

Aviation House
125 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

T 0300 123 1231
F 020 7421 6855
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk



16 March 2011

Ms H Wilson
Headteacher
Thurston Community College
Norton Road
Thurston
Bury St Edmunds
IP31 3PB

Dear Ms Wilson

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 1 and 2 March 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.

- Standards on entry to the school at the beginning of Year 9 are broadly in line with expectations in the locally agreed syllabus. Students then make good progress in their first year as a consequence of highly effective teaching and their own commitment to learning.
- Results in the optional GCSE non-selective full course are very good and well above the national average, and compare very favourably with the students' results in other subjects. The full course provides solid preparation for the subject in the sixth form where significant numbers of students follow a course in religious studies at AS and A level, making

good progress. Their attainment is broadly in line with other humanities subjects in the school.

- Those entered for the GCSE short course make good progress and learn well. However, attainment overall in last year's examination was below expectations despite a considerable improvement over the previous year. The school has carefully analysed these outcomes and a number of strategies are in place to raise attainment. Evidence from interim assessment of the current Year 11 cohort suggests that there is likely to be another substantial improvement in results.
- Overall, by the end of Key Stage 4, most students can engage perceptively in discussions about philosophical and ethical issues, and can relate their arguments and reasoning to a coherent understanding of religious and ethical principles. Students recognise how important this is in their own personal development. They speak about the confidence the subject has given them by challenging their preconceived ideas, exposing them to the ideas and value systems of others and helping them to clarify their own beliefs and values.

Quality of teaching in RE

The quality of teaching in RE is outstanding.

- RE is taught by a very strong team of subject specialists who work well together and pool and share their best practice. Their extensive knowledge and understanding of their subject ensure that students are challenged and guided to focus on the key concepts and issues raised through the subject. Consequently, students enjoy learning, and respond enthusiastically to their teachers. The RE classroom is characterised particularly by very good relationships and a sense of mutual respect and rapport.
- The high-quality teaching is supported by meticulous planning, in which learning outcomes are remarkably well focused and coherent, showing a careful integration of both of the subject attainment targets. They are discussed thoroughly with the class and used as the basis for lesson summaries and evaluations. Learning activities are diverse and imaginative. The main elements of best practice, in terms of variety, pace, questioning and interventions, group and individual work and assessment for learning, feature prominently in lessons. Teachers have adapted well to the 100-minute lesson allocation, and make use of this for encouraging students to research and feed back to the class. This was seen to very good effect in a Year 10 GCSE short course lesson where students explored a number of texts from both Buddhist and Christian sources to deepen their understanding of the importance of care for older people. The learning experience was supplemented by thoughtful and evocative visual, musical and poetic resources to stimulate a sense of identity with the outlook of older people. However, the department is exploring ways of ensuring a more effective sense of continuity when lessons are separated by extended periods of time.

- Formal assessment is carried out regularly, with tasks differentiated according to students' abilities. They are aware of their own achievement and understand what they need to do to make further progress. Teachers use targets effectively both in planning ahead and for assessment purposes.
- Teaching in the sixth form is also exceptionally well focused on ensuring that learning continues to be characterised by best practice in terms of planning, presentation and assessment. Students experience a high level of challenge, enjoyment and stimulus from various activities to suit different learning styles. They become engrossed in their work and are both enthusiastic and thoughtful when they participate in lively discussions.

Quality of the curriculum in RE

The quality of the curriculum in RE is outstanding.

- The curriculum is very well matched to students' needs and to the requirements of the locally agreed syllabus. The school has successfully integrated the key learning experiences, attitudes, skills and concepts, as well as the non-statutory guidance, into the schemes of work. The overall curriculum focuses strongly on the philosophical and ethical dimensions as being most relevant to the needs and aspirations of students. However, this is balanced by the emphasis placed on understanding how religious belief and practice illuminate the issues raised. This balance helps students to explore the relationship between questions and issues about beliefs and values, and religious perspectives. Students are helpfully encouraged to explore issues through Christian and Buddhist perspectives which enables them to contrast theistic and non-theistic approaches. They prepare for this in Year 9, so that they have a sound understanding of the principal concepts of the religions before they start to apply them to contemporary issues.
- This approach successfully ensures that the students' courses of study have a clear route of progression and continuity. This is made even clearer by the school's efforts to ensure that the Year 9 curriculum develops the ground already covered in the middle schools from which students come. Effective liaison means that they arrive in the school with a sound grounding in their knowledge of different religious traditions.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE

The effectiveness of leadership and management in RE is outstanding.

- The high-quality subject leadership is firmly supported by the senior leaders in the school. There is a very positive understanding of the role of RE in relation to students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Effective support, monitoring and direction are provided and this ensures, among other aspects of leadership, that the RE department

is part of, and benefits from, whole-school developments and initiatives, such as those which promote active learning and effective target-setting.

- The department is ably led by a very experienced teacher who infuses colleagues with an enthusiasm for offering students a really positive experience of RE. They respond in kind by working closely as a team, sharing strategies and exchanging ideas for improving classroom practice.
- The department's self-evaluation is accurate and perceptive, and is accompanied by clear and well-focused targets for action and improvement. Consequently, the potential for further improvement is good.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- continuing to develop strategies for managing issues of continuity where lessons are separated by extended periods of time.

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