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Mr R Williams
Principal
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Dear Mr Williams

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 23 and 24 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 without their consent.

The evidence used to inform the judgements included: observation of two lessons; interviews with staff and students; and scrutiny of curriculum planning and assessment records.

The overall effectiveness of RE is inadequate.

Achievement in RE

Achievement in RE is inadequate.

- The standards attained by the students are well-below average. In the short GCSE course, students' progress and the standards they attain are inhibited because they are not transferring and reinforcing the skills and understanding about philosophical, religious and moral argument into their thinking about specific issues. Although current assessment data for the newly introduced full GCSE course indicate that an increasing proportion of students are on track to meet their target grades, reflecting improving achievement, it remains inadequate. Evidence from lessons and students'

work indicates that while students develop an appropriate understanding of a range of moral and social issues, their understanding of the religious perspectives which they apply to these issues is often superficial and formulaic.

- This, in part, reflects weaknesses in the provision for RE at Key Stage 3, where limited attention is being paid to the systematic development of students' knowledge and understanding of religions. As a result, students do not make enough progress in acquiring a breadth of understanding of religion and belief to match the expectations of the locally agreed syllabus.
- The quality of personal development of students in RE is variable. Many enjoy the subject and participate well. However, where teaching fails to capture their imagination, students are disenchanted and do not engage well in their learning. The subject makes a sound contribution to students' moral and social development, but their spiritual development within RE is limited and not enough opportunity is provided for students to extend their understanding of religious and cultural diversity.

Quality of teaching of RE

The quality of teaching of RE is inadequate.

- Teaching incorporates many positive features including: the effective management of behaviour; positive relationships with students; the use of well-structured lessons and resources; and, a dedicated commitment to the subject.
- The RE department is making increasingly successful use of the Teacher Effectiveness Enhancement Programme (TEEP) to improve teaching. The best lessons use the six-part TEEP cycle. Before talking about the learning objectives, the teacher sets an introductory task to promote thinking and discussion. This helps students to put forward their ideas and to understand the teacher's explanations. Students then work on exercises to consolidate and extend their learning, before reviewing what they have learnt in a plenary session. However, its implementation is inconsistent across the department.
- Teachers have appropriate subject knowledge but the lesson activities do not always help students to think about RE in ways that might build their understanding. For example, when students have to listen passively for long periods, or when they do not do enough discussion or complete independent investigation for themselves to develop their skills and understanding, the pace of learning slows.
- The scope of the subject to promote effective learning is not exploited sufficiently. As a result, for example, the potential of the subject to make a strong contribution to the development of personal learning and thinking skills in the Key Stage 3 humanities programme is not realised fully. Uncertainties about subject links mean some teachers do not provide students with a clear enough understanding of the purpose and direction

of their learning, and, in some cases, lessons lose focus on any subject-related objectives.

- The use of questioning is not planned in enough detail to ensure that all students participate effectively and demonstrate what they have learnt. Students' skills in literacy are not reinforced enough in RE lessons, particularly in Key Stage 3. This is further reason why some of the better teaching is not being translated into satisfactory overall achievement.
- Thoughtful work has been undertaken to develop the pattern of assessment in RE. Structured, manageable and levelled assessment tasks are in place. However, as yet judgements are not reliable or robust enough, particularly in Key Stage 3, because assessments do not relate clearly enough to the pattern of progression outlined in the locally agreed syllabus. Although marking is regular, it does not give consistently precise advice to the students on how to improve their work.

Quality of the curriculum in RE

The quality of the curriculum in RE is satisfactory.

- Although good provision is made for all students to accredit their learning in Key Stage 4, the Key Stage 3 curriculum is unbalanced, lacks coherence and progression, and is not coordinated well. Individual units do not always ensure that there is a clear process of learning running through the work or provide for the structured development of skills and knowledge. While some units challenge students' thinking, others over-emphasise low-level collection of information about religion. The school has recognised the need to refine the Xplore course in Year 7 to make the links between subjects, and the focus on skills, more explicit and effective.
- The department places appropriate emphasis on enabling the students to understand the significance of religion and its forms of expression in people's lives. Most students have had no significant enrichment of their learning in RE through use of fieldwork or visitors.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE

The effectiveness of leadership and management in RE is satisfactory.

- Despite the shortcomings noted above, the overall leadership of the subject is satisfactory and improving. The senior leadership team has taken active steps to support the subject by, for example, securing provision at Key Stage 4.
- The head of RE is hardworking and very committed. In difficult circumstances, she has kept the department running smoothly on a day-to-day basis. Despite some of the weaknesses in provision, she is becoming increasingly aware of the next steps in the subject's future

development. With the support of the senior leadership team, she is beginning to re-establish the status of the subject.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- establishing a clearer, more coherent and progressive overall curriculum for RE
- developing more opportunities for independent learning
- ensuring students' knowledge, understanding and skills in relation to their learning about religions and beliefs are improved.

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 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 SACRE and your local authority.

Yours sincerely

Jacqueline Wordsworth
Her Majesty's Inspector