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Mr J Archibald
Acting Headteacher
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Dear Mr Archibald

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 27 and 28 September 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 good.

Achievement in RE

Achievement in RE is good.

- Standards are in line with expectations and achievement is satisfactory at Key Stage 3. At Key Stage 4, standards are above the national average, and are above standards reached in other subjects in the school. Achievement is good and has improved consistently in recent years with more pupils achieving A* to C and fewer getting D grades.
- Students enjoy the GCSE short course and demonstrate a good balance in the development of the knowledge, understanding and skills of RE. Students' learning is rigorous and systematic. At Key Stage 3, particularly in Year 7, learning is skewed towards developing skills of empathy and personal reflection and students' knowledge and understanding of religions and beliefs are less well developed.

- Learning is generally good, although many students struggle to remain motivated throughout the long 100-minute lessons.
- Students' attitudes match their achievement. GCSE students are particularly enthusiastic about the subject, stimulated by the rigour of the course and enjoying learning about religions in depth 'for the first time'.

Quality of teaching in RE

The quality of teaching in RE is good.

- RE is taught by a talented team of humanities teachers, who are knowledgeable, imaginative, and very hard working. In particular, they have successfully embraced teaching the GCSE short course.
- Teachers are committed to developing learning skills and use well tried methods such as 'thinking hats'. They encourage students to work effectively in groups. Students are taught to question concisely. Teachers' preparation of helpful revision guides and the successful development of students' examination techniques have had a positive impact on achievement. Teachers work hard to maintain students' engagement in the long lessons. Learning assistants provide good support for less able students while the most able and those with specialist 'insider' knowledge are given leadership tasks in lessons.
- The less successful aspects of teaching at Key Stage 3 are linked to weaknesses in the curriculum. In oral and written work, there is an inappropriate emphasis on developing skills of empathy and personal reflection at the expense of critical evaluation. For example, Year 7 students were asked how slaves and those who sold and owned them would 'feel', where questions about the morality of slavery in a country that claimed to be Christian would have got to the heart of the RE issues. In some lessons, students are given insufficient opportunities to work alone or in groups or to use information and communication technology for research in lessons.
- Assessment systems are in place and there is regular self-assessment by students in lessons. However, the use of generic humanities levels in Year 7 does not get to the heart of students' achievements in RE. Teachers do not always make sufficient assessment about whether students have learnt as much as they should in relation to the RE element of the course.

Quality of the curriculum in RE

The quality of the curriculum in RE is satisfactory with good features.

- The strength of the RE curriculum is the carefully planned provision of the GCSE short course, which is popular and successful.
- The Year 7 humanities programme is carefully planned to develop students' skills. However, there is a mismatch between the RE content and the general themes. For example, more relevant contemporary links could be made with the theme of slavery than the lessons on Moses, which are more appropriate at Key Stage 2. Weaknesses also exist in the Year 8

curriculum, notably an approach to teaching the Holocaust within RE from a history rather than RE perspective. There is also unnecessary duplication as students study the Holocaust in history and English as well as RE.

- The Key Stage 3 curriculum does not provide students with enough opportunities to learn about a variety of religions. Continuity and progression in the Key Stage 3 curriculum are not well developed and there are insufficient planned opportunities to build on earlier learning about the religions studied.
- The department works hard to provide curriculum enhancement. Year 8 students visit places of worship, although not necessarily representative of the religions they are studying. The school inspires a lively response to the 'Spirited Arts' initiative.
- RE provides good support for students' spiritual and social development, but only satisfactory support for their moral and cultural development because of missed opportunities at Key Stage 3 to evaluate ethical issues or to study a range of religions in depth.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE

The effectiveness of leadership and management in RE is good.

- The humanities department is managed very efficiently. The head of department leads through her commitment to humanities and to developing expertise in RE. There is a strong element of sharing good practice across the department. The potential for further improvement in RE is good.
- The head of humanities is very active in the day-to-day management of the department. There is a determination to improve provision and raise standards. A wide range of systems in place for monitoring humanities subjects and leadership has a good understanding of strengths and weaknesses in RE.
- The head of department has already instigated change which has resulted in improvement, such as the introduction of intensive units on Christianity and Islam in preparation for GCSE and working with C/D borderline students to raise attainment.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- reviewing the RE curriculum in Years 7 and 8 to ensure:
 - greater continuity and progression and eliminating unnecessary duplication with other subjects
 - the development of the use of critical evaluation, particularly in the context of teaching moral dimensions of religions
 - a stronger focus on developing the knowledge and understanding of beliefs and traditions of religions.

I hope that these observations are useful as you continue to develop RE in the school.

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

Yours sincerely

Barbara Wintersgill
Additional Inspector