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Ms V Ward  
Headteacher  
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Dear Ms Ward

**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 3 and 4 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 students; scrutiny of relevant documentation; analysis of students' work; and observation of four lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE is good with outstanding features.

**Achievement in RE**

Achievement in RE is good overall and outstanding for those students who take the full course GCSE.

- Students come to the school from a very wide variety of backgrounds and experience of RE in their primary schools. They make very good progress in Key Stage 3 where any gaps in their knowledge are quickly remedied. Good teaching and students' enthusiasm provide the impetus for progress, so that by Year 9 they are working well above the expectations outlined in the locally agreed syllabus. Their progress matches closely the overall level of achievement in the school.

- Approximately 40% of the students in Key Stage 4 choose the GCSE RE full course and again make excellent progress. This high level of take-up for an optional programme has been increasing in recent years. The students' and their teachers' commitment secures outstanding results in the GCSE. Their standard of attainment is well above average when compared with national figures and is also above average in terms of other subjects in the school. Some of their work in Year 11 is in line with expectations at AS level, since they are beginning such processes as comparing and evaluating different opinions among scholars, deploying more complex concepts and showing evidence of wider reading.
- The 60% of the students in Key Stage 4 not taking GCSE in RE receive an element of RE through a programme of non-examination personal and social education. Because of the limited curriculum provision for these students, their achievement is more constrained. However, they make some progress in the subject, because of their enthusiasm and the challenging teaching that they receive.
- RE makes an important contribution to students' personal development through its emphasis on exploring beliefs and values. This encourages students to be confident in expressing their own ideas and in deepening their understanding of, and respect for, the beliefs of others. Their obvious interest in engaging with these ideas, and their behaviour in class, which is always positive, provide further stimuli to their learning. As a result, they have a strong sense of personal independence in their thinking and are well-equipped to take their place in, and contribute to, a diverse society.

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

The quality of teaching of RE is outstanding.

- Lessons observed were at least good, sometimes outstanding and well attuned to the aspirations and abilities of students. They are taught by a very well-informed and experienced subject leader, supported by a small team of non-specialists who are very familiar with the content and processes of RE. As a result, they are all confident in responding to the ideas and questions of students, and in turn are able to challenge their thinking and ideas and respond to their needs and ability levels.
- Lessons are characterised by careful and focused planning and a good sense of pace and progression. Stimulating resources are used effectively, including information and communication technology, and well-prepared and carefully controlled discussions. Lessons are very well managed in an unobtrusive way so that discipline is maintained by the students themselves in the interests of their own and others' learning. A particularly strong feature of learning is the attention given to group and class discussion. In a Key Stage 3 lesson, students were being introduced to the principles of debate as open, fair, balanced and informative. The benefits of this process were observed in a Key Stage 4 lesson where students prepared their evidence or examples carefully, and deployed their

arguments effectively. As a result, they showed a broad and in-depth understanding of issues, and respected others' right to express their own views.

- Formal assessment of written work at regular intervals is thorough and rigorous. It usually includes high-quality feedback with suggestions about how work may be developed and improved. Measures for ensuring consistency include moderation of extended project work to ensure that all participants are working to the same standard. Teachers and students are aware of the level at which they are working. Those who fall slightly behind the highest standard are supported by older students to ensure that their work represents the best of which they are capable. Assessment of learning contributes extensively to teachers' awareness of their students' progress and students' attitudes to learning reflect the benefits of differing approaches to teaching.

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

The quality of the curriculum in RE is good.

- For all students in Key Stage 3 and for those who follow the GCSE full course in Key Stage 4, the provision is in line with the guidance in the locally agreed syllabus. The GCSE full course matches the needs and abilities of students. The issues explored have a high degree of relevance to the students who value their work at this level because it contributes to the development of their own beliefs and values.
- The remaining students in Key Stage 4 follow a non-examination course of which RE forms a part. Although these students have opportunities to consider significant spiritual and moral issues and to discuss a range of beliefs and values, they do so only briefly when compared with the students following the GCSE course. The curriculum for this group lacks scope, and occasions for higher achievement are constrained. While this aspect of the provision is limited, the quality of the students' engagement remains good. In the sixth form, students study aspects of beliefs and values through a programme of General Studies.
- The curriculum in Key Stage 3 is broad and balanced. The emphasis is clear on 'understanding others', leading into questions and issues about beliefs and values in Year 9. The focus of understanding is helpfully targeted at understanding what it means to belong to a particular religious tradition and community, so that the quality of work is focused on issues of meaning, purpose and identity. The gathering of information serves this end. As a result, students appreciate different religious traditions, which matches their self-understanding, and provides a firm foundation for addressing issues of belief and value from different religious viewpoints.
- The RE curriculum provides good opportunities for wider enrichment, including visiting speakers and visits to places of worship.

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

The effectiveness of leadership and management in RE is outstanding.

- The RE department is very well and ably led, based on leadership by example, in terms of the quality of teaching matched with the high abilities of the students, and the organisation and management of the department.
- The provision for RE is monitored and evaluated regularly, as shown in the departmental self-evaluation and the well-targeted action points which arise from it. RE's effectiveness in addressing the students' needs and challenging their high ability range is supported well by statistical evidence and by students' evaluations. There is, however, scope for the subject leader to monitor the teaching of subject non-specialists in a closer and more focused way, to ensure consistency of challenge.
- RE receives strong support from the school's senior leadership, including monitoring and evaluation of the quality of the subject leader's teaching and learning. There is an overall commitment to enhancing all aspects of the subject's contribution to the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of students.

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

- ensuring that all students in Key Stage 4 receive their full entitlement to RE in line with the expectations in the locally agreed syllabus
- extending opportunities for the subject leader to monitor the teaching of non-specialists.

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

**John Rudge**  
**Additional Inspector**