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Mr K Dean
Executive Headteacher
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Dear Mr Dean

Ofsted 2012–13 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 May 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 five lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE is satisfactory.

Achievement in RE

Achievement in RE is satisfactory.

- Attainment in the short course GCSE over recent years has been in line with the national average and represents good progress at Key Stage 4. The department has been successful this year at raising the attainment and progress of targeted students. The gap in attainment and progress between boys and girls is slowly closing. In one lesson, observed students offered well-presented evaluative and personal responses to differing Christian perspectives on abortion and how these views fit with the wider Christian belief in the sanctity of life. However, generally responses lack depth because students do not have a systematic and coherent understanding of religion to draw upon when formulating their own responses to the issues studied.

- Attainment at the end of Year 9 is broadly in line with the expectations of the locally agreed syllabus. Students handle concepts well and can use some evidence to justify their own ideas. However, their thinking is not sufficiently informed by a detailed and systematic understanding of the different religions. Too often, activities related to 'learning about' religion lack depth, and students do not extend their skills in critically evaluating information. This weakness at Key Stage 3 has some impact on students' attainment at Key Stage 4, particularly in their ability to apply religious perspectives to specific issues.
- A small number of students opt into GCE AS and A-level courses in philosophy and ethics in the sixth form. As this is the first year of the course, there is insufficient evidence to make a judgement on students' attainment and progress. In lessons observed, students can apply the teachings from religion to the ethical and moral issues they study with growing insight. For example, students showed increasing skill in explaining how the writers of the Bible explain God as creator.
- Most students have positive attitudes to their work and the quality of the learning is satisfactory. However, occasionally in lessons there is a tendency for a few students to become passive, particularly if teachers are directing their learning too closely.

Quality of teaching in RE

The quality of teaching in RE is satisfactory

- Among the consistent features of lessons are high expectations and good relationships. Teachers plan carefully to ensure that activities match most students' needs. The variety of activities includes role play and structured discussions. Students' responses are recorded in poems, posters and extended pieces of writing.
- Teaching also makes use of good subject knowledge; however, teachers do not always make best use of probing questions to extend students' thinking and thereby deepen their knowledge and understanding. Other weaknesses in lessons include over-direction by the teacher and inconsistency in the use and accuracy of assessment.
- Marking is usually developmental and constructive in tone, but is not always helpful in promoting students' progress. At Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form great care is taken to help students understand and prepare for the requirements of the examinations. In both AS and GCSE lessons, students marked each other's work using set criteria and gave feedback to their peers. However, teachers did not reflect with them on what they had learnt and did not give any further feedback on how to improve. Therefore, the impact of this activity was limited.

Quality of the curriculum in RE

The quality of the curriculum in RE is satisfactory.

- The quality of the curriculum is good at Key Stage 4. The selection of topics and distribution of units in Key Stage 3 do not secure a balanced and progressive curriculum. Some units of work offer a good level of challenge while others are much less demanding. In addition, the links between topics are not made explicit enough. Satisfactory use is made of visitors to the classroom and fieldwork opportunities.
- Provision in the sixth form broadly meets requirements with the majority of students given the opportunity to explore issues related to beliefs and practices through a variety of cross-curricular opportunities. Students have opportunities to extend their interest in religion, philosophy, and ethics within the A-level course.
- The contribution of RE to the personal development of students is satisfactory. Most show an interest in religion and adopt an appropriate respect for the beliefs and practices of others. Students value opportunities for discussion and debate. However, the students at Key Stages 3 and 4 are less enthusiastic about the way in which they learn when finding out about religions because the activities lack challenge.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE

The effectiveness of leadership and management in RE is good.

- The school has undergone a period of significant change, including the creation of a hard federation between three schools. The RE leadership team has a clear sense of purpose and it is working well to increase the rate of improvement. Clear lines of accountability enable senior and middle leaders to ensure the smooth running of the department.
- Regular monitoring of standards and progress and the quality of teaching and learning leads to a broadly accurate evaluation of provision, which is the foundation for strategic planning. A well-focused improvement plan for the subject is in place with a set of clear and appropriate priorities targeted on improving provision and raising standards.
- The key priorities for raising standards and improving teaching are shared with members of the department. Members of the department have taken part in targeted training and coaching programmes.
- The arrangements for assessing students' progress are satisfactory. Appropriate use is made of the analysis of assessment data to evaluate students' progress. Less effective use is made of the information gained from assessments to plan increasingly challenging work. Also, judgements are not reliable or robust enough, particularly in Key Stage 3, because some of the tasks set do not allow students to attain the higher levels.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- securing the consistency and quality of the curriculum across the department in Key Stage 3 to better ensure progression into Key Stage 4
- structuring assessment tasks to cater for the whole range of abilities of the students.

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

Jacqueline Wordsworth
Her Majesty's Inspector