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Mr B Davies
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Dear Mr Davies

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 9 and 10 July 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 four lessons and parts of three lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE is good.

Achievement in RE

Achievement in RE is good.

- Students arrive at the school with standards in RE generally below the expectations of the locally agreed syllabus. While achievement overall is good, it is uneven across different aspects of the subject and across the key stages.
- Around two thirds of students are entered for the full course GCSE where they make good progress. Results have risen steadily over the past three years. The percentage gaining A* to C grades is now above the national average. However, the proportion of students attaining the higher A* and A grades, while also improving, is below average. Students with lower prior attainment are almost all entered for the short course GCSE. While these results are well below the national average this represents appropriate progress for this cohort of students. The current Year 11

students are on track to attain well with a further predicted rise in A* and A grades. Students taking the GCE Advanced level courses in the sixth form make satisfactory progress and attain grades broadly in line with their overall performance.

- Attainment at the end of Key Stage 3 is below the expectations of the agreed syllabus reflecting satisfactory progress. At Key Stage 3 students acquire a basic knowledge of a range of religions. However, their understanding of the nature, meaning and significance of religion is relatively superficial and fragmented. Their skills of enquiry are limited and the more able in particular are not challenged sufficiently.
- At Key Stage 4 students develop a good understanding of a range of philosophical, ethical and social issues. Some are able to apply religious perspectives to these issues with confidence and fluency. However, the majority tend to learn the technique of incorporating these perspectives into their writing rather than developing and applying them independently on the basis of a thorough understanding. While some students quickly acquire the skills of effective discursive writing, others are not always challenged sufficiently to identify the features of a good argument.
- The quality of learning is good at Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form. It is satisfactory at Key Stage 3. At its best RE makes a positive contribution to students' literacy skills and to their ability to engage on discussion and debate. The department has identified the need to improve students' independent skills of enquiry to help accelerate their performance.
- Most students enjoy RE and see its value although some are clear they are not always challenged sufficiently. Generally they find investigating issues more interesting than studying religions. Behaviour is generally good although, very occasionally, when the purpose and structure of the learning are unclear, students can lose concentration and become restless.

Quality of teaching in RE

The quality of teaching in RE is good overall.

- There is some unevenness in the quality of teaching. It is generally more effective at Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form.
- Lessons are generally well organised and orderly. Relationships with students are often very good. Teachers successfully provide a range of engaging and imaginative resources and tasks to help maintain interest, concentration and pace. Behaviour is usually managed effectively. Teachers have good subject knowledge which they deploy effectively to promote learning.
- In the best lessons teachers explain the purpose of the learning well and use questioning effectively to promote good learning. In these lessons the balance of oral and written work is good and the overall sequence of learning is managed effectively.
- Sometimes, where teaching is less effective, the wider purpose of the learning is not always evident and there is over-reliance on low-level

written tasks. Sometimes the structure of the learning and the connections between parts of the lesson are unclear.

- Generally, not enough attention is paid to engaging students actively in their learning and developing their skills of enquiry. On occasion, the focus on 'learning from' religion is not integrated effectively into the students' work and as a result the focus on enquiry is diminished.
- Assessment is generally good. Very close attention is paid to helping students understand what they need to do to succeed in the GCSE and GCE examinations. They are aware of their progress and how to improve their work. The quality of assessment is more uneven at Key Stage 3 but arrangements are being established to secure greater consistency.

Quality of the curriculum in RE

The quality of the curriculum in RE is good although improvement is required at Key Stage 3.

- A strength of the provision is the range of opportunities to accredit students' achievement at Key Stage 4. These meet the students' diverse needs well. The time allocated to the subject is satisfactory although it has become necessary to shorten the Key Stage 3 programme to allow sufficient time for students to complete their GCSE studies. In practice, teachers find it challenging to provide opportunities for more extended study of religion beyond the requirements of the GCSE examination.
- The number of students taking the GCE A level Philosophy and Ethics course is rising. However, little provision is made for core RE in the sixth form.
- The department has identified as a priority the need to improve the Key Stage 3 curriculum to extend the level of challenge, engage students better in the study of religion and religions, and provide a more effective basis for their GCSE work. A clear scheme of work is in place which broadly matches the requirements of the locally agreed syllabus. However, the level of challenge, coherence and progression is limited. The scope to differentiate the curriculum and assessment to better meet the varied needs of the students has not been exploited enough.
- RE makes a good contribution to social and moral development and a satisfactory contribution to spiritual and cultural development. Students have few opportunities to engage directly with representatives of local religious communities through the use of visits and visitors.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE

The effectiveness of leadership and management in RE is good.

- RE benefits from effective leadership and good support from the senior staff in the school. The subject is well managed and a range of documentation, procedures and practices has been put in place to secure greater consistency. It is recognised that there is still some way to go to

implement these systematically throughout the department in terms of teaching and learning, assessment and the curriculum.

- There is a clear commitment to improvement. A range of quality-assurance arrangements is in place. Good access to data supports the analysis of performance although there is scope to extend its use especially at Key Stage 3. Teaching is monitored routinely and plans are in place to extend the opportunities to scrutinise students' work and to moderate assessments more closely.
- In exploring ways of improving the Key Stage 3 curriculum and incorporating a stronger enquiry-based approach to learning, the department has found it difficult to access any support or guidance from the local authority and SACRE.
- Overall, the department has an accurate view of its effectiveness and a clear understanding of its priorities for improvement. This coupled with the strong subject leadership, specialist teaching team and positive resource allocation means the capacity for improvement is good.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- securing greater consistency in the quality of teaching and assessment
- revising the Key Stage 3 curriculum and assessments to incorporate:
 - a stronger emphasis on enquiry and opportunities for students to exercise more independence
 - more progression and coherence across the schemes of work
 - a clearer focus on exploring key religious beliefs and ideas about religion
- extending the challenge for the more able across Key Stages 3 and 4
- increasing opportunities for students to engage at first hand with religion through more use of visits and visitors.

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