

Aviation House
125 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

T 0300 123 1231
F 020 7421 6855
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk



17 January 2012

Mr I Kellie
Headteacher
Sir Thomas Rich's School
Oakleaze
Gloucester
Gloucestershire
GL2 0LF

Dear Mr Kellie

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 10 and 11 January 2012 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 three lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE is outstanding.

Achievement in RE

Achievement in RE is outstanding.

- Students arrive in school with prior attainment in RE which is broadly average. They make outstanding progress and by the end of Year 10 when all students sit the short course GCSE their attainment is high, particularly the proportion gaining the highest grade A*.
- By the end of Key Stage 3, standards are well above the expectations of the locally agreed syllabus.
- The strength of the students' achievement across all key stages is their ability to use higher-order thinking skills to interrogate, analyse, and evaluate religious, ethical and philosophical issues and concepts. Many are handling complex concepts confidently and can use an excellent range of

evidence and examples to justify their own ideas while providing a detailed evaluation of the perspective of others.

- Students taking GCE AS and A level in the sixth form are able to distinguish between opinions, viewpoints and beliefs in connection with various issues of conviction and faith. They are able to use a wide range of religious and philosophical vocabulary. Students critically evaluate the various interpretations of religion with careful reference to historical, ethical and philosophical ideas. Students' attainment in applied ethics is not as strong as their attainment in the philosophical aspects of the course.
- All students demonstrate exceptional enthusiasm for learning RE in lessons. This was particularly noteworthy in a Year 7 lesson, where students were asked to consider whether Jesus was God made man on earth, by applying six different aspects of critical thinking in addition to evaluating the statement from a number of religious standpoints. The technical language that students used was of high quality and enabled them to frame and extend their discussions using the target vocabulary developed by the teacher.

Quality of teaching in RE

The quality of teaching in RE is outstanding.

- Teaching in RE has many significant strengths. Teachers plan effectively and take account of the needs of different students. They have excellent subject knowledge and very high expectations about teaching and challenging students to think. Teachers use strategies very skilfully to engage students in deeper levels of analysis, particularly through the direct and systematic teaching of critical thinking skills. The very best lessons make highly effective use of a range of strategies to consolidate and extend learning.
- Students' highly positive attitudes to the subject mean that they respond exceptionally well to debate and practical activities. For example, they worked well in pairs to evaluate religious material and solve problems giving the reasons and thinking behind their solutions. Sixth form students benefited from working in pairs to study the effectiveness of religious vocabulary because the teacher ensured that their analysis was enhanced by the precise use of the correct technical language.
- Students develop a coherent understanding across their learning in RE. They understand that questions about religion, truth and belief are complex. Teachers enable students to explore what religion and belief have to say about ultimate questions such as social justice and human rights. As a result, students are able to make connections between different aspects of the subject and understand the significance and impact of commitment and belief.
- Assessment arrangements ensure that students have a good idea of the level of their work and the areas they need to improve. Good use is made of self- and peer-assessment and carefully structured tasks, which often require a high level of challenge.

The quality of the curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in RE is good.

- The curriculum provides well for the needs and interests of students and fulfils the requirements of the locally agreed syllabus, including those for the sixth form. Many units of work are designed to promote higher order skills of analysis and evaluation, the development of a systematic understanding of Christianity and the engagement with some demanding religious, ethical and philosophical thinking.
- Students respond well to a curriculum that includes some challenging features designed to engage students' interest and ensure that the work has relevance to their lives. Students' curiosity is harnessed well through a series of key questions that drives each unit of work. Students particularly enjoy opportunities which allow them to question and debate their ideas with others.
- RE makes an outstanding contribution to students' personal development. The subject encourages students to take matters of faith and religion seriously and to respect the views of others. Their attitudes towards the subject are excellent, supported by the strong focus on challenging them to think for themselves. Students are able to express their views and develop coherent and informed arguments about matters of belief, ethics and values. They are clear that the subject provides excellent opportunities for them to articulate their own ideas, to express opinions, and to learn to respect the views of others and therefore value diversity.
- The department is aware that limited use is made of visitors to the classroom and fieldwork opportunities to enable students to gain high-quality direct and first-hand experience of religious and faith communities.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE

The effectiveness of leadership and management in RE is outstanding.

- RE benefits from the excellent leadership of the experienced, very well informed subject leader. There is a drive for improvement and a strong sense of vision about the future development of the subject. RE is very well organised on a day-to-day basis. The roles and responsibilities for RE are clear, with suitable strategies to monitor and evaluate the quality of the provision; crucially, the leadership is committed to ensuring that developments in RE are integrated within the school's wider priorities for improving learning.
- Schemes of work are comprehensive and provide a good basis for all the staff to work well together as a team. All aspects of the work of the department are driven by a shared commitment to high standards and the enrichment of students' wider personal development.
- The subject has high profile in the school. Its quality and character are reflective of, and embedded in, the wider values of the school with its emphasis on students' spiritual, social and emotional development, respect for all, and encouraging independent learning.

- The arrangements for professional development are good. A range of well-conceived strategies has been used to develop an understanding of effective learning in RE.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- increasing the opportunities for students to engage with visits to, and visitors from, a wider variety of faith groups.

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

**Jacqueline Wordsworth
Her Majesty's Inspector**