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Mr P Lewis
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Dear Mr Lewis

Ofsted 2010–11 subject survey inspection programme: religious education (RE)

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and students, during my visit on 13 and 14 October 2010 to look at work in RE.

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 six lessons and an assembly.

The overall effectiveness of RE is satisfactory although significant areas require improvement, particularly at Key Stage 3.

Achievement in RE

Achievement in RE is satisfactory.

- The results of students taking GCE A levels in Philosophy and Ethics are broadly in line with their targets reflecting satisfactory achievement.
- The standards attained by students at the end of Key Stage 4 are variable but broadly average. The full course GCSE results in 2010 improved on the previous year reflecting the more stable staffing and leadership in the subject. However, the results remained below the national average and, given the ability profile of the students involved, represented underachievement. However, last year's results for the short course GCSE in both Years 10 and 11 represented satisfactory progress and, in the case of Year 10, were broadly in line with the national average. The current Year 11 students taking GCSE in RE are making reasonable progress.

- The department's analysis of results is not yet thorough enough to provide a comprehensive picture of the relative performance of different groups of students. Indications suggest some underachievement among the more able and particularly girls. This was confirmed in observations which showed that, while the more able are keen to share ideas and opinions about ethical and social issues, their understanding of religious perspectives and their ability to structure high-quality written arguments require further development.
- Standards by the end of Key Stage 3 are well below average and reflect a pattern of significant underachievement. This reflects limited challenge in the students' learning and weaknesses in the quality of the curriculum. Students' understanding of religion and their ability to use the skills of enquiry when investigating the subject are limited.
- Student attitudes towards RE are variable. While some are clearly enthusiastic about the opportunities it provides to explore different religions, beliefs and issues, where the work lacks challenge, students are more reluctant to engage in learning. At Key Stage 4, the subject makes a reasonable contribution to developing students' literacy skills but this is rarely the case at Key Stage 3 where too much writing is very low level. On occasions students have good opportunities to develop a range of learning skills such as group working.
- The contribution of RE to the students' social and moral development is generally good, particularly at Key Stage 4 where they have opportunities to consider a range of contemporary issues. Within RE, the students' cultural development is relatively constrained because the scope to develop a rich appreciation of diversity is limited. Opportunities to contribute to the promotion of spiritual development are restricted.

Quality of teaching of RE

The quality of teaching of RE is satisfactory.

- The quality of teaching is uneven, partly reflecting variability in the quality of the curriculum. It is generally stronger at Key Stage 4 where the structure of the examination syllabus supports better learning.
- Where teaching is at its best, lessons are lively and a wide range of strategies and resources is used to capture students' interests. Humour is often used to good effect to promote good relationships and maintain concentration. Tasks are often well-managed; for example good use was made of lively small-group work to enable a very low attaining Year 8 class to make good progress. Good use is made of questioning to check on progress and stimulate discussion.
- Where teaching is ineffective, activities and students are not managed well. Learning is not adjusted appropriately to ensure that students remain engaged in their work. As a result, in these lessons students are often not on task and make little progress.
- Even in the better lessons, some features of teaching are less secure. Often the pattern of the learning is too complicated or not structured effectively enough. For example, on occasions students are asked to

evaluate ideas before they know enough. The learning objectives are sometimes too obscure and the obvious key thrust of the topic is lost. Teachers rarely explain the 'story' of the lesson and so students are often unsure where the activities are leading.

- Work is marked regularly and, at Key Stage 4, students are reasonably clear about their progress and how to improve. Assessment at Key Stage 3 is very weak. Although reference is made to detailed levels and sub-levels in students' books, this has limited meaning or value for students. As a result, they have little or no understanding of their progress or how to improve.

Quality of the curriculum in RE

The quality of the curriculum in RE is satisfactory but significant weaknesses exist at Key Stage 3.

- An important strength of the provision is the opportunity for all students to accredit their achievement at the end of Key Stage 4. More able students take a full GCSE, while others complete a short course with the opportunity to also take a GCSE short course in citizenship. In addition, provision is made for GCE A level in the sixth form and this recruits modest groups. While there is no formal core RE programme in the sixth form, there is scope to consider related issues as part of the tutorial work.
- While all receive their entitlement to RE at Key Stage 3, the pattern of fortnightly provision in Year 8 fragments learning for those students. In the case of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities, this fragmentation is compounded by the pattern of withdrawal from parts of lessons for special needs support.
- The Key Stage 3 curriculum is under review. Its quality is currently inadequate. The sequence of units is too driven by content and lacks progression. The planning does not incorporate any differentiation to match the work to the different needs of the students. Units are rarely driven by a key question or pattern of enquiry. By the time students reach Year 9 this leads to a very serious lack of challenge in the work. Plans are in place to review the curriculum starting from Year 7.
- The opportunity to enrich learning through additional activities, fieldwork or use of visitors is very limited. As a result, students have little scope to explore the living reality and diversity of religion and belief.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE

The effectiveness of leadership and management in RE is satisfactory and improving.

- The subject is recovering from a period of instability in its staffing and leadership. The situation is now much improved and a pattern of management has been established to support the work of the department. There is a clear commitment to improvement.
- The arrangements for monitoring the subject have, until recently, been limited. The use of data about students' performance requires further

development. For example, the target grades for the current Year 11 students are far too low and, as a result, patterns of underachievement are not being identified systematically. A clear process of subject review and action planning is in place but this is not yet rooted in rigorous self-evaluation.

- The accommodation and resources for the subject are adequate but would benefit from an update. Displays within the department lack spark and dynamism. Book materials are rather dated and do not reflect current best practice. The opportunities for the professional development of the subject leadership have been limited.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- extending the level of challenge for the more able across the subject
- revising the curriculum for Key Stage 3 to build in:
 - more focus on the skills of enquiry
 - stronger differentiation to meet the needs of all students
 - a clearer sense of progression in students' learning
 - more effective assessment opportunities
- extending opportunities for activities to enrich students' learning and their first-hand experience of religious and cultural diversity
- providing further professional development opportunities for the head of RE to support more effective planning, assessment and monitoring of the subject.

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

As I explained previously, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and SACRE and will be published on the Ofsted website. It may be used to inform decisions about any future inspection.

Yours sincerely

Alan Brine
Her Majesty's Inspector