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Better education and care

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Dear Mrs Black

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and Religious Education (RE)

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my joint visit with Barbara Wintersgill on 24-26 January to look at work in ICT and Religious Education.

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. All feedback letters will be published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half-term.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at ICT, the visit had a particular focus on assessment. In RE, the visit had a particular focus on the implementation of the recently published locally agreed syllabus.

The evidence used to inform the judgements made included: interviews with staff and pupils, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of pupils' work and observation of lessons.

The overall effectiveness of ICT was judged to be satisfactory. The overall effectiveness of RE was judged to be good.

Information and Communication Technology

Achievement and standards

Overall, achievement and standards are inadequate.

- Standards in ICT at Key Stage 4 are below average. Pupils make inadequate progress and underachieve. GCSE results in the short course were well below average in June 2006, the first full cohort to follow this qualification.
- The proportion of Year 9 pupils achieving National Curriculum Level 5 or higher is reported to be good and similar to that for the core subjects. However, evidence from lesson observations and interviews with pupils indicates that these results are inflated and do not accurately reflect the level of pupils' capability in ICT.
- Pupils demonstrate good presentation and graphics skills in ICT and in other subjects, for example English, but there is less evidence of high level work in more challenging aspects of ICT such as data analysis, control, animation and the use of multimedia.
- The development of pupils' ICT capability is inconsistent across the curriculum and relies on the expertise of their individual subject teachers.
- Pupils' personal development in ICT is good and they collaborate well when working in pairs or groups. They enjoy their ICT lessons and appreciate the good relationships between pupils and adults.

Quality of teaching and learning of ICT

The quality of teaching and learning is satisfactory

- The sole specialist teacher has a good knowledge of the subject, particularly the requirements of the vocational examinations. This is helping pupils to prepare more effectively for examinations in Key Stage 4.
- Good use is made of the support provided by the ICT technical staff and effective use is made of learning assistants in lessons.
- Teachers from across the school are generally positive about the use of ICT to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Where they are able to, they make effective use ICT to enable pupils to become more independent and creative.
- In ICT lessons, tasks are not always well matched to the needs of all pupils. Activities do not always extend the most able and learning materials are not well designed to enable pupils to work independently.
- There is too much emphasis on developing skills in the use of specific software and too little on improving ICT capability. More use should be made of interesting and pertinent examples to engage pupils of all ability and more account taken of their personal experiences of the use of ICT.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is satisfactory

- Effective links with the local authority ICT consultants and the appointment of a specialist teacher have helped the school to improve ICT provision for pupils, particularly in Key Stage 3.
- The department makes good use of the sample teaching units from the national strategy to ensure coverage of the programme of study, and there are plans to adapt and improve them further.
- Much thought is being given to the choice of appropriate courses for pupils and the introduction of the OCR National course in Year 9 is proving to be successful and engaging for pupils.
- The ICT curriculum at both key stages has improved but it remains insufficient for those pupils who do not take a full GCSE qualification in ICT in Key Stage 4. Although there are some good opportunities for pupils to work with ICT in a number of subjects, the school does not yet rigorously map this provision to ensure that all pupils cover the statutory programme of study.
- Extra-curricular provision is good. Pupils enjoy using computers to do coursework and research during breaks, lunch-times and after school, for example, in the creative media and magazine clubs. Pupils' access to the school's ICT materials from home is improving and this helps to develop their independent learning skills.
- The new E-Learning Centre is an excellent resource and is used extensively. It is well designed to enable a range of teaching styles to be adopted.
- ICT is not used effectively to support learning in all curriculum areas. The school has carried out an audit as a result of the ICT Across the Curriculum (ICTAC), initiative and is aware of the constraints in some departments with regard to regular and timely access to resources, particularly laptops for individual teachers.
- Where teachers do have access they are beginning to integrate ICT into their lessons to enable pupils to apply their ICT capability in new contexts as well as supporting pupils' progress with ICT.
- The school works hard to ensure pupils adopt safe practices when using technology but the acceptable use agreements need to be updated.

Leadership and management

Leadership and management of ICT are satisfactory.

- The school has suffered for some years with staffing problems in ICT. This has had a negative impact on all aspects of provision including infrastructure, curriculum and most importantly, achievement and standards.

- The senior leadership team has worked hard to improve ICT through the recruitment of a specialist head of subject and by making improvements to the quality and quantity of ICT resources.
- Staff welcome the access to electronic whiteboards, and some use these well to enliven lessons and improve pupils' understanding and achievement.
- The school's own evaluation recognises the helpful contribution of the local authority consultants to ICT and accurately identifies the areas which still need improving.
- There is now a greater emphasis on accurate assessment and standardisation procedures within the ICT department. These need to be designed more formally to provide a more accurate picture of standards and the progress of pupils in ICT.

