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Ms D Ajose
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Dear Ms Ajose

Ofsted 2011–12 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 10 and 11 May 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 satisfactory.

Achievement in RE

Achievement in RE is satisfactory.

- The standard of students' work at Key Stages 3 and 4 is in line with expectations in the agreed syllabus.
- Students learn to articulate ideas about significant moral, social and cultural issues, particularly those relating to prejudice, discrimination and racism. In a very general way, they can link these issues to religious beliefs and attitudes. As lessons allow, they also discuss their personal beliefs and feel the benefit of exploring religious issues, for example the existence of God, with others who do not share their opinions. By doing

so, they learn to dialogue in a considerate way, listening respectfully to others and expressing their own ideas.

- In most lessons seen, students developed general learning skills well through RE. However, although they have a general knowledge and understanding of religions, this lacks depth. The most able students are to not achieve their potential because they are not sufficiently challenged.
- Students' behaviour is outstanding and their attitudes towards RE are good. They enjoy lessons when teachers address issues that are relevant to their experiences, and respond positively when teachers provide a range of interesting learning activities.
- Students recognise and value the contribution that RE makes to interfaith understanding in this culturally diverse school. RE makes a good contribution to their moral, social and cultural development but only a satisfactory contribution to spiritual development because they do not have enough opportunity to engage with and reflect on religious concepts.

Quality of teaching of RE

The quality of teaching of RE is satisfactory.

- The strength of teaching is the ability of some experienced non-specialists with good teaching skills and considerable goodwill towards RE to engage students in the subject.
- Considerable progress has been made in winning the hearts and minds of students by abolishing textbook-based lessons and ensuring that in each lesson they experience an interesting range of resources and learning activities. The development of enquiry and evaluative skills plays a key part in most lessons.
- Groups are structured in such a way as to allow teachers to focus on students' specific needs. Generally students' needs are met effectively, the exception being those of high ability who are not sufficiently challenged through subject matter or learning methods.
- Teachers generally have a sound level of expertise, but those with other specialisms do not have the depth of subject understanding to recognise where specific aspects of RE could be incorporated in their teaching. Consequently, opportunities to extend students' awareness of religions are sometimes missed.
- A general weakness in teaching is the absence of attention to the attainment targets and level descriptions in the agreed syllabus. These rarely appear in planning and, as a result, lessons sometimes lose a specific RE focus and are in danger of falling into the citizenship or PSHE category.
- Assessment is weak. The attainment targets and level descriptions are not used rigorously or consistently.

Quality of the curriculum in RE

The quality of the curriculum in RE is satisfactory.

- The curriculum meets statutory requirements in the main school but not in the sixth form. AS and A2 Religious Studies courses are offered at a neighbouring school but take up is very modest.
- The head of humanities has worked very hard to restore the status and popularity of RE by re-designing the curriculum to meet the wide range of students' needs in the school. To achieve this, he has been very inventive in applying differentiated curriculum models for different ages and abilities.
- However, in the process, some elements distinctive of RE have been sacrificed. Students in Key Stages 3 and 4 do have opportunities to study specific religions but there is not always sufficient reference to religious ideas and teachings where the focus of the curriculum is on moral, social or cultural issues.
- As a result of the diverse provision, the curriculum lacks coherence and an overall philosophy. Individual aspects are well planned and make sense to students but these parts of the curriculum do not sit together as a whole. As a result, progression and continuity are interrupted.
- Students' learning is accredited through 'Vision to Learn', a vocational course which focuses on equality and diversity. Through selecting specific options in the course, teachers give it an RE dimension, but this does not enable students to engage with RE subject matter in either the breadth or depth of a GCSE Religious Studies course.
- The school has very lively and productive links with local Christian groups but this is not replicated with reference to local Muslim and other faith communities.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE

The effectiveness of leadership and management in RE is satisfactory.

- The head of humanities provides painstaking leadership and senior managers have a very accurate understanding of the strengths and weaknesses in the subject. They have worked very hard to improve provision within the current staffing constraints.
- The subject is monitored through lesson observation, work scrutinies and student questionnaires. Weaknesses have been identified and addressed, although the school has not yet identified all possible measures that could bring about improvement.
- The subject is being taught increasingly by non-specialists from within the humanities faculty. However, the school's decision to transfer some of its strongest teachers to RE teaching has been effective in raising the profile of the subject and in giving students a positive experience of RE.

- RE does not benefit from effective specialist subject leadership or from nearby sources of specialised training.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- securing highly qualified RE specialist expertise to work with the staff in developing the curriculum and their expertise in teaching the subject
- developing a coherent assessment system for the subject and ensuring that all teachers of RE understand and use effectively the attainment targets and level descriptors for the subject
- ensuring that teaching provides more challenge for the most able
- developing links with religions to match the school's strong associations with Christian organisations.

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