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Mrs H Cooper
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Cooper

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 29 and 30 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 seven lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE is satisfactory. However, some significant areas of provision require improvement.

Achievement in RE

Achievement in RE is satisfactory.

- Achievement in RE is inconsistent reflecting unevenness in the quality of the provision. Results in the recent past in the full course GCSE have been above the national average reflecting good progress by the small cohorts who took the examination. Nearly all students were entered for the short course GCSE in 2011. While results were above the national average, both for A* and A grades and A* to C grades, a significant number of students, particularly boys, underachieved. This cohort of students had not had any RE lessons in Year 9, disrupting the continuity of their learning in the subject.
- The current Year 11, all of whom are taking the short course GCSE, also did not receive any RE lessons in Year 9. Current assessment data indicate

most are on track to reach their target. The students have a good understanding of the various moral, social and philosophical issues they are studying. Some are less sure how to extend their ability to develop robust argument. Students do not have a secure knowledge and understanding of the religions selected to apply religious perspectives to the issues.

- Attainment in Years 7 and 8 is broadly in line with expectations reflecting satisfactory progress. Students can work independently using a range of resources to research aspects of religious belief and practice. They can explain the meaning and significance of religion in people's lives. Their grasp of the wider nature and dynamics of religion and belief is limited. Their understanding of the key ideas underpinning Christianity is very restricted.
- The students taking a 'pre-GCSE' taster course in Year 9 make very good progress exploring philosophical ideas. For the majority of students taking core RE in Years 9 and 10, attainment is very variable depending on their attitudes and engagement. The limited nature of the provision means that progress overall is restricted.
- Students generally have a positive view of RE and can see its value. A few Key Stage 4 students are less interested and struggle to sustain attention and engage maturely with the subject.

Quality of teaching in RE

The quality of teaching in RE is satisfactory but with some good and outstanding features.

- The quality of teaching is very variable. Lessons seen ranged from outstanding to inadequate. All those teaching are RE specialists and bring a good level of subject expertise to their lessons.
- In the best lessons, an excellent environment for learning is created, some stimulating resources are used, and teaching is lively and engaging. Good use is made of questioning to check progress and challenge students' thinking. Learning is well-structured to enable students to build understanding. Effective use is made of group work and structured discussion. Some skilful use is made of differentiated resource material to both challenge and support students as appropriate.
- Where teaching is less effective, the structure and purpose of the learning are often unclear to the students. As a result, they find it difficult to understand the level of work which is expected. Limited use is made of questioning to check understanding and adjust the learning accordingly. On occasions, there is a tendency to accept any idea or argument as valid regardless of its merit. Very occasionally, teaching does not engage students' interest and teachers struggle to maintain the focus and direction of the lesson.
- The quality of assessment in GCSE classes is generally good, although there is sometimes a tendency to focus too heavily on meeting examination requirements rather than on ensuring that students develop

their subject understanding. Work is marked regularly and good use is made of peer- and self-assessment. There is scope to use more specimen answers to help students understand how to improve their performance.

- Assessment arrangements at Key Stage 3 are weak. There is no clear and shared understanding of how to apply levels or how to use them effectively in planning.

Quality of the curriculum in RE

The quality of the curriculum in RE is satisfactory but areas require improvement.

- The school recognises that the RE curriculum needs to be reviewed to ensure that it better matches the students' needs and interests. The provision has been subject to significant changes in recent years making a clear pattern of continuity in students' learning difficult to sustain.
- The Key Stage 3 curriculum, which currently covers Years 7 and 8, incorporates a range of religions but does not secure clear continuity and progression in learning. Limited use is made of levels, concepts or key questions to help focus and pitch the learning. The department is keen to build a stronger enquiry approach into learning, in line with the recommendations of the new locally agreed syllabus, but is unsure how to achieve this. The current curriculum offers insufficient challenge, especially in relation to work on Christianity.
- The current short course GCSE provision is being phased out and, from this year, the majority of students will have only one lesson of RE each fortnight across Years 9 to 11. This barely meets statutory requirements and is significantly below the time allocation recommended in the agreed syllabus. Ninety-six students in the current Year 9 are taking a 'pre-GCSE' taster course in RE with the intention of re-establishing full course GCSE provision next year. There is a need to keep this overall pattern of Year 9 and Key Stage 4 provision under review to ensure that it meets students' needs and does not lead to duplication and repetition of work.
- The subject makes a good contribution to social and moral development. The inclusion of some creative opportunities for reflection using, for example, a 'theatre of learning' approach supports the promotion of spiritual development. The contribution of RE to students' awareness of cultural diversity is limited by the lack of a significant pattern of enrichment activities, such as opportunities to visit a range of places of worship.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE

The effectiveness of leadership and management in RE is satisfactory.

- RE benefits from a dedicated team of specialists who bring a range of expertise and experience to the subject and it is well supported by the line management arrangements. The leadership of the subject needs to develop a more strategic approach towards the development of the

subject to capitalise on these strengths. Day-to-day management is satisfactory, although some key aspects of planning and assessment require improvement to help secure greater consistency and raise standards.

- The subject's monitoring, review and action planning are now aligned with wider school approaches and this has brought greater rigour to the process of self-evaluation and improvement. The department is beginning to develop a more proactive approach towards the use of data and to the identification and sharing of good practice, but this needs to go further.
- The subject has been successful in seeking out opportunities for professional development through links with the local authority and a local teacher education provider. There is scope to extend this by seeking out good practice in other departments across the school and beyond.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- raising standards and securing greater consistency by:
 - developing a more coherent, progressive curriculum for RE which better meets the needs of all students
 - incorporating a clearer emphasis on enquiry learning across all aspects of the RE programme
 - establishing more manageable and reliable assessment arrangements focused on promoting effective learning
- improving the effectiveness of the leadership and management of RE by:
 - developing a strategic vision for the future direction of RE across the school
 - using data and the outcomes of monitoring more effectively in self-evaluation
 - identifying and sharing best practice in teaching and learning
 - improving the contribution that RE makes to students' cultural development by extending the enrichment activities within the subject.

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

Alan Brine
Her Majesty's Inspector