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Dr S Sissons
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Dear Dr Sissons

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 2 and 3 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 inadequate.

Achievement in RE

Achievement in RE is inadequate.

- At Key Stage 4, students make very little progress because they have few opportunities to learn. Those students taking the GCSE examination in Year 9 in 2010 made satisfactory progress. Students in the current Years 8 and 9 do not reach the standards expected and do not make enough progress.
- When they have the opportunity, students develop an understanding of some religious concepts, such as the nature of an ultimate question or 'moral evil'. Students rarely apply the higher level learning skills in RE, such as analysis, application and evaluation, because too many low-level tasks require them to discover and recount simple factual information.

- Students' knowledge and understanding of religions are limited. They are often unaware of the diversity of belief and practice within religious groups and are often confused about which features of religion belong to each religion. They struggle to make links between what they learn about religions and their own questions and experiences and many of them do not grasp the association of religions with the topics covered by the Global Learning courses.
- Students' attitudes to the Key Stage 3 Global Learning programme are generally positive. In three of the four lessons observed most students engaged in group activities, although they made limited progress because the tasks did not make adequate demands of them.

Quality of teaching of RE

The quality of teaching of RE is inadequate.

- Most teachers are able to create an interest in the subject because they manage classes well, relate well to students, and use a good range of teaching strategies, which engages them in activity.
- However, the subject context in which this activity takes place is characterised by low-level tasks and inappropriately low expectations. For example, what was planned as a collaborative enquiry for Year 7 was little more than simple fact finding. Projects and coursework are also often characterised by the repetition of factual information.
- Several teachers, despite possessing good general teaching skills, lack the subject expertise and confidence to answer enquiries correctly, to intervene in students' activities with focused questioning, or to redirect learning that is taking a wrong course. As a result, in one case, several students never recovered from mistakes made early in the lesson.
- Students' success in carrying out enquiries was also hindered by the use of outdated text books and tasks that encouraged them to assume common belief and practice by all people subscribing to the same faith.
- The use of a hybrid attainment target for Global Learning, reduced to an oversimplified form for students and sometimes teachers, has led to unrealistic overgrading of standards and progress in relation to RE.
- Planning and teaching do not help students to understand the natural association between RE and the other subjects included in the Global Learning programme.
- The school policy that every lesson should be individually planned to meet the needs of specific groups of students was not implemented in most lessons seen. As a result, for example, one class of low ability students responded to an over-challenging lesson on Buddhism with poor behaviour and negative attitudes.

Quality of the curriculum in RE

The quality of the curriculum in RE is inadequate.

- The school has plans to ensure that by 2011/12 it complies with the basic legal requirement that all students should be taught RE. However, the plans do not ensure that the detailed expectations of the locally agreed syllabus are met. The decisions taken regarding the RE curriculum lack a clear rationale.
- The potential for Year 7 and 8 students to achieve well in RE through Global Studies has not been realised because links between RE and topics, such as the environment and global inequality, are not adequately made. This prevents students from understanding the connection between religious ideas and other areas of human experience and knowledge.
- Progression and continuity are weak. At all stages planning does not secure progress. Noticeably absent are key questions to maintain a thorough focus on higher order skills. For example, the question 'what is euthanasia?' was not used effectively to encourage students to analyse, compare and evaluate opinions. It is not clear how students' understanding of religious concepts is expected to develop across Key Stage 3.
- The offer of an accredited course in Year 9 provides incentive to some students but the planned introduction of the GCSE RE short course in 30 hours across Years 10 and 11 raises questions about how this will secure success in such a short period of time.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE

The effectiveness of leadership and management in RE is inadequate.

- The school's commitment to extensive monitoring and evaluation is reflected in Global Studies where the coordinator has undertaken routine and sustained work scrutinies and lesson evaluations. However, the focus of these evaluations is the general quality of teaching rather than the progress that students are making within the subject.
- Plans are not in place for raising standards and improving teachers' expertise. In particular, the subject leader has had little opportunity for subject professional development and this has limited her ability to keep the department informed about current developments. The lack of continuity in staffing for Global Learning leaves some teachers without the time to build up their expertise in unfamiliar subject areas.
- Some resources have a negative impact, especially when used for enquiry-based learning. Those seen in lessons are outdated and not differentiated to meet the subject or literacy needs of all students.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- raising standards and improving progress by giving students more challenging tasks pitched in line with the expectations in the locally agreed syllabus
- improving teachers' RE subject expertise

- extending the contribution of RE in the Global Learning curriculum
- developing a rationale for RE provision throughout the school.

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