

05 March 2007

Mr T Darbyshire
Headteacher
Cottingham High School
Harland Way
Cottingham
East Riding of Yorkshire
HU16 5PX

Dear Mr Darbyshire

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Religious Education

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 28 February and 1 March 2007 to look at work in religious education (RE).

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a particular focus on the implementation of the locally agreed syllabus.

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.

The evidence used to inform the judgements made included: interviews with senior staff, the head of subject, and pupils in years 9 and 11; scrutiny of relevant documentation; analysis of pupils' work; and observation of four lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Pupils' achievement in RE is good.

- Standards at Key Stage 4 are well above average with 73% of pupils gaining A*-C grades in the GCSE short course in 2006. This represents good achievement.

- Standards at Key Stage 3 are broadly average and pupils' achievement is satisfactory. It is constrained by two key factors. The curriculum does not promote with sufficient rigour increasing levels of challenge for pupils as they move through Key Stage 3. Additionally, tasks are not always closely enough matched to the learning needs of all pupils.
- 2006 saw the first small cohort of students complete and pass the A2 course in Religious Studies and Philosophy.
- RE makes a good contribution to pupils' personal development. In the main, pupils behave well in lessons and have positive attitudes to the subject. They collaborate well in pairs and groups, listen attentively to their teachers and to one another, and apply themselves promptly to tasks in hand. The pupils interviewed consider RE a significant contributor to their developing self-confidence, enabling them to formulate well-founded personal opinions and express these clearly. Pupils describe the subject as having an immediate and direct relevance to their lives, playing a useful part in preparing them for adult life. They can see where it has links to other aspects of the formal curriculum as well as to the world at large.

Quality of teaching and learning of RE

The quality of teaching and learning in RE is good.

- Lessons follow a three part format, with initial activities designed to help pupils' recall and make links with their prior learning. Pupils know what lessons are about because objectives are shared with them in terms they are able to grasp. The best lessons move at pace, use a variety of media to present materials and stimulate pupils' thinking, build from simpler to more complex ideas, and provide opportunities for pupils to develop and practise skills. There is a good balance of individual, paired and group work and suitable opportunities for pupils to develop and express their own views. The accurate use of technical terms is emphasised and teachers are adept at helping pupils to make links between the various aspects of their work in the subject.
- Where learning is less successful, activities are not firmly enough rooted in pupils' prior knowledge and understanding: neither are they sufficiently well matched to pupils' learning needs. Learning outcomes are not clearly identified and instructions lack precision. Pupils are not given sufficient time to gain the satisfaction of completing tasks.
- The school's specialism in media arts has extended the use of information and communication technology in the delivery of lessons, increasing the range of resources and stimuli employed in lessons. Pupils appreciate this and say it helps to make lessons more interesting. Successful instances of this were observed, such as the staged presentation of a GCSE model answer with striking prompts to remind pupils of the key elements required in their work.

- Overall, the quality of marking is good with some exemplary practice in the department. Comments are clear, encourage pupils by praising their successes, give useful pointers for improvement and often include short term targets for improvement.
- Recently, the department has adopted a more rigorous use of prior attainment data to set end of key stage and end of year targets for each pupil. Progress towards targets is tracked via performance in regular assessment tests and tasks. These are clearly presented so that pupils can see what is expected of them with regard to both attainment targets, in order to reach a given level. Since the last inspection the department has improved the accuracy with which pupils' work is levelled and this is now secure. The evaluation of performance in RE is helpfully supported by comparisons with pupils' performance in English and other humanities subjects.
- Pupils are encouraged to evaluate their own performance and set their own targets for improvement. These curriculum targets are clear and closely linked to examination requirements at Key Stage 4. However, practice is unfocused at Key Stage 3 where, in the main, targets relate to organisation and effort as distinct from learning in RE.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is satisfactory.

- There is an appropriate allocation of time for RE. The curriculum is supported by a detailed scheme of work at Key Stage 3 which ensures equality of provision across year groups. The Year 9 curriculum prepares pupils effectively for their GCSE studies. However, the demands of the curriculum do not increase sufficiently to enable pupils to achieve well across Key Stage 3.
- Links between a number of units of study at Key Stage 3 and topics in other subjects enable pupils to make helpful connections between various aspects of their learning. In the case of Citizenship, this is reinforced through several shared assessment activities.
- In response to the last inspection report, the school has improved the provision of RE for sixth form students who now complete a suitable unit of study within the PSHCE curriculum. Across the sixth form consortium, the uptake of the A level course in RE and Philosophy is increasing gradually.
- Although there are some opportunities for pupils' learning in RE to be enhanced through the contribution of visitors, no visits linked to the curriculum are arranged.

Leadership and management of RE

Leadership and management of the subject are good.

- Through an appropriate line management system, the head of department is held to account for performance in RE and supported in improving provision.
- Robust systems for monitoring and evaluating the quality of provision in the subject are in place. These operate at a series of levels and are founded on a suitable range of processes including lesson observations, scrutiny of pupils' work and the review of examination and test performance. The resulting accurate self- evaluation of the subject provides a firm basis for development planning which is closely linked to the whole school improvement planning.
- The department has worked effectively to address the issues raised in the last inspection report. A suitable assessment system at Key Stage 3 has been established and a course for sixth form students introduced.

Implementation of the Agreed Syllabus

While provision in RE meets the basic statutory requirements, the agreed syllabus has not been used directly as the basis for planning the curriculum at Key Stage 3. However, the department is using the agreed syllabus assessment scale successfully.

Inclusion

The school enters all pupils for the GCSE short course. The proportion gaining A* and A grades is well above average because more able pupils are given opportunities to develop and practice the skills required. At both Key Stages 3 and 4, suitable extension activities are provided for higher attaining pupils. However, provision for lower attaining pupils is less systematically planned and not always well tailored to the needs of individual pupils.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- increasing the levels of challenge at Key Stage 3 so that pupils can achieve well
- improving differentiation to better meet the learning needs of all pupils
- in setting curriculum targets with Key Stage 3 pupils, increasing the focus on knowledge, understanding and skills in RE.

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

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

Yours sincerely

Mrs J Austin
Her Majesty's Inspector