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Mr A Brien  
Headteacher  
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Dear Mr Brien

**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 8 and 9 November 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 five lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE is good with many outstanding features.

**Achievement in RE**

Achievement is good with outstanding features.

- Throughout the school, standards are well above national averages and at Key Stages 3 and 4 achievement is outstanding, as seen in the high proportion of A\* and A grades at GCSE. In the sixth form, where many students take GCE AS and A2, achievement overall in the recent past has been good. However, last year many of those taking AS level failed to reach their target grade.
- RE makes a good contribution to students' literacy skills as they have ample opportunities for extended writing using complex ideas and concepts.

- In response to challenging tasks, students apply a range of higher level skills such as analysis, interpretation, evaluation and reflection. When given the opportunity they are able to work independently and take the initiative in their work and when working with others. On these occasions, they sometimes demonstrate imagination and creativity; for example, a group of Year 12 students produced a 'Plato's video-blog'.
- Learning was impeded where students were not given sufficient opportunities to work independently or in groups and were not given enough time to complete tasks in depth.
- RE is popular with students and exceptionally high numbers choose to take it as an examination subject in the sixth form. Last year there was some non-attendance, which was one factor contributing to the underachievement, but this was not restricted to their studies in RE.
- Students' spiritual and moral development in the context of RE is outstanding; their social and cultural development is good.

### **Quality of teaching in RE**

The quality of teaching in RE is good with outstanding features

- The quality of RE teaching in the lessons observed varied from outstanding to satisfactory. Most teachers have a confident level of subject expertise but not all communicate equally a passion and enthusiasm for the subject.
- Teachers generally have high expectations, particularly with Years 10 and 11, where they convey to students their understanding of what constitutes excellence in RE.
- Assessment for learning is very good, although assessment criteria for Key Stage 3 do not include an understanding of diversity within religions or the ability to compare and contrast. Teachers give very high-quality feedback to students and identify general misconceptions for clarification with the whole class. Students take an active part in their and each other's assessment and target setting, and they are very clear about what they have to do to improve.
- At its best, teaching is precise, pacy, challenging and engaging. The head of department creates short films that engage students in the issue at hand and teaches students effective methods of learning by marking and coding texts.
- In some lessons, although students are given accurate information, teaching strategies were not so inspiring and varied. In these lessons, students play a minor role, with few opportunities for independent learning or working with others. Whole-class rather than group discussion dominates, with the result that some of the quieter students have few opportunities to contribute. In most of the lessons observed, the range of resources used was limited. A single textbook was used in some lessons rather than the variety of resources needed to stimulate students' active participation in their learning.

## **Quality of the curriculum in RE**

The quality of the curriculum in RE is outstanding.

- The success of the RE curriculum is due to its relevance to students' interests and abilities and to the commitment of senior management to the subject, which ensures that sufficient time is available to teach the GCSE full course to all students and achieve outstanding results.
- Continuity and progression from Key Stage 3 through to the sixth form are very good. The curriculum draws throughout on stimulating ideas, and the recent decision to change examination syllabus at Key Stage 4 has resulted in a course better suited to students' aptitudes.
- The department provides a good range of enrichment opportunities, including visits to places of worship and talks by visiting speakers.

## **Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE**

The effectiveness of leadership and management in RE is good with outstanding features.

- Leadership at all levels is informed by a high level of commitment to RE. The head of department has excellent subject expertise and sets an example to the department in the quality of his teaching. He introduces new ideas with careful consideration to the aptitude and interests of students and staff through, for example, the use of the virtual learning environment. He has a very good understanding of the strengths in the provision and where improvement is needed.
- Excellent strategies are in place to delegate subject responsibilities to teachers in the department according to the stage in their career and future ambitions. Training links directly to appraisal and the school finances high-quality professional development opportunities.
- The subject has a very high profile among the students and enables them to make good progress overall. There are unresolved issues, primarily the reasons for underachievement in the sixth form and making the quality of teaching throughout the department match the best.

## **Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:**

- addressing the reasons for underachievement among some students in the sixth form
- improving the overall quality of teaching by providing more opportunities for students to play an active part 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

**Barbara Wintersgill**  
**Additional Inspector**