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Mr M Murphy
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Dear Mr Murphy

Ofsted 2011–12 subject survey inspection programme: religious education (RE)

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 8 and 9 February 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 a range of lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE is satisfactory although significant improvements are needed to the curriculum at Key Stage 3.

Achievement in RE

Achievement in RE is satisfactory.

- Results in the short course GCSE in 2011 were well below the national average and a significant number of students did not meet their targets. This was a decline on the results in 2010 when the percentage achieving A* to C grades was well above the national average. The decline in 2011 reflected a wider picture across the whole school. Overall, the current Year 11 students are on target to meet their predicted grades this year, although progress across the three school populations varies.
- The current Key Stage 4 students, who are following either the full or short course GCSE, are making good progress. They demonstrate a sound grasp of a range of ethical and social issues. They also quickly acquire an ability to offer informed ideas on issues such as the existence of God and

the nature of religious experience. Students are less confident in relation to their knowledge and understanding of different religious traditions and, as a result, their ability to apply and evaluate religious perspectives is very limited.

- Students' attainment by the end of Key Stage 3 is below the expectations of the locally agreed syllabus. While they develop the ability to offer personal responses to a range of religious, philosophical and social issues, their thinking is always not sufficiently informed by a robust knowledge and understanding of different religions. Overall, their grasp of the nature and significance of religion is limited. This weakness at Key Stage 3 impacts on students' progress and learning at Key Stage 4.
- The quality of learning in RE is variable reflecting inconsistencies in the quality of both teaching and the curriculum. There are positive examples of students developing skills of collaboration and independence. There are also good opportunities for them to extend their literacy and thinking skills. Elsewhere, however, the pattern of learning is sometimes too restricted. This is particularly evident in some GCSE classes where the narrow drive to prepare students for the examination limits opportunities to develop a deeper understanding of the nature of religion and belief.
- Students have a positive attitude towards RE. They recognise its value and appreciate the opportunities to explore issues of relevance to their lives. Behaviour in the lessons observed was good and students readily respond to the opportunities for discussion. They show respect for diversity and readily listen to the opinions of others.

Quality of teaching in RE

The quality of teaching in RE is satisfactory.

- Lessons include a number of positive features. Relationships are good and a climate is created in which students are confident to express their views and engage in dialogue. Activities are usually well managed and students are given a clear idea about the purpose of their learning.
- In the best lessons, a range of imaginative activities and resources is used to sustain interest and extend students' thinking. Opportunities are provided for students to find things out for themselves and share their findings with others. Effective use is made of questioning to check on progress and extend thinking.
- Where the quality of teaching is less effective, opportunities for working independently are limited. Learning is not structured sufficiently to allow students to develop their subject understanding and too much attention is paid to narrow coaching to meet assessment criteria. Sometimes, particularly at Key Stage 3, the teaching does not focus carefully enough on the needs of the subject. Very limited use is made of information and communication technology to enrich students' learning.
- Teachers' subject knowledge varies considerably and this impacts on the quality of learning. While the subject specialists bring a high level of expertise to the classroom, in those lessons taught by non-specialists

students are not always given accurate information and opportunities to extend their thinking are sometimes missed.

- Assessment practice is also variable. Work is marked regularly across the subject, often with helpful comments to support students' learning. In GCSE classes, assessment is accurate and rigorous with clear targets set for improvement. At Key Stage 3, the accuracy of assessment is not secure and a variety of different marking structures is used, creating inconsistency of practice.

Quality of the curriculum in RE

The quality of the curriculum in RE is satisfactory but requires improvement at Key Stage 3.

- Provision for RE at Key Stage 4 is good and will be enhanced next year with an increase in the students taking full course GCSE. Decisions have yet to be made about the future provision for less able students.
- The time allocated to RE is satisfactory. Provision in the sixth form meets requirements with all students given the opportunity to explore issues related to beliefs and values through their tutor programme. Students have opportunities to extend their interest in philosophy within the A-level options.
- Although some interesting and challenging topics for study are provided, the pattern of the Key Stage 3 curriculum has a number of shortcomings. A strength is the modular structure in which RE is taught alongside citizenship. This provides opportunities for sustained learning within each module. However, the selection of topics and the distribution of the modules do not secure a coherent, balanced and progressive curriculum. Insufficient time is allocated to the study of Christianity; some of the units lack a clear subject focus; and, students in two of the school populations undertake very little RE for almost a year of their time across Years 8 and 9. As a result, the progress in developing a clear understanding is limited and the Key Stage 3 programme is not providing an effective platform for the students' GCSE work.
- There are examples of some enriching approaches to teaching in the broad social and religious studies programme of which RE is a part. Use of made, for example, of philosophy for children strategies. There is scope to integrate these approaches more systematically within the RE provision.
- Overall RE makes a positive contribution to students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. However, the development of students' appreciation of diversity within Britain is limited by the lack of opportunities for first-hand experience of local religious communities.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE

The effectiveness of leadership and management in RE is satisfactory.

- The school has undergone a period of significant change including the creation of three 'schools' within the larger school. This has led to new

leadership and management structures which impact at subject level. It has been recognised that these changes will need time to settle.

- RE benefits from a team of specialists, who have strong support from senior leaders, with the potential to drive improvement and raise standards. At present, this capacity is not being fully realised because of uncertainties about how the different roles and responsibilities within the team should be exercised. Not enough time is provided for the leadership of the team to work together.
- Some good use is made of Key Stage 4 data to analyse patterns of students' performance and identify areas for improvement. However, the wider arrangements for monitoring and developing the curriculum are not entirely effective. The inconsistencies in the way the curriculum is being delivered are not being identified and addressed quickly enough.
- There is currently no coherent strategic plan for the development of the subject across the three school populations. The role of the 'subject adviser' within the structure has the potential to drive improvement but this is not yet fully effective. While good use is made of external inspection to evaluate the subject provision, the issues raised at the time of the previous inspection in January 2011 have not yet been addressed sufficiently and did not form the basis of a clear action plan.
- The non-specialists who contribute to the teaching of RE are deployed efficiently and receive good support, however, the arrangements for their professional development are not sufficiently systematic or rigorous. The accommodation within which RE is taught often lacks a sense of the subject and is not particularly stimulating.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- addressing the inconsistencies in the quality of teaching and providing more specific subject training for the non-specialists
- reviewing the Key Stage 3 curriculum to ensure:
 - its content, breadth and balance align more closely with the expectations in the locally agreed syllabus
 - a more effective basis for the GCSE provision at Key Stage 4
- clarifying and rationalising the leadership and management arrangements for the subject to ensure:
 - monitoring of the provision is more robust and systematic
 - a clearly articulated and coherent improvement plan is in place
 - more opportunities for collaboration across the three school populations
- developing opportunities for students to gain more first-hand experience of the diversity of religion within the local community.

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