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Dear Mr Newey

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Religious Education

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and pupils, 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 staff and students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE was judged to be satisfactory with some good features.

Achievement and standards

Pupils' achievement in RE is satisfactory.

- Pupils' GCSE short course results in 2006 were well above the national average. Over 70% of pupils attained A*-C grades although the

percentage attaining the highest A* and A grades had fallen from the positive results of the previous year and was well below the national average. While, for many pupils, this represented good achievement at Key Stage 4, the progress made by some higher ability pupils in 2006 was only satisfactory. There was very little difference in the attainment of boys and girls, reflecting the wider picture in the school.

- While the achievement of many pupils, especially those of average ability, is often good, it is somewhat narrowed by the very tight focus on the examination requirements.
- Standards at Key Stage 3 are broadly in line with expectations set out in the agreed syllabus. Pupils make most progress in Year 9 where they follow the GCSE short course. The achievement in Years 7 and 8 is more limited because the curriculum and teaching do not always secure sufficient progression in learning.
- Overall, pupils do best in those aspects of RE which are linked to acquiring knowledge and understanding. They achieve less well in relation to the development and application of higher order learning skills in RE. Their ability to think flexibly and independently about religion is limited and they find it difficult to apply prior learning confidently. The contribution made by the subject to the development of pupils' wider learning skills and to the basic skills of oracy and literacy could be extended further.
- The progress of pupils with learning difficulties and more able pupils is sometimes inadequate because teaching does not always address their needs sufficiently.
- The personal development of pupils is good. Pupils' attitudes to learning and their behaviour are generally positive. This reflects the department's significant success in improving the profile of the subject in the school. Most pupils recognise the value of RE, show a good understanding of, and sensitivity towards, cultural diversity, and a lively interest in exploring a range of philosophical, ethical and social issues.

Quality of teaching and learning

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

- Much of the teaching is energetic and enthusiastic. Relationships with the pupils and the management of classes are usually good. Lessons are often carefully planned and paced. Pupils are clear about the purpose of their learning and review their progress at the end of lessons. Some good use is made of exposition, varied resources and engaging teaching strategies to stimulate pupils' interest. As a result pupils usually remain on task and make at least satisfactory progress. However, there is too much teacher dependency and insufficient opportunity for pupils to develop as independent learners.

- While some effective use is made of discussion and questioning, insufficient attention is paid to the development of oral skills and, as a result, pupils do not always have enough opportunity to rehearse their thinking before moving onto written tasks. This restricts the quality of some work. Transitions between different elements of learning are not always managed effectively.
- Many lessons are taught by the wide range of non-specialists and these arrangements are restricting the quality of learning for some classes.
- Work is not always well-matched to the varying needs of pupils. The most serious weakness is the failure, in some lessons, to address the needs of pupils with learning difficulties.
- Some very good progress has been made since the last inspection in improving the arrangements for marking, assessment and target-setting in RE. For example, some good use is being made of self-review and individual target-setting by pupils and as a result they are often articulate about their learning and the progress they are making. However, the use of levels in Key Stage 3 is often inaccurate and, as a result, pupils find it difficult to set appropriate targets. There is also some inconsistency in the use made of the self-assessment and target-setting arrangements.

Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in RE is good, particularly from Year 9 onwards.

- The provision for RE from Year 9 onwards is effective with all pupils pursuing short course GCSE and an intention to provide a full course option from the end of year 10.
- The school has successfully extended the provision for general RE in the sixth form in response to the last inspection report and is looking to provide opportunity for students to follow an accredited course in religious studies.
- The curriculum for Years 7 and 8 is carefully linked to the agreed syllabus and provides an adequate programme focused on developing pupils' understanding of range of religious traditions. However, the level of challenge and the pattern of progression over the two years are not well defined.
- The over-emphasis on thematic work limits pupils' ability to link features of a religion together in order to deepen their understanding of the interplay of belief and practice within each tradition. As a result, while pupils build up knowledge of different features of various religions, they do not extend their skills and depth of understanding sufficiently. There is some repetition of work within RE and between RE and other subjects.
- The arrangements for teaching RE in Year 7, with humanities teachers teaching all three subjects to the same classes of pupils, has great

potential. However, these arrangements need to be planned, supported, monitored and evaluated much more rigorously in order to ensure their value is maximised.

- The medium term plans do not incorporate enough emphasis on matching the work to the varying learning needs of pupils and there is limited reference to links across the curriculum. As a result the subject is not yet making a sufficiently structured contribution to the delivery of, for example, literacy and citizenship.
- There is a satisfactory range of enrichment activities to support learning in RE including use of visits. The field work to Northumbria is a great success but opportunities for direct contact with non-Christian religions are currently very limited.

Leadership and management

Leadership and management of RE are satisfactory but there are some matters which require urgent attention.

- The status and profile of the subject have continued to improve building on the positive progress made at the time of the last inspection. It is to the credit of the head of department and his colleagues that pupils take RE seriously and value the contribution it makes to their personal development. A major success has been the establishment of a clear scheme of work with detailed planning documentation for all year groups. The subject is now taking a lead in promoting some wider initiatives across humanities subjects.
- There is scope to improve the use made of some of the subject accommodation in order to ensure pupils experience a positive environment for learning. Teachers have very limited access to information and communication technology to support their teaching.
- A start has been made with department self-evaluation but, at present, the use made of data and monitoring to make judgements about achievement and provision is not sufficiently reliable or consistent. As a result, improvement planning and energies are not always focused effectively on the key priorities for improvement.
- The staffing for the subject involves use of a large number of non-specialist teachers and some split classes. The head of department provides good support for his colleagues but the impact of these arrangements is not monitored sufficiently.
- The department is committed to improvement and has had great success in establishing the reputation of the subject within the school. Attention now needs to be paid to some key aspects of day-to-day administration such as the maintenance of records, the use of pupil information, departmental documentation and moderating assessments.

Implementation of the agreed syllabus

The department has begun the process of reviewing the Key Stage 3 curriculum in line with the scheme of work recently published to support the 2005 agreed syllabus. While the staff have extended opportunities for students in the sixth form to explore matters related to religious, philosophical and ethical issues, they do not find the requirements of the agreed syllabus realistic. The levels of attainment in the agreed syllabus are built into the department's assessment arrangements, but these are not always being used reliably.

Inclusion

Some aspects of the department's work reflect a positive approach to inclusion. For example, the gap between the attainment of boys and girls at GCSE narrowed significantly in 2006. However, the provision to extend the more able and, in particular, the support provided for pupils with learning difficulties is not always adequate or well-planned.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- ensuring all pupils, including the more able but especially those with learning difficulties, are supported to make good progress and achieve well
- making sure the subject makes a more planned contribution to the development of pupils' oracy and literacy skills
- helping pupils develop higher order learning skills, for example, in investigating, analysing and evaluating religious belief and practice
- improving the reliability of assessment judgements at Key Stage 3 and making better use of data to inform the evaluation of achievement and provision in the subject
- reviewing the curriculum in Years 7 and 8 to ensure the pitch, coherence and progression in learning are more closely defined
- reviewing the impact of the Year 7 teaching arrangements to ensure their full potential is realised and monitoring the impact of the use of non-specialist teachers at Key Stage 4
- supporting the leadership of the department in addressing the specific gaps in the management of the subject.

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

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

Alan Brine
Her Majesty's Inspector