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Mrs K Miller
Acting Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Miller

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 11 and 12 October 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 including one joint observation with the subject line manager.

The overall effectiveness of RE is satisfactory with good features.

Achievement in RE

Achievement in RE is satisfactory with good features.

- Results in the last two years in the GCSE short course have been well below the national average and a significant proportion of students did not meet their minimum target grade. This contrasts sharply with students' performance in the option group full GCSE course up to 2010 when results were broadly in line with the national average and achievement was good. The short course has now been dropped and full course GCSE reinstated.
- Students currently taking GCSE courses often demonstrate good knowledge and understanding of different religions. They are confident in expressing views and discussing issues related to the study of religion and belief. Their abilities to use their knowledge and to build the skills of

structured argument when addressing the evaluation element of GCSE questions are less well developed.

- Standards at Key Stage 3 are broadly in line with expectations representing satisfactory achievement. The pattern of attainment is varied. Many students can talk about religions with confidence drawing on their personal experience and learning. Their ability to use higher level skills of enquiry when investigating religions is less well-developed. Attainment is stronger in relation to 'learning about' rather than 'learning from' religion.
- The department does not make systematic use of data about the achievement of different groups of learners in RE. Evidence from lessons indicates that the more able are not always challenged sufficiently while the less able are sometimes not supported effectively to reach their potential.
- A very significant strength of RE is the very positive attitudes of the students towards the subject. They enjoy RE and can see its value. They are enthusiastic about the opportunities to discuss issues and share ideas. Behaviour in lessons is excellent. The values of toleration and respect for diversity are very strongly reinforced within the work of the department.

Quality of teaching in RE

The quality of teaching in RE is satisfactory with good features.

- Lessons in RE vary in quality. All teachers demonstrate some significant strengths in their classroom practice. They have good subject knowledge which they use well. Relationships in lessons are very positive and this fosters confidence in the students and a willingness to engage in discussion of challenging issues. Teachers communicate enthusiasm and use questioning well to encourage students to reflect on their own religious beliefs and practices in a safe and secure context. Some good use is made of humour to help create a positive ethos for learning.
- A less effective feature of teaching is the management and structuring of learning. Sometimes the planning of lessons lacks coherence and clear progression. As a result, students are unsure how different aspects of their learning connect together. Occasionally, the objectives of a lesson are unclear and activities do not build sequentially on each other. In many of the lessons, little attention is paid to matching the learning to the wide range of abilities within each mixed-ability class.
- Students' work is marked regularly with helpful feedback given. A series of assessment tasks are identified with level or grade criteria. However, some of the assessments are not well structured making it very difficult for average and lower ability students to demonstrate what they can do.

Quality of the curriculum in RE

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

- The provision for RE meets statutory requirements. While there is no RE-related examination provision in the academy's sixth form, opportunities to

engage with matters of belief and value are monitored across the curriculum and there are plans to include off-timetable days in both the sixth form and at Key Stage 4 focused on relevant topics. The academy has chosen to continue to use the locally agreed syllabus as a basis for RE.

- The popularity of RE has been reflected in the high numbers opting for GCSE full course when this has been made available. The academy hopes the new Key Stage 4 option arrangements will secure even higher take-up in the future.
- The GCSE examination specifications chosen by the department focus heavily on the study of religions. This is a sensible decision matching well to the students' interests and capabilities.
- In Years 7 and 8, the curriculum is being carefully aligned with the wider pastoral-based learning goals programme. This is providing a good context to develop some potentially challenging units of work exploring a range of issues related to the study of religion and belief. Currently this is followed by a Year 9 programme focused on a more systematic study of three world religions.
- Provision at Key Stages 3 and 4 has undergone a number of changes in recent years in response to wider curriculum and other academy developments and further significant change is planned. The academy has recognised the need to monitor the impact of these changes on RE carefully.
- While the overall pattern of RE provision is good there are shortcomings in the medium-term planning and assessment arrangements. The pattern of progression and continuity within and between units of work is often unclear. The sequence of learning and the identified learning outcomes of specific units sometimes lack coherence. Some assessment tasks are inappropriately positioned within units of work limiting their effectiveness.
- A strong pattern of enrichment activities is linked to RE. As part of the RE celebration in March 2011, some students had the opportunity to work closely with the local Zoroastrian community. The department also contributes to the marking of Holocaust Memorial Day. It has been recognised that there is scope to extend links with other religious communities in the local area.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE

The effectiveness of leadership and management in RE is good.

- RE benefits from a strong team of well-qualified subject specialists which includes an advanced skills teacher (AST) who works more widely across the borough and is on the local SACRE. RE makes a very positive contribution to students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. As such it is strongly aligned with the wider aspirations of the academy as it serves its very diverse local community.
- The process of monitoring and self-evaluation of RE is good and has generated a well-defined improvement plan which focuses on the right priorities and is carefully linked to the wider whole-school plan. While the

department has access to a wide range of data, it has yet to use these fully in, for example, analysing the performance of different groups of students. There is also a need to monitor the quality of the curriculum planning more closely. The capacity for the improvement of RE is good.

- The opportunities for professional development within the school are good and members of the department have taken advantage of a number of whole-school initiatives. The AST has been involved in local networks sharing practice with other schools. While the head of department has been involved in examination board training, opportunities for wider subject development have been limited in recent years.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- securing greater consistency in the quality of teaching by:
 - making sure that learning objectives are expressed appropriately and match the content of the lessons
 - improving the way in which learning is structured both in curriculum and lesson planning to ensure greater coherence and progression
 - reviewing the pattern of assessments to ensure that they are appropriately placed and provide a structure which enables all students to achieve their potential
 - incorporating more differentiation to ensure that work is better matched to the wide range of abilities in lessons.

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. It may be used to inform decisions about any future inspection.

Yours sincerely

Alan Brine
Her Majesty's Inspector