

Aviation House
125 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

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



30 November 2010

Mrs M Marder
Acting Headteacher
St James' School
Summer Lane
Exeter
Devon
EX4 8NN

Dear Mrs Marder

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

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and pupils, during my visit on 17 and 18 November 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.

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

The overall effectiveness of RE is good.

Achievement in RE

Achievement in RE is good.

- The standards reached by pupils in RE are average at Key Stage 3 and above average at Key Stage 4, reflecting good achievement overall.
- Results in the RE short course GCSE in 2010 were well above the national average and compared well to school results overall. This continues the trend of improvement over the last three years. Most pupils met or exceeded their target grade, particularly many of those in challenging circumstances. The only group of pupils to underachieve was a small one of the most able.

- By the end of Key Stage 4 many pupils are able to discuss ethical, philosophical and social issues, drawing on religious and secular perspectives. They understand that beliefs influence people's lives and their attitudes to world issues.
- Standards by the end of Year 9 generally meet the expectations in the Devon Agreed Syllabus and pupils make satisfactory progress. Pupils extend their understanding of Christianity, Buddhism and Sikhism and develop their understanding of Hinduism and Judaism from Key Stage 2, as required by the agreed syllabus. They understand a range of moral, social, political and religious issues and have some understanding of how the media portrays religion. They can apply the beliefs of these religions to the themes studied, although rarely in any depth, and they develop their skills of analysis, interpretation and application. Their evaluative skills are less well developed.
- Pupils make less progress in other aspects of the subject, for example in understanding concepts and issues of truth and authority in religion. They are slow to develop an understanding of the reasons for similarities and differences within and between religions or to draw on evidence and argument when making points in discussion.
- The contribution made by RE to pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is good overall. Religious education is a popular subject with most pupils. Most behave well in lessons, are interested in the subject and value the contribution that it makes towards their understanding of diversity.

Quality of teaching of RE

The quality of teaching of RE is good.

- The purpose and direction of learning is explained very well in all lessons so that pupils understand what they are about to do and why. In particular, pupils are encouraged to believe that they can achieve well.
- Pupils' learning is structured very well. In every lesson learning develops incrementally as each new activity enables them to build on what they have already learnt. Learning activities are based on individual, paired and group work with regular whole-class plenaries for the purpose of checking learning.
- Pupils receive good support. In the lessons observed the teacher was particularly effective at focused questioning, intervention to suggest new lines of enquiry, and using the achievements or difficulties of individuals to clarify the lesson objectives to the whole class.
- Generally, lessons meet the needs of all pupils but some activities require more specific adaptation for the more able pupils, particularly when they are in a small minority in a class and without the capacity for mutual support.

- The department uses a range of assessment opportunities. Pupils are formally assessed regularly and know their target level. A particular strength of RE is the practice of acquainting pupils with assessment criteria from the agreed syllabus and the GCSE specification by using them in self- and peer-assessment. However, at Key Stage 3 in particular, pupils' work is sometimes over-graded and the targets do not highlight sufficiently the specific aspects of the level that pupils need to achieve.

Quality of the curriculum in RE

The quality of the curriculum in RE is good.

- The curriculum has been one of the key instruments for raising the profile and popularity of RE in the school. The curriculum meets statutory requirements; at Key Stage 3 it is in line with the Devon Agreed Syllabus and at Key Stage 4 all pupils follow a GCSE short course.
- The curriculum is designed to be interesting for pupils and to meet the wide range of their needs across the school. It generally succeeds in doing so, except that provision for the more able is not always sufficiently challenging.
- Creative links are being developed with other subjects; for example pupils have opportunities to explore Islam and science and religion and art. Links with other subjects in the humanities faculty are less well developed.
- There are some excellent links with other agencies in the community, which enable pupils to gain first-hand experience of local religious groups. However, the excellent links with evangelical Christian groups are not yet replicated to such an extent with other faith communities or with a broader range of Christian communities.
- Other local links are unusual and impressive, notably the involvement of theology and Islamic Studies undergraduates in the department's work; and the visit of some pupils to a school partner company to find out how they accommodate their multifaith and multicultural work force.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE

The effectiveness of leadership and management in RE is good.

- The head of department has responded to the position of RE a few years ago, when it was neither valued nor enjoyed by pupils, with vigor and a clear vision for the future.
- Within the humanities faculty there is a shared determination to continue raising standards in RE through regular assessment, self-evaluation and imposing more challenging targets. The regular and rigorous evaluations of teaching and learning in RE have contributed to the recent improvements in the subject.

- The RE department makes an important contribution to the school, in particular to community cohesion. It reflects the wider priorities of the school, in particular through raising standards, heightening pupils' enjoyment of their learning and encouraging self-belief.
- Those involved in teaching RE have good opportunities to share good practice through the collaboration within the faculty. The head of department benefits from training opportunities offered by the local authority and from visiting other RE departments in the area in order to learn from experienced specialists.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- raising the achievement of the most able pupils by designing resources and activities that will enable them to achieve the highest standards possible
- applying greater consistency in the award of Levels at Key Stage 3 and focusing targets more specifically on the Level descriptions in the agreed syllabus.

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

Barbara Wintersgill
Additional Inspector