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Ms Caroline Brooker
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Dear Ms Brooker

Ofsted Subject Inspection Programme – Music and Religious Education

Thank you for your assistance and hospitality, and that of your staff and pupils, during my visit and that of my colleague John Rudge, on 13 and 14 November 2006. At the end of the inspection we fed back our judgements and this letter is to confirm our findings.

The purpose of this inspection was to evaluate the provision of both music and RE in Key Stages 3 and 4 at your school. The visit provided much useful evidence for the next Ofsted reviews of music and RE and the wider evaluation of developments in these subjects. Your school will not be named in any publication without your permission and most evidence will be used at a general level, to identify trends and issues for development.

Music

Achievement and standards

Overall, achievement and standards are satisfactory.

- Standards in Key Stage 4 are broadly average. The four pupils that took GCSE in 2006 achieved well and did better in music than in the other subjects taken. Fourteen pupils are now studying music in Year 11 and they achieved well in the lesson observed and made good progress. They demonstrated good rhythmic control and some imaginative improvisatory skills while performing in the style of African drumming.

- Attainment in Key Stage 3 is broadly in line with national expectations and the department has done well to improve standards in music. In 2004 fewer than one in three pupils reached the expected standards. This is now around three out of four. In lessons, most pupils were able to play a simple tune on the keyboard and were beginning to understand how to structure a melody. However, the quality of singing was poor.
- Pupils' attitudes and behaviour are generally good, and lessons are usually characterised by purposeful work. However, attitudes deteriorated markedly during the time devoted to singing. A small number of pupils benefit from good opportunities to perform regularly in assemblies and they commented how much this had increased their self esteem. However, there was a lack of peer support in the Year 9 lesson when one pupil performed in front of the others. Although the pupils' views of music are improving, not all negative attitudes have yet been fully overcome.
- Pupils make good progress in their instrumental lessons and in the extra curricular activities. However, the impact of the music provision beyond the curriculum for all pupils remains limited. The involvement of Year 8 pupils is particularly disappointing, given their participation in the Wider Opportunities scheme while they were at primary school.

Quality of teaching and learning

The overall quality of teaching and learning is satisfactory.

- The quality of teaching and learning in Key Stage 4 is good. The lesson was well organised, had a clear focus and challenged pupils to succeed at their own level. Effective teacher interventions deepened understanding and extended the learning. The challenge to "make the ending less predictable" effectively prompted more developed and imaginative work from one group.
- The quality of teaching and learning in Key Stage 3 is satisfactory. Clear objectives are consistently set and expectations are clear. The teacher's calm authority in the classroom encourages good attitudes and a purposeful ethos for learning. Planning is carefully geared to build on previous learning and the use of graded assessment criteria makes this evident to pupils: pupils know they are getting better. However planning is not usually differentiated except by outcome, and some able pupils said they were sometimes 'bored' because they could quickly do what was asked. The teaching of singing was inadequate with no attempt to improve either the quality or accuracy of the pupils' performance.

Quality of the curriculum

The curriculum is satisfactory.

- There is an appropriate range of experiences in both the taught curriculum and in extra curricular activities, although the range of enrichment activities is limited by the short lunch break and by the need for many pupils to catch buses straight after the end of school. The Saturday morning music school provides valuable opportunities for some pupils as well as raising the profile of music in the community.

Leadership and management

Leadership and management of the subject are satisfactory.

- The subject is led by a committed and experienced head of department who has done much to improve the profile of the subject in the school and to counter its previously negative image. It is now a subject that is taken seriously and also enjoyed.
- A realistic self review of the department's work has enabled a sensible plan for further improvement to be drawn up.
- The senior management team provides good support and has a good understanding of the work of the music department through its regular programme of monitoring and support. Currently a junior partner in the school's specialist performing arts status, music is now poised to make a more positive contribution.

Overall effectiveness of the subject

The overall effectiveness of music is satisfactory with some good aspects particularly in Key Stage 4. However, the effectiveness of the department is severely limited by the accommodation for music which is inadequate. This needs urgent attention if the effectiveness of music is to be improved further.

Subject issues

- Assessment and the use of data are satisfactory. Pupils' progress is carefully tracked and assessments against clear criteria are regularly made. Links to National Curriculum levels make progression easy to track and set achievable targets for the pupils. However, very little data is passed on from primary schools about pupils' musical attainment and experience on entry.

- The school is making good use of partnerships with others to extend and enrich its music provision. These are partly achieved through the school's specialist status, but also through other school initiatives. Good links are made with the county music service and visits and visitors are making an increasingly valuable contribution. These now need to be planned to ensure a more cohesive programme is offered which links and enriches the curriculum in a meaningful way.

