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Mr D Hill
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Hill

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 20 and 21 June 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 six lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE is good.

Achievement in RE

Achievement in RE is good.

- Results in the full and short GCSE courses are well above average. The proportion of students reaching the highest A* and A grades is particularly noteworthy.
- The strength of students' achievement in RE lies in the ability of the older students to use higher order thinking skills. Many are handling complex concepts confidently and can use the skills of enquiry, interpretation and evaluation effectively. However, it goes further by supporting the development of a wider range of learning skills. Students respond well at a personal level to their learning, asking more personal and incisive questions; as a result, they are able to understand the significance and impact of commitment and belief. For example, in an effective Year 10 lesson on the topic of euthanasia, students demonstrated their ability to

interpret and analyse the significance which this particular topic might have for them as individuals. Students also demonstrated an ability to 'stand in the shoes' of a person of faith or non-religious conviction, seeing the issues they were investigating from that perspective. Effective use was made of case studies, sensitive teaching and effective classroom management to secure the good progress.

- Achievement at Key Stage 3 is good. Students attain standards that are in line with the expectations of the locally agreed syllabus. The department is working hard to establish patterns of learning in RE at Key Stage 3 that are challenging and promote excellent achievement. However, the assessment arrangements are not providing reliable judgements of students' performance across the whole range of areas of attainment in the subject.
- RE supports students' personal development effectively. Behaviour and attitudes to learning in RE lessons are good. The subject contributes well to their spiritual, social, moral and cultural development. Students are given time in lessons to reflect on their feelings and thoughts. All students show positive attitudes to the subject. Students enjoy the subject and they show curiosity, insight and reflect seriously on life's fundamental questions. Students show an understanding of, and respect for their own and other people's cultures.

Quality of teaching in RE

The quality of teaching in RE is good.

- Teachers demonstrate good subject knowledge and, in the case of the best lessons, they set high expectations and ensure that activities challenge students to think hard. Relationships with students are very good and reflect a mature attitude towards the subject modelled by the teachers. At its best, teaching is imaginative, lively and provides good opportunities for students to express feelings and ideas. Lessons proceed at a good pace and effective use is made of a range of engaging and interesting resources.
- The skilful management of discussion and oral work is a further important strength. Good use is made of discussion, exposition, reflection and questioning. Written tasks set are generally purposeful and varied including, for example, extended and independent work with some more open-ended activities.
- Marking is satisfactory but few diagnostic comments are given to support students' learning in the subject. As a result, the students are not always clear about how to improve their work or reach the higher levels.

Quality of the curriculum in RE

The quality of the curriculum in RE is satisfactory.

- The subject has a secure place within the curriculum. The choice of faiths studied and visits provide a suitable breadth of experience. Students engage with religious, moral, social and global issues from a variety of standpoints. Provision for all students in Years 9 and 10 to study an accredited course is good.

- Limited use is made of levels in planning learning outcomes at Key Stage 3. While some units challenge students' thinking, others overemphasise lower-level collection of information about religion. Regular assessment opportunities are in place, however, some tasks are not defined well enough to be a basis for reliable judgements against levels. This reduces the effectiveness of using the outcomes from assessments to inform further planning and to ensure that learning is pitched appropriately to meet the needs of individual students, particularly for those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities and the most able students. Consequently, this leads to the good rather than outstanding achievement across the school.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE

The effectiveness of leadership and management in RE is satisfactory.

- The subject is led by a well-organised head of department who receives good support from the senior leadership team. All aspects of the work of the department are driven by a shared commitment to improving standards and the enrichment of students' wider personal development.
- The use made of a shared framework of terminology about the process of learning has enabled all teachers to talk about and plan their teaching of the subject in a coordinated manner.
- Arrangements for monitoring and improving the provision are satisfactory. The department is sound in its analysis and use of examination data both to identify patterns of students' achievement and evaluate the quality of the provision.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- examining whether to use levels to differentiate the learning objectives in the planning at Key Stage 3 to provide a useful way of monitoring students' progress
- using structured and differentiated assessment tasks to plan challenging activities that are more precisely matched to the needs of individual students.

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 published on the Ofsted website and will be sent to SACRE. It may be used to inform decisions about any future inspection. Except in the case of academies, a copy of this letter is also being sent to your local authority.

Yours sincerely

Jacqueline Wordsworth
Her Majesty's Inspector