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Mrs A Turner
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Dear Mrs Turner

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 28 and 29 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 six lessons, including one joint observation.

The overall effectiveness of RE is satisfactory with a good capacity for improvement.

Achievement in RE

Achievement in RE is satisfactory.

- Results in the short course GCSE in recent years have been above the national average. Students make good progress in addressing the requirements of the examination. They can explain and evaluate a range of philosophical, ethical and social issues effectively; they make less progress in developing a deeper understanding of the religious perspectives they apply to these issues.
- Most students arrive in the school in Year 7 with limited subject knowledge and understanding. They make satisfactory progress across Key Stage 3 but the standards reached by Year 9 are below national expectations. The pattern of their progress is uneven reflecting the variable quality of the curriculum and of the provision received by different

groups of students. While they have opportunities to explore a range of aspects of religious belief and practice, their overall knowledge and understanding of religions and beliefs are underdeveloped. They often struggle to link together different aspects of their learning.

- Students' behaviour and attitudes are generally positive. They are better at Key Stage 4 where students have a much clearer view about the purpose and value of the subject. Some students find it difficult to explain the relevance of their learning at Key Stage 3 and do not always fully understand the value of exploring religious diversity.

Quality of teaching in RE

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

- RE is taught by a team of humanities teachers that includes two subject specialists. This pattern of delivery is a strength of the provision with the potential to secure future improvement in RE. All lessons are orderly and planned in detail. The management of the students and their activities is effective. Learning proceeds at a good pace and teachers demonstrate a sound grasp of the topics they are teaching.
- The best lessons are characterised by good structuring of the students' learning. Teachers explain the purpose and direction of the work clearly and set students tasks which challenge their thinking. Questioning is used well to extend students' ideas and check their progress. A range of imaginative strategies is used to stimulate and engage interest. In one Year 8 lesson, for example, the teacher used role play effectively to help the students evaluate the relevance of Christian values in the modern world. A strength of teaching at Key Stage 4 is the close attention paid to helping the students understand how to improve their work. In one Year 10 lesson, students collaborated well to plan how to improve their evaluation of issues related to marriage and relationships.
- Where teaching was at best satisfactory, learning often lacked structure and tasks did not build sequentially on prior work. Questioning was not used enough to check whether students understood what they were doing. As a result, some tasks lacked challenge or, in other cases, did not acknowledge significant gaps in the students' prior knowledge which prevented them from making good progress.
- Teachers follow closely the humanities faculty marking policy. Assessment at Key Stage 4 is rigorous and supports students in making good progress. At Key Stage 3, assessment lacks precision and rigour and, as a result, students do not understand how to improve.

Quality of the curriculum in RE

The quality of the curriculum in RE is satisfactory.

- The provision for RE meets statutory requirements but is variable in its quality. A strength is the opportunity for most students to accredit their learning in RE. In the past, and currently in Year 11, the limited time

allocation of one lesson a fortnight for GCSE short course provided students with insufficient opportunities to develop a deeper understanding of some of the material. This has now been addressed; students in Year 10 receive one lesson a week and this will be extended to Year 11 in 2012.

- Provision is made for students in the sixth form to explore a variety of issues related to diversity, belief and values through, for example, off-timetable days and tutorial time.
- A clearly documented scheme of work is in place for Key Stage 3 based on the locally agreed syllabus. This is a stable basis for teaching and secures coverage of a range of religions and topics. However, many of the less effective features of teaching and student progress at Key Stage 3 derive from significant limitations in the curriculum. Many of the planned units are too brief and lack coherence and clarity of purpose. While the unit titles suggest an enquiry-based approach to RE, in practice the sequencing of learning often undermines this intention. The pattern of continuity and progression across the key stage is not well-defined and the topics chosen for study do not always engage the students' interest. Arrangements for assessing students' progress are not sufficiently embedded into the planning. The subject leadership is aware of these shortcomings and is intending to review of the provision.
- A modest but significant number of less able students are withdrawn from parts of the curriculum in Key Stage 3 and receive a separate provision which includes their RE. This provision is currently being managed and delivered by the Learning Support Faculty and there is a need to ensure that the effectiveness of this is carefully monitored and evaluated.
- An emerging strength of the provision has been the move in recent years towards a modular pattern of delivery of humanities securing more sustained learning and allowing teachers to build stronger relationships with their students. Timetabling constraints mean that this model has not been adopted for all classes this year. In some cases, students are currently only receiving one lesson of RE a fortnight with a serious detrimental impact on the quality of their learning. There are plans to remove this inequity next year and ensure that all students receive an equal entitlement.
- RE makes a positive contribution to the promotion of students' moral and social awareness. The impact on their spiritual and cultural awareness is more limited, in part because students have very limited opportunities to engage at first hand with the reality of religious life through the use of visits and visitors.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE

The effectiveness of leadership and management in RE is satisfactory.

- RE has been through a period of turbulence in its staffing and leadership. These issues have now been resolved and the subject now benefits from well-qualified, enthusiastic and perceptive leadership, well-supported by the head of faculty. A key success has been the establishment of a committed team of humanities teachers who are keen to support the

teaching of the subject. These factors combine to ensure that the capacity for future improvement is good.

- While there has been some opportunity for team training this has been relatively limited and there is scope to involve the team more actively in sharing good practice, and in planning and reviewing the curriculum.
- The faculty has a clear understanding of the priorities for development. Improvement planning is fairly informal at present and would benefit from a more structured timeline for action.
- The assessment arrangements at Key Stage 3 are weak and, as a result, the data available is unreliable. While the senior leadership are very supportive towards the subject, recent timetabling decisions at Key Stage 3 have hampered the development of the subject.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- improving the Key Stage 3 curriculum by:
 - embedding a challenging process of enquiry into the learning
 - securing greater coherence, continuity and progression in the planning
 - incorporating more robust assessment arrangements
- stabilising the timetabling provision for RE across Key Stage 3 to ensure that all students have equal entitlement
- exploring ways of providing students with more opportunities to meet representatives from local religious communities
- providing more opportunities for the humanities team to plan together and share good practice
- establishing a clearer action plan to prioritise the areas for improvement.

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