

Alexandra House
33 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

T 08456 404045
F 020 7421 6855
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk



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Mr Barry Cooper
Headteacher
Nether Stowe High School
St Chad's Road
Lichfield
Staffordshire
WS13 7NB

Dear Mr Cooper

Ofsted 2007-08 survey inspection programme: mathematics and religious education

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit with my colleague Jacqueline Wordsworth HMI on 21 and 22 May 2007 to look at work in mathematics and 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 students' enjoyment and understanding of mathematics and the contribution of RE to the promotion of community cohesion

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. This letter will be posted on the Ofsted website.

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 seven lessons in mathematics and six lessons in religious education.

Mathematics

The overall effectiveness of the subject, mathematics, was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Achievement is good. Standards are above average at the end of Key Stage 3 and broadly average at GCSE and A level.

- Standards have improved rapidly over the last three years, having been too low at the time the school was placed into special measures in 2004. The most recent results from the school's tracking systems show standards are average or just above at all levels throughout the school.

- Students are set challenging targets and they know the level at which they are working and how to improve. However tracking and analysis concentrate on the number of students reaching the various benchmarks and not on measures which include the contributions of all students.
- Students are supported for examination preparation well by the school. The department's philosophy of teaching understanding of mathematics means that students have a better knowledge of key elements of the work and are able to recall and use this when needed.
- Students say they enjoy mathematics and particularly lessons where teaching engages them in problem solving or the work is not over reliant on the use of text books. They also say they enjoy the variety of 'games' which they feel helps them learn.
- Students behaviour is good in lessons because they are engaged in their learning. They also feel a sense of ownership of the work of the department through their input into departmental reviews.
- All students, but particularly those in the sixth form, thought they were very well supported by staff who were always willing to help.
- Teaching often effectively supports students' future economic wellbeing, particularly personal finance, as it uses real-life problems to enhance work in lessons, for example comparing prices of an item from different countries, including different currency exchange rates.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning is good.

- The quality of teaching and learning has improved significantly over the last three years, benefiting especially from a more settled and permanent staff.
- Lessons are thoughtfully planned to engage students and to ensure they generally make good, or better, progress.
- Lessons have a strong emphasis on mental work and students respond well to teachers' good use of open questions. Questioning is used well to assess the work of students and in some lessons responses are then used very effectively as teaching points.
- Marking is good in some sets but in others it is not used well to monitor the work of students or to advise on how to improve.
- Teachers have high expectations of students and relationships within classes are good.
- Teachers meet regularly to discuss and share good teaching activities and extend their repertoire of effective ways of introducing topics and enhancing students' understanding.

Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is good.

- The schemes of work give a good overview of the work to be covered and support for teaching and learning. Sharing of good practice and teaching ideas

help less confident teachers gain confidence in delivering more interesting and challenging lessons.

- Students have many opportunities for 'using and applying mathematics' in lessons. They respond very well to the challenge of generalising their work and are encouraged to give reasons for their conclusions and to communicate using correct mathematical language. However, elements of 'using and applying' are not always identified within the planning and tracked.
- Staff make good use of the whiteboards within classrooms but only limited use is made of information and communication technology to enhance learning. However this is rightly identified by the department in its self evaluation as an area to extend.
- Teaching assistants are used well to support students in lessons, particularly lower attaining students or those with learning difficulties.

Leadership and management

Leadership and management are good.

- The strong drive from the very effective subject leader, assisted by the senior managers, has been instrumental in greatly improving the quality of the provision and raising standards in mathematics. Progress in mathematics over the last three years has been excellent.
- Management has been very strong, and has ensured a coherent and strong team work well within mathematics. The department has a strong collegiate identity; staff share good practice well.
- The subject leader has worked well to guide colleagues so that all have a clear understanding of what is needed and how to improve further. The department has an accurate self evaluation.
- Leadership has been good but, capitalising on stable staffing, the subject leader now needs to concentrate more on the strategic direction of the department and to delegate some management responsibilities to other staff.

Subject issue: students' enjoyment and understanding of mathematics

Students generally enjoy mathematics. Sixth-form students are particularly ebullient about the support they receive and the enjoyment they have studying mathematics. This is reflected by the increasing numbers opting for A-level courses.

The department has a clear philosophy of ensuring teaching enhances students' understanding and lessons develop their investigative and reasoning skills. Students commented that mathematics is a completely different subject to that which they experienced a few years ago. They find lessons to be generally relevant and interesting; they also say that activities often involve less 'book work' and more practical work. Students also enjoy a variety of 'games' which they feel really help them learn.

Inclusion

Inclusion is good.

Planning ensures the work is matched to students' abilities. Targeted support by teaching assistants helps students in lessons and enables them to work alongside their peers. The school has identified appropriate courses to meet the needs of students and is investigating the possibility of extending the courses available in Key Stage 4.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- improving the overall quality of marking so that it consistently supports students by advising them how to improve
- identifying elements of 'using and applying mathematics' in planning so as to better develop and track the progression of these skills
- extending the management role within the department to ensure greater strategic direction and leadership.

Religious Education

The overall effectiveness of RE was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Students' achievement in RE is good.

- Standards at the end of Key Stage 3 are slightly above average and students achieve well. Students develop a good understanding of the beliefs and practices of two major faiths and are developing their appreciation of the impact that religion has on people's way of life. Students' ability to handle philosophical and ethical issues is more limited.
- Although GCSE results at the end of Key Stage 4 are below the national average, the progress made by students is good.
- In lessons, students make good progress in their ability to explain the relevance of religious beliefs and practices in their cultural and social contexts. Students' ability to explain why the various beliefs and practices are important to a particular faith group is good. In particular, they demonstrate a good understanding of some of the contemporary challenges to religious belief. They use a good range of evidence and examples to fully justify their own ideas and provide a detailed evaluation of the perspective of others.
- While recent A-level results have indicated students' achievement is satisfactory, the current students are making good progress. Students are able to distinguish between opinions, viewpoints and beliefs in connection with various issues of conviction and faith. They use a wide range of religious and philosophical vocabulary. Students evaluate critically the various interpretations of religion with careful reference to historical, ethical and philosophical ideas. Assessment data suggests that students are on track to meet their predicted grades.

- Most students have positive attitudes towