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Ms J Shuter
Headteacher
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Dear Ms Shuter

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 four lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE is outstanding.

Achievement in RE

Achievement in RE is outstanding.

- By the end of Key Stage 4, the standards gained by students in the 2010 GCSE short course were in line with the national average in the A* to C category. This figure is based on a whole cohort entry. For the great majority this outcome represents very good progress. This applies in particular to the unusually large proportion of students who gain the highest grades. It also represents a year-on-year improvement in standards in the subject.
- Students progress very well through Key Stage 3 so that by Year 9 their attainment is in line with the expectations set out in the locally agreed syllabus. Many start from a low platform on entry, with a very high

proportion of students having English as an additional language. Their good progress is due in large part to the exceptional quality of teaching in Year 7. This engages them quickly in exploring religious diversity, so that they are able to discuss, for example, how Christians in different cultures respond to the teachings of Jesus, or how different religious traditions explain the origins of the world. By the time they are in Key Stage 4, students present sophisticated reasons for differing viewpoints, such as why variation of interpretation is found within particular traditions, leading to a range of views and attitudes.

- Most students have a very positive attitude to the subject and are keen to learn. In discussion, they said that they value the opportunities they have to explore the beliefs and ideas of others, and to engage in dialogue with those from whom they differ. They feel that their learning in RE helps them to become more confident in their own beliefs and background and in expressing their own values. They also recognise that their experience of diversity helps them to be more aware of others and to support strongly the school's promotion of community coherence.

Quality of teaching of RE

The quality of teaching of RE is outstanding.

- All the lessons observed were at least good, and many had a number of outstanding features. All the building blocks of good lessons were in place, including lively starters, imaginative activities, the use of stimulating resources, very good levels of communication and behaviour, and effective use of assessment for learning. Planning is a strength, with very clear learning outcomes and arrangements for different levels of ability. Lessons in Year 7, taught by teachers trained for primary schools, were particularly effective in engaging students with thoughtful and progressive questions.
- Those teaching RE generally show a sound grasp of the beliefs and values of the religions they are dealing with. In the best lessons they deploy their subject knowledge well, for example in helping students to understand the meaning and interpretation of Aboriginal dreamtime stories. Occasionally, teachers lack some of the subtlety and sensitivity needed to deal with the more perceptive issues and questions raised by students.
- Students are very strongly supported in their progress through effective assessment, monitoring and target-setting. These feature prominently in all planning, and provide some of the means through which the teaching of RE is well matched to students' needs and abilities.

Quality of the curriculum in RE

The quality of the curriculum in RE is outstanding.

- The curriculum is very well matched to the needs and aspirations of the whole school community. It is underpinned by the school's vision of an inclusive and coherent community. Priority is also given to the

development of key skills, which infuses the RE curriculum and subject teaching. There is a strong emphasis on the contribution that the subject makes to students' personal development, by honing their skills in dealing with philosophical, moral and social issues.

- RE follows closely the structure and guidance provided in the locally agreed syllabus about how to develop students' capacity for conceptual enquiry, through active learning strategies based on a five-stage learning cycle. This model allows the school to develop a distinctive pattern of curriculum delivery to teach RE. This is achieved first through the Opening Minds programme in Year 7, then through exploring the experiences and values of Jews, Buddhists and Muslims in Year 8. An accredited Humanities course provides the basis for the subject in Years 9 and 10, in line with the guidance given in the agreed syllabus. The GCSE RE short course is followed by all students in Year 11. This is taught through the English department, also to good effect. In all cases, the RE content of these courses is planned thoroughly and the teaching is monitored effectively.
- A programme of personal and social enrichment is included for all students in the sixth form. In addition, some students take the GCE A-level course in Philosophy which includes the study of the philosophy of religion.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE

The effectiveness of leadership and management in RE is outstanding.

- The school's vision and your leadership ensure that RE is seen as an essential and central element in the curriculum. This is supported effectively by the subject leader who is an experienced RE teacher and a member of the senior leadership team. This role is used positively to ensure that the quality of RE across the school is planned accurately in sufficient detail, and closely monitored and supported. As a result, all who teach the subject are very well guided in terms of curriculum content and subject understanding. The impact of this is very clear in the subject teamwork and collaboration that take place in all years.
- Having made a number of improvements to enhance the overall quality of the provision in recent years, the school and the subject leader are now looking at ways of improving further the attainment of all students across the age and ability spectrum. This includes the possibility of teaching the accredited GCSE full course in Key Stage 4.
- The subject's self-evaluation is accurate and current practice and action plans indicate a good capacity for further improvement.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- continuing to target the professional development of subject non-specialists to increase their confidence in teaching about religious traditions.

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