Inclusion

- The department is committed to inclusion, but currently, small numbers of pupils are involved in instrumental lessons and in the musical life of the school more generally. However, these numbers are set to increase as music is developed in the school. A good start has been made, and pupils are enthusiastic about the increasing range of opportunities to participate.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- improve the teaching of singing to ensure pupils sing with accuracy, enjoyment and musical expressiveness
- give urgent attention to the accommodation for music to ensure further success and improvement
- increase the numbers of pupils participating in musical activities outside of the classroom and continuing the study of music at Key Stage 4.

Religious Education

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards in RE are satisfactory.

- Standards achieved by pupils on entry to the school are below average in the core subjects, and particularly English. Pupils make satisfactory progress in RE during Key Stage 3, and reach standards by the end of year 9 which are broadly in line with expectations set out in the agreed syllabus. However, some do not show their full potential in their written work. In the GCSE short course, entered by all except a small minority, results are well below the national average, and below the pupils' overall attainment in all subjects, though some progress well and gain good results.
- RE supports pupils' spiritual and moral development through raising their awareness of, and encouraging respect for, beliefs and cultures different from their own. In lessons they are keen to learn, they behave well and they express themselves with confidence.

Quality of teaching and learning in RE

The quality of teaching and learning observed in RE was found to be good overall.

- Most pupils make good progress in lessons. This is because they are usually taught well; lessons are planned thoroughly and imaginatively; stimulating resources and purposeful activities contribute to their learning; and, they respond well to challenging tasks.
- The department has made good progress in developing an effective assessment regime with strategies to support assessment for learning, so that pupils have a good understanding of their own progress and work towards demanding targets. Their written work is monitored regularly and they usually receive supportive comments and guidance about the level at which they are working. Homework is used to good effect by encouraging research and creative thinking.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in RE is satisfactory.

- A well-planned curriculum supports pupils' learning. It meets the statutory requirements of the subject. Its approach is fully in line with the direction and ethos of the locally agreed syllabus, emphasising a coherent balance between the subject's attainment targets, and giving priority to the exploration of beliefs and values. Careful attention is given to extending pupils' more general skills, such as literacy. As a result, pupils enjoy their learning and participate actively in lessons.
- Pupils' overall progress is often inhibited by disruptions to their planned timetable, as reported at the time of the previous inspection. Whilst the time allocation for the subject is suitable, disruptions to the programme for individuals and groups often means that some of the time available is lost, with a consequent loss of continuity. Timetabled provision for the GCSE short course is also insufficient to meet the demands of the examination syllabus. These factors limit the overall progress of the pupils.

Leadership and management of RE

Leadership and management of the subject are good.

- The strengths of the department lie in its very effective self-evaluation, in the detailed attention given to overall policy and planning, and in the subject leader's awareness and implementation of new national and local initiatives in the subject.

- These strengths are constrained by the other demands placed upon the subject leader, the sole subject specialist, by his other responsibilities. These responsibilities limit the time he has available to monitor and support his colleagues. A diverse team of non-specialists teach the subject and more robust monitoring, linked to effective training, are needed to ensure the staffing arrangements do not impact negatively on the progress made by the pupils. These constraints jeopardise the potential for further development of the subject.

Subject issue

- In anticipation of the new agreed syllabus, the department was already well ahead with incorporating the level descriptors from the non-statutory national framework into its planning and assessment. The subject leader has attended in-service training on the implementation of the new syllabus and is in the process of setting up a subject baseline assessment programme with support from the local authority.

Inclusion

- All pupils receive supportive care, encouragement and guidance from their teachers, including more able pupils.

Overall Effectiveness

The overall effectiveness of RE was judged to be satisfactory.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- to ensure that pupils' timetabled entitlement in RE is safeguarded
- to ensure that the teaching of subject non-specialists is supported by a programme of monitoring, evaluation and professional development
- to continue to develop assessment for learning and ensure that good practice is disseminated throughout the department
- to consider the introduction of further accredited opportunities in RE at Key Stage 4, possibly in conjunction with the citizenship programme
- to match the current planned curriculum directly with the attainment targets of the agreed syllabus in preparation for the statutory reporting on attainment by levels in Key Stage 3.

I very much hope that these observations are useful as you continue to develop music and religious education in your school. A copy of this feedback will be sent to your local authority and a copy of the RE section to SACRE.

In 6-12 months after the inspection visit, we would like to gather information on the impact of this inspection on the improvements in this subject in your school. To this end you may be contacted by telephone or sent a questionnaire to complete. We appreciate your co-operation in this evaluation.

Yours sincerely

Tony Shield
Additional Inspector