

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 J Martin
Headteacher
Notre Dame High School
Fulwood Road
Sheffield
South Yorkshire
S10 3BT

Dear Mr Martin

Ofsted 2010–11 subject survey inspection programme: geography

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and students, 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 nominated staff and students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of nine lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is outstanding.

Achievement in geography

Achievement in geography is outstanding overall.

- Standards are consistently high at GCSE and A level. Results are well above national as well as school averages. This is a very successful department.
- Students make outstanding progress in examination classes and consistently attain the highest grades, especially at GCSE, where a majority of the candidates gain A* or A grades.
- At Key Stage 3, most students generally make at least good progress, although there are inconsistencies across some classes. Overall, their experiences provide a good broad base upon which future examination success is built.

- Geographical skills are developed particularly well through regular opportunities for fieldwork in a range of locations, both locally and further afield, in the Lake District, Iceland and Sicily.
- Geography is a very popular subject. The greater majority of students enjoy the subject with a high take-up, especially at GCSE.
- Behaviour in lessons is good at Key Stage 3 and outstanding in examination classes. Positive relationships enable students to achieve very well in their lessons.

Quality of teaching of geography

The quality of teaching in geography is generally good and sometimes outstanding.

- All lessons are taught by experienced subject specialists who are enthusiastic about geography and have high expectations of the students.
- Lessons are planned in detail and a wide range of teaching strategies is employed to engage students. Teaching is strongest in examination classes. In many lessons, good use is made of topical issues.
- Information and communication technology (ICT) and a wide range of multimedia resources are used frequently by teachers in most lessons. Students make the most effective use of ICT to support their learning through research and enquiry in GCSE and A-level classes. The use of geographical information systems (GIS) remains at a developmental stage.
- Students benefit from the focus on enquiry in most lessons. This allows them to develop their geographical thinking and show a real understanding of the issues involved.
- Work is marked regularly and students are aware of how they are doing. Most are also able to identify what steps they need to take to improve. Very good use of assessment for learning strategies prepare students well for their public examinations and contributes to their success.
- Assessment at Key Stage 3 is undergoing review and development as geography moves to a shortened two-year programme next academic year. Fieldwork, alongside opportunities to complete extended research and analysis on topics such as 'The Changing Face of China', provide good and rigorous assessment approaches. These are not yet developed consistently across the key stage.

Quality of the curriculum in geography

The quality of the curriculum is good with some aspects which are outstanding.

- Significant changes have been made to the curriculum as the department has systematically reviewed provision across the school.
- The curriculum at Key Stage 3 is in a period of experimental transition as preparations are made to teach the contracted two-year programme from

September. Although most aspects are covered, opportunities for students to learn about Europe and their role as European citizens are limited.

- The constricted time for Key Stage 3 poses problems to ensure all aspects are covered in sufficient depth. The school is aware that aspects, such as globalisation and interdependence, lack depth and need to be strengthened through quality case studies.
- Provision for fieldwork is a real strength of the curriculum. Students get opportunities each year to experience fieldwork through classwork opportunities and through 'alternative curriculum days'. Students comment very positively about these experiences and how 'they bring their learning from the classroom to life'.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in geography

The effectiveness of leadership and management in geography is outstanding.

- The geography team is a well-established, respected, close-knit unit which has a clear commitment to high-quality provision.
- A shared vision and a collaborative approach to developing the subject has established geography as a very successful lead subject in the school.
- There is a good understanding of the strengths of the subject and a shared desire to meet the challenges to make it more relevant to better meet the changing needs of the students. This has resulted in some significant curriculum changes which are being managed very effectively.
- The department is very proactive in playing a lead role in developing teaching and educational practice as part of the school's specialist college work. This involves establishing productive links with the main feeder primaries to support transition as well as wider engagement through activities supported by the Geographical Association.
- The recent establishment of the Environmental Learning Centre on the school site provides an excellent opportunity to support and influence students' understanding of the need to lead more sustainable lifestyles. The ongoing collaborative work to produce learning programmes for primary pupils using the centre provides a wonderful opportunity to spread good practice in local primary schools and influence improvements in primary geography.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- re-evaluating the Key Stage 3 curriculum to ensure sufficient opportunities to:
 - develop the European dimension
 - study aspects, such as globalisation and interdependence, in greater depth
 - use quality assessment tasks to extend the more able and provide quality and rigorous evidence for students' progress

- developing wider use of GIS and supporting this through appropriate training and sharing good practice.

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

Leszek Iwaskow
Her Majesty's Inspector