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08 June 2007

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Dear Mr Davies

Ofsted survey inspection programme – English and religious education (RE)

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit with Philip Jarrett HMI on 7 and 8 June 2007 to look at work in English and religious education (RE).

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of RE the visit had a particular focus on the subject's contribution to the promotion of community cohesion. The survey theme in English was provision for poetry.

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.

English

The overall effectiveness of English was judged to be outstanding.

Achievement and standards

Standards in English are below average. However, students' achievement is outstanding.

- Despite recent improvements, standards remain below average at the end of both key stages. However, results in English compare very well with other subjects.
- The achievement of students is excellent. Many students enter the school with low levels of literacy, or as early learners of English as an additional language. They make very good progress, especially at Key

Stage 4. This is confirmed both by contextual value added data and by evidence from lessons and discussions with students.

- Pupils from the different major ethnic groups in the school achieve equally well.
- The department has accurately identified some areas of concern regarding the attainment of more able students and boys. Early evidence suggests that action taken has been effective and that these groups are likely to perform even better in tests this year.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in English is outstanding.

- Very good teaching overall is confirmed by high levels of achievement and very positive responses to English by students.
- Students especially value the teachers' commitment and their support for individuals.
- Teaching observed was good overall. Strengths included good subject knowledge and enthusiasm. Lessons are lively, interactive and succeed in motivating students. Teachers use a variety of approaches and media leading to good pace to learning. Positive attitudes and behaviour in lessons are based on very good relationships and class management.
- In some of the observed lessons, teachers tried to use too many activities and this limited learning and reduced time for independent work.
- The best marking is very high quality, with teachers identifying areas for development and responding sensitively to students' work. Despite this, students generally do not talk confidently about their strengths and weaknesses in English. The department is currently introducing curricular targets for students but this has not yet had a significant impact on their understanding.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in English is good.

- The curriculum provided for students at Key Stage 4 is very good and leads to high levels of achievement.
- The school operates a differentiated approach to the curriculum at Key Stage 4, involving early entry and a range of courses, including English Literature, media studies and drama. An adult literacy course is also available for targeted students. This is very successful in meeting the needs of individual students.
- The school is currently reviewing its curriculum at Key Stage 3. At present, there is an innovative cross-curricular initiative in year 7, *Project 7*, within which English is taught. This programme has significant potential to motivate students, re-enforce literacy skills across subjects, and develop speaking and listening skills as well as independent learning. However, the school will need to ensure that staff are appropriately trained in all aspects of English and that texts

are not simply chosen to be a springboard for other work or to fit in with an identified theme.

- In Years 7-8, the English curriculum is flexibly managed to give teachers some elements of choice and includes good use of ICT. This also leads to very good progress from students. At present, there is no overall written curriculum plan for English that defines entitlement at Key Stage 3 or addresses issues of progression explicitly.

Leadership and management

Leadership and management in English are outstanding.

- The department is based around a core of experienced and effective classroom practitioners with real passion for the subject. Departmental leadership provides a clear sense of direction guided by strong views about the nature of English.
- Teachers, including the teaching assistant assigned to the department, work closely together and there is a high degree of consistency across the department. The team is innovative, reflective and open to change.
- The department has high expectations. Despite evidence of very good progress by students, there is no complacency and the department has identified areas in which it could be more effective.
- Monitoring and evaluation are thorough, leading to an accurate view of strengths, weaknesses and priorities. Current work on raising the numbers of level 6+ students in Year 9 is already proving to be successful.

Provision for poetry

Provision for poetry is good.

- Teachers are mostly very enthusiastic about poetry and teach it well, especially at GCSE.
- The department has a coherent and carefully considered approach to poetry based on the use of a range of approaches including visual and aural stimuli, and the importance of engaging students' emotional response.
- As a result of effective teaching, most students are positive about poetry and the more able in particular get a lot out of their GCSE work on poetry.
- Poetry is built into the Key Stage 3 course, including the Project 7 programme. However, it is not a significant element of the course. Students show a limited knowledge of poetry in Key Stage 3 and there is too little evidence of work on poetry in students' books.

Inclusion

Inclusion in English is outstanding.

- Achievement in English is very good overall and students of Indian and Pakistani heritage perform especially well.
- The curriculum is well managed to meet the needs of all students, especially at Key Stage 4, and the department is effective in re-engaging potentially disaffected students.
- The school operates a very good series of intervention programmes for students across all years. These are significant initiatives involving large numbers of students that make good use of assessment data and have a positive impact on learning. The library provides additional support through a popular weekly reading club.
- Relationships in lessons are very good and enable all students to contribute fully. Teachers provide good support to students needing extra help.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- improving students' understanding of the next steps in their learning in English
- reviewing the role and impact of poetry in the Key Stage 3 programme.

Religious Education

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

Achievement and standards

While overall students' achievement in RE is satisfactory, the contribution of the subject to their wider personal development is good.

- Recent results on both the full and short GCSE courses are broadly in line or slightly above the national average and this represents good achievement by the students. The full course results in 2006 were particularly pleasing with around three-quarters of students entered gaining an A*-C grade.
- The work of students currently following the GCSE course is also of good quality and many use their good literacy skills effectively to write cogent and well-structured extended pieces of work. The progress they are making is sometimes limited by the narrowness of some of the teaching.
- Work on the full course is sometimes too dominated by the collection of data about religion at the expense of understanding and evaluating its significance. This is particularly evident in some of the GCSE course work students produce. Elsewhere, however, where students engage with more challenging work on issues requiring debate and argument, they produce work of a higher standard. However, there is scope to develop the skills of reasoned philosophical and ethical argument earlier. Gaps in the specialist staffing will need to be addressed quickly to ensure standards at Key Stage 4 are sustained.
- The progress of students across Key Stage 3 is very uneven. The figures for 2006 indicate that just over 50% of students were attaining level 5 and above in RE. However, the school recognises that the key

stage assessment arrangements in the subject are not reliable enough to base a secure judgement about students' overall achievement. The inspection confirmed that this is the case.

- Currently, the provision for RE in Year 7 means progress is inadequate in that year group. Work of students in Year 8 and 9 is often well-below the expectations of the agreed syllabus. Because too many of the tasks lack challenge and do not enable students to deploy their higher level learning and literacy skills, their progress is inadequate.
- Pupils' personal development in the context of RE is good. They generally have positive attitudes towards the subject and in many cases demonstrate a mature approach towards their learning. They exercise the skills of collaboration effectively, although the opportunities for genuine independent learning are less evident. A particular strength is the way the subject provides a context within which students express and develop attitudes of respect towards the views and beliefs of others. The contribution of the subject to students' spiritual development is constrained because students have limited opportunities to engage with material which is personal, evocative and stimulating.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in RE is satisfactory.

- Some of the teaching in RE is good, particularly at Key Stage 4. Where teachers challenge students and require them to think for themselves and work effectively with others, learning is good. Behaviour in lessons is usually well managed and relationships with students are often good. In the best lessons students show genuine curiosity about religious and ethical issues and are keen to contribute to their learning. There are good examples of effective use of whiteboard technology and active learning strategies to stimulate students' interest.
- Gaps in the subject expertise of non-specialist teachers sometimes have a negative impact on learning. In some cases students' misconceptions are not addressed appropriately; elsewhere tasks are not challenging enough and questioning does not extend learning. The management of learning is sometimes inadequate and, as a result, students make slow progress in lessons.
- RE teaching often makes a planned positive contribution to the development of pupils' wider learning skills, however the interplay of these with the learning objectives of the subject is not always effective.
- Work is marked regularly. In some Key Stage 4 classes, students receive helpful feedback on how to improve and some effective and extended use is made of peer assessment. The schools' wider marking policy is implemented appropriately and is well-understood by students. Some use is being made of levels in marking work at Key Stage 3 but, at present assessment tasks are not differentiated or structured well enough to ensure students can demonstrate their skills and understanding appropriately.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in RE is inadequate at Key Stage 3 but good at Key Stage 4.

- The provision of opportunities for students to follow either a full or short course in RE is a strength of the provision. These arrangements are very flexible with some students starting the course early and others being considered for entry at certificate of achievement level. The current arrangements whereby students complete the short course in year 10 and move to a further short course in citizenship provides valuable continuity between the two subjects.
- The decision to allow students to select a religion of their choice as the basis for their full course GCSE work is positive although this arrangement can create problems with the management and pace of learning in some lessons.
- The current provision for RE at Key Stage 3 is a serious cause for concern. At present there is no clear provision for the subject in Year 7. The overall schemes of work for the key stage are not securing clear coherence in students' learning. Work in the early part of Year 9 is particularly lacking in challenge and this is exposed when students start the final unit on moral issues. The current planning to review the overall subject provision for 2007/08 will require considerable further development to ensure there is continuity and progression in learning in the subject.
- Too much work at Key Stage 3 is not sustained or developed sufficiently; there is too much jumping around from topic to topic within each unit and students do not have a clear enough overview of the direction and purpose of their learning. This is a key factor leading to low level work.
- There is insufficient understanding about the nature of, and relationship between, the two attainment targets in the agreed syllabus and how they can be used effectively to structure planning and assessment.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of RE are satisfactory.

- The subject currently has no subject specialist for RE. However, the subject benefits from its position within a humanities faculty which places great emphasis on mutual support and collaboration. The head of humanities, who provides good leadership of the faculty, is holding a watching brief for the subject. While the subject has yet to produce a formal self-evaluation document, many of the key priorities for its improvement have been identified. The arrangements for the wider monitoring of the work in the subject are well-established.
- There is significant concern about the current capacity within the subject to undertake the very skilful and creative planning which will be needed to match the expectations of the locally agreed syllabus to the imaginative curriculum initiatives the school is introducing at Key Stage 3.

- GCSE results are analysed well and great care is taken to identify under-achievement and target individuals or groups who need to improve. It will be important to ensure the analysis of data explores any impact of religious background on student performance in the subject.

The contribution of RE to the promotion of community cohesion

- The subject makes a positive contribution to community cohesion both through much of the content of the curriculum and through the wider ethos of learning in RE lessons where issues of diversity are handled appropriately and attitudes of respect are fostered skilfully.
- The links between the subject and other whole school initiatives are also very positive with students taking a lead in sharing and celebrating their faith. This, along with other developments within the school, has had a significant impact in securing confidence within the local religious communities that their faiths will be handled with respect and sensitivity.
- The use of visits and visitors to enrich learning in RE is limited and more links could be made with local Christian communities to ensure students develop a better understanding of that tradition.

Inclusion

- Teaching in RE generally seeks to ensure all students are included in the learning. In some cases more active strategies could be deployed to secure the involvement of all in oral work and discussion activities.
- Generally, the more able are not challenged enough. On occasions there is insufficient provision made in lessons for students with learning difficulties and students with English as an additional language are not supported effectively.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- ensuring specialist leadership and teaching of RE is secured within the humanities faculty as quickly as possible
- ensuring that the curriculum at Key Stage 3 is revised and improved in order make sure the subject can play an effective role within the wider curriculum initiatives of the school
- improving teaching and assessment in RE to ensure all students are challenged and extended by their learning.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop English 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, to SACRE. It 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