

Aviation House  
125 Kingsway  
London  
WC2B 6SE

T 0300 123 1231  
F 020 7421 6855  
[enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk)  
[www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)



29 November 2010

Mr I Barker  
Headteacher  
Northern House Special School  
South Parade  
Summertown  
Oxford  
OX2 7JN

Dear Mr Barker

**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 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: interviews with staff and pupils; scrutiny of relevant documentation; analysis of pupils' work; and observation of two lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE is good.

**Achievement in RE**

Achievement in RE is good.

- While the attainment of pupils is well-below the expectations of the locally agreed syllabus, they make good progress particularly in acquiring a basic knowledge of a range of features of religion. By the end of Year 6, pupils can identify and link together a variety of different religious beliefs and practices. The more able are beginning to understand the significance of religion in people's lives and can offer their own reflections on some religious ideas. Some were able, for example, to talk about the Hindu idea of reincarnation and the idea of a spirit 'within us'.
- The school's own tracking of pupils' progress suggests a pattern of higher attainment in relation to 'learning from' religion but this is based on a

misunderstanding of this aspect of RE. In practice, the pupils find it challenging to relate learning about religion to their own experience.

- The pupils enjoy RE. The subject makes a positive contribution to developing their familiarity with, and respect for, ways of life and cultures which are different from their own. The pattern of teaching and overall ethos within RE lessons contribute positively to pupils' social and moral development. Because the teaching tends to focus heavily on covering the content set out in the locally agreed syllabus, the opportunities for reflection and the contribution to pupils' spiritual development are relatively constrained.

### **Quality of teaching of RE**

The quality of teaching of RE is good.

- RE is taught primarily by one teacher. Although usually this is the subject leader, because of some temporary staffing issues, it is currently being taught by you. You teach for half the RE time leaving tasks to be completed by the class teacher in the other half of the allocated time.
- The strengths of the teaching are good subject knowledge and effective structuring of activities to ensure that pupils sustain concentration and maintain good behaviour. A variety of strategies and resources is used to engage interest and promote learning.
- Careful attention is paid to ensuring that pupils record the outcome of their learning through the tasks left for the class teacher to manage. These are usually completed carefully, fully reflecting the pupils' sense of pride in their work. The work is marked with encouraging comments.
- Two factors constrain the effectiveness of the otherwise good teaching. First, the pitch of the learning objectives in the scheme of work is often inappropriate to the pupils' needs and the lessons have to be significantly adjusted to ensure that the pupils can make progress. Second, the pattern of split delivery between two teachers tends to interrupt the flow of learning leading to too many low level written or colouring tasks.

### **Quality of the curriculum in RE**

The quality of the curriculum in RE is good although there is a need to ensure that the requirements of the agreed syllabus are adapted more effectively to meet the distinctive needs of the pupils.

- Very close attention is paid to implementing the programmes of study in the locally agreed syllabus. A careful two-year long-term plan is in place to support this coverage. The breadth and balance of the RE curriculum matches the expectations of the syllabus. However, the planned curriculum is not well-matched to the pupils' learning needs because it attempts to cover too much content and the learning objectives are usually out of their reach.

- In practice, adjustments are made at lesson plan level to ensure pupils can access the learning and make good progress. Progress would be even better if the overall scheme of work was better matched to pupils' needs from the outset. For example, very limited use is made of the themes set out within the syllabus to build a pattern of work which links the study of religion more closely to pupils' experience. There is also scope to include more evocative, creative and experiential learning within the RE curriculum.
- A series of additional activities enrich pupils' learning in RE. Links with a local chapel, the organisation of faith events and the celebration of festivals contribute to this enrichment. Recently, the opportunities to visit places of worship and build links with local religious communities have been limited.

### **Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE**

The effectiveness of leadership and management in RE is good with outstanding features.

- RE is led and usually taught by an experienced and highly committed subject coordinator. This arrangement secures good continuity of provision throughout the school. Curriculum and lesson planning are very detailed and of a consistent quality.
- The arrangements for reviewing, monitoring and action planning in RE are strong although their effectiveness is slightly inhibited by the schools' attempt to cover all the breadth of study within the locally agreed syllabus. There is a clearly defined RE policy and a good resource base to support the subject.
- Considerable effort is put into assessing and tracking pupils' progress against the levels in the agreed syllabus. However, these levels are not proving easy to implement. Information about the pupils' progress is not being used systematically in planning the curriculum to ensure it matches their needs.
- The RE coordinator has maintained close connections with the wider local RE community. She has attended courses run by the local authority and events meeting representatives from local religious communities. The school has, however, found it difficult to access advice about the process of adapting the agreed syllabus requirements to match the specific needs of the pupils in the school.

### **Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:**

- exploring the flexibility within the locally agreed syllabus to redesign the curriculum so that it better matches the specific learning needs of the pupils in the school
- reviewing the model of delivery of RE to ensure it supports consistent high-quality teaching.

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**