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Mr D Pearmain
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Pearmain

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 9 and 10 February 2011 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 lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE is inadequate.

Achievement in RE

Achievement in RE is inadequate.

- There are no recent RE examination results but some students this year will be entered for GCSE short course. Their work indicates that they are making insufficient progress to ensure that they will meet targets. There are no assessment data for the core RE programme at Key Stage 4. Progress is inadequate as students have little opportunity to develop thinking about religious belief and practice.
- Standards at Key Stage 3 are well below the expectations of the locally agreed syllabus. The use of assessment and monitoring data is inaccurate and work in lessons is not sufficiently challenging to ensure that students can make appropriate progress. There is an over-reliance on low-level

factual recall and no opportunities for students to relate their learning to today's world.

- Students can see the value of the subject and enjoy the limited opportunities given for discussion. They are less enthusiastic about the heavy emphasis given to unchallenging written work in the majority of lessons.
- RE makes a contribution to students' moral development, particularly at Key Stage 4 when ethical issues are discussed. However, the contribution of RE to spiritual and cultural development is very limited. Students are not given opportunities to explore religious diversity and encounter members of faith communities. Their insight into questions of meaning and truth through their study of religion is also underdeveloped.

Quality of teaching of RE

The quality of teaching of RE is inadequate.

- Relationships with students are positive and behaviour is generally good. As a result, lessons are orderly. However, students' progress is severely limited as a result of a lack of planning for student challenge and engagement. Lessons are too dominated by the teacher and low-level textbook activities. Little opportunity is given for students to contribute ideas, ask questions and develop skills. Some use is made of varied tasks for differing abilities, but these are inaccurate and lack sufficient challenge. As a result, students can become distracted in lessons.
- Some teachers do not have enough confidence in the subject to enable them to answer students' questions and plan appropriate learning objectives and activities. This is leading to some confusion among students about the purpose of RE lessons and is hampering their progress.
- Assessment practice is very weak. Levels and sub-levels are used for setting tasks but students do not understand what these mean. They do not receive success criteria when completing a task and marking does not clearly indicate what students need to do to improve their work.

Quality of the curriculum in RE

The quality of the curriculum in RE is inadequate.

- A recent strength in provision at Key Stage 4 is the introduction of full course GCSE as an option for mixed Year 9 and 10 teaching. RE is provided for all students through core RE. However, until recently, only the top two bands have been given the opportunity to accredit their achievement through short course entry. The pattern of provision once a fortnight is hampering continuity and coherence in learning. There is no provision for RE in the sixth form.
- The Key Stage 3 curriculum is very weak. The curriculum closely follows a textbook series that lacks coherence and progression. School-based units are content driven and lack relevance. There is no use of questions for

enquiry or planning for the development of appropriate skills. Some activities are based on inappropriate personal reflection with no reference to religious traditions and beliefs. Insufficient use has been made of the locally agreed syllabus in planning the provision for RE.

- Students have no opportunities in RE to meet members of local religious communities and appreciate the diversity of beliefs across Newcastle and the wider region. As a result, RE does not contribute significantly to community cohesion.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE

The effectiveness of leadership and management in RE is inadequate but improving.

- A new leader was appointed over a year ago. She is committed to the subject and wants to bring about positive change. Some improvements have been made to the provision recently. Full course GCSE provision has recently been established. Students clearly appreciate the value of external accreditation with significant numbers opting to be entered for examination; last year no students opted to be entered.
- There is, however, a lack of subject knowledge and clarity about the purpose and direction of RE within the team of RE teachers. Opportunities for professional development of the leader and other members of the department have not been identified.
- Some monitoring of RE takes place to support the process of evaluation. However, this is not being used to identify specific actions for improvement in provision and the quality of teaching and learning. There are no reliable data on students' progress. The use of assessment and levels of attainment in RE is weak across the team of teachers and is not being addressed.
- Resources are limited with a heavy reliance on books, some of which are dated and dull. Understanding and use of information and communication technology are very limited.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- revising the Key Stage 3 curriculum in line with the requirements of the agreed syllabus, ensuring coherence, continuity and progression in students' understanding of different religions and beliefs and questions of meaning and truth
- ensuring that all staff receive extensive training in understanding the aims, teaching strategies and assessment in RE
- providing more opportunities for students to encounter members of a variety of faith communities in the region
- using self-evaluation to develop specific improvement actions which are regularly reviewed and revised as appropriate.

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 will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Isobel Short
Additional Inspector