Assessment of ICT and the readiness of the school for the onscreen Key Stage 3 ICT test

Assessment of ICT is satisfactory

- Systems for assessment at Key Stage 3 and marking and moderating work for examinations in Key Stage 4 are improving. Pupils are aware of their targets and of the progress they are making in ICT.
- Information about pupils' ICT capability needs to be shared more widely with staff across departments to ensure that pupils can exploit their knowledge, skills and understanding in all subjects.
- The school is experiencing technical difficulties in preparing pupils for the pilot of the on-screen test but aim to use it to enable pupils to transfer their skills and demonstrate their ICT capability.

Inclusion

- ICT is used well to support the learning of pupils with learning difficulties and disabilities. In lessons observed, these pupils made good progress as a result of the support provided by learning assistants. More able pupils do not always make the same progress as other pupils because tasks are not always demanding enough.
- All pupils benefit from opportunities to use the school's computers outside of lesson times. This ensures that none are disadvantaged when completing homework or research.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included to:

- continue to review the accuracy and rigor of assessment systems to improve pupils' attainment in ICT
- provide more opportunities for pupils to develop their independent learning skills and extend their ICT capability
- review the curriculum model and monitor pupils' ICT experiences more closely to ensure their statutory entitlement at Key Stage 4

- increase the access to ICT resources for staff to enable the schools' vision for ICT to be implemented effectively.

Religious Education

Achievement and standards

The achievement of the pupils in RE is good.

- GCSE results are excellent. Results compare very favourably with those attained in similar subject provision and are well above the national average. Given pupils' average ability on entry this would suggest outstanding achievement from Key Stages 2-4. Further analysis of results by the department would make the precise extent of pupils' progress clearer.
- No firm evidence was available to demonstrate the standards or achievement of pupils at Key Stage 3. On the basis of unit assessments all but 10% of pupils achieved level 5 or above and 26% achieved level 6 or above. However, these standards are far from evident in pupils' books and more detailed assessment evidence is not available.
- RE makes a good contribution to pupils' personal development.

Quality of teaching and learning

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

- In the lessons observed pupils made satisfactory progress. Teachers have a very good knowledge of the subject and the level of challenge is generally sufficient for all groups of pupils, although the tasks set do not always take account of pupils' target levels, especially those for the most able.
- Some of the teaching methods used are not particularly engaging and this limits pupils' enjoyment and their motivation to do well.
- Assessment systems in place are adequate for teachers to monitor pupils' progress but there was limited evidence of it being used to inform teaching in most lessons observed. Pupils know what to do to improve but it is not clear how they get the appropriate opportunities to work towards their target levels in lessons.

Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the curriculum for RE is good.

- Overall the subject is planned to interest and motivate pupils. The department has taken the original step, against the structure of the agreed syllabus, of teaching religions systematically in Years 7 and 8,

but can demonstrate clearly where aspects of the agreed syllabus are covered.
- The department uses a wide range of resources including video, ICT, posters, artefacts and visiting speakers.
- Planned teaching and learning strategies are very good and varied and planning shows a lot of imaginative and engaging activities, although these are not always applied in lessons.
- A weakness in planning at all levels is a lack of clarity in learning outcomes.

Leadership and Management

Leadership and management of RE are good.

- The current subject leader has only been in post for two weeks and the following comments reflect the evidence for subject leadership over recent years.
- There has been a highly successful focus on raising standards, particularly at Key Stage 4. The subject also contributes very well to the personal development of pupils.
- The subject has been held in high esteem by pupils and morale in the department is high.
- The outgoing head of department had drafted a self-evaluation, which shows a good grasp of the subject's performance.

Implementation of the agreed syllabus

- The department has a clear understanding of the main changes in the new agreed syllabus. Actions in place to implement the syllabus are reasonably comprehensive recognising its main priorities, although more formal attention could be given to the introductory programme of study for Key Stage 3. The process of implementation has been incorporated within a development plan. The department recognises the impact of the new syllabus, particularly the revised level descriptions, on pupil achievement and overall provision.

Inclusion

- Inclusion is good. Most groups of pupils make good progress in RE. The department successfully enters nearly all pupils for short course GCSE. The inclusion of all pupils is taken particularly seriously and the department has successfully addressed the under-achievement of boys.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- setting regular targets and monitoring work more carefully against them to ensure standards continue to rise

- completing, at Key Stage 3, the departmental handbook and revised schemes of work
- developing assessment, particularly at Key Stage 3; in particular the department should maintain evidence of levels awarded in marked assessment tasks
- setting work in lessons at Key Stage 3 which challenges pupils to meet their target level
- providing more engagement and enjoyment in lessons.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop ICT and RE in the school.

As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and, in the case of RE, SACRE and will be published on Ofsted's website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Cathy Morgan
Her Majesty's Inspector