and skills are progressively developed across Key Stage 3.

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 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 Dowgill
Additional Inspector