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Mrs J Phelan
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Phelan

Ofsted 2012–13 subject survey inspection programme: geography

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 14 and 15 May 2012 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 four lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is good.

Achievement in geography

Achievement in geography is good.

- Students achieved above the national level last year and this continued an improving trend and reflected higher recruitment for the subject at GCSE. The current cohort has two groups and both are on track to maintain or exceed this level in 2012.
- Students are good at geographical enquiry and enjoy finding out about places. They use facts well to support their answers to questions and benefit from the rich range of case studies and examples used which include current global events.
- Key Stage 3 students especially enjoy their fieldwork where they successfully investigate the impact of humankind on a local city

environment. This locality contrasts appropriately with their more rural home location.

- Their wider regional knowledge is effectively developed by looking at The Eden Project. They have a good understanding of sustainability; especially in relation to the development of the Olympic site. Map skills are good and students learn to think spatially; although they have limited experience of the most modern geographical information systems (GIS) other than Google Earth.
- GCSE classes are diligently prepared and as a consequence achieve well right from the start of Year 10. Students reach good standards especially in their coastal fieldwork where they collect and use data very efficiently. While most is individual work their good collaborative and group working skills, learnt in Key Stage 3, enhance their ability to work well in the field.
- Behaviour in lessons is good and students understand the opportunities and potential dangers involved in fieldwork.

Quality of teaching in geography

The quality of teaching in geography is good.

- Teachers have good specialist knowledge and share their enthusiasm for geography with their students. This results in work that is both rigorous and engaging. Students benefit from a reasonable range of teaching strategies and tasks are well adapted to their aptitude and ability levels.
- Good use is made of the locality and students learn to look with an objective eye at the local leisure facilities and what the area can offer tourists. Their brochures show a good grasp of detail. Students are familiar with the wider physical landscape such as Dartmoor; this is partly as a result of the numerous students who participate in and gain first-hand experience via the 'Ten Tors' endurance expedition.
- Teachers use a range of good quality resources to support investigations and to promote discussions. Multimedia snippets to stimulate students' initial interest are, however, underused. Students appreciate the information provided on computer presentations and in useful staff designed handouts.
- On the whole, tasks interest and engage students and they have clearly been successful in helping older students to grasp the complexity of economic development for example, in parts of Africa. The school's international links with Namibia successfully enrich students' empathy and understanding as well as their social and cultural understanding.
- Students have good access to information and communication technology in their examination classes and use it confidently to support the presentation of their work and data.

Quality of the curriculum in geography

The quality of the curriculum in geography is good.

- The curriculum is broad and balanced and it offers continuity from the students' previous experiences in primary schools; staff often meet students in Year 5, in the majority of their feeder primary schools, when they lead a project on fair trade.
- The school assesses students' ability on entry in geography and uses this to help plan work that rapidly develops and extends their skills, for example in map reading and data recording.
- Planning highlights key concepts and ensures that students have first-hand experience of finding out about places and how people interact with different environments. Environmental and sustainability issues are well considered and students develop a good knowledge of local and international issues.
- Fieldwork skills are well integrated into the planning. Especially good use is made of the local coastline in Key Stage 4 to study coastal landforms.
- Opportunities to compare and contrast the impact of natural disasters on more and less developed countries lead to thought-provoking work. Students value the opportunity to look in rigorously analytical ways at related issues.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in geography

The effectiveness of leadership and management in geography is good.

- Leaders monitor and review the subject regularly. Recently the analysis of the students' progress data has become better understood by all concerned. It is now used effectively to check on rates of progress and to intervene at the earliest opportunity to support any student who is in danger of underachieving.
- The department has strong links with parents and carers and they are sent postcards when students are doing well in the subject, as well as being promptly contacted if any problem arises.
- Self-evaluation is thorough and accurate and feeds into the school's overall strategic plan. You take an active personal interest in all students' progress as well as ensuring that teachers' performance management holds staff to account.
- The subject is thriving as a result of diligent leadership and the value placed on out-of-class learning. Other departments benefit from the support geography gives to developing students' social skills and enquiring minds.
- Although the geography staff have had good generic staff development and engage productively with the examination board briefings there have been too few opportunities to build links with the professional subject associations. This has restricted their ability to keep up fully with the latest developments in GIS, for example.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- using the support and training available from the subject's professional bodies to help staff keep up to date with the latest developments, especially in GIS
- making more effective use of the full potential of multimedia to both stimulate students' interest and/or consolidate their understanding as topics are completed.

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

Mo Roberts
Her Majesty's Inspector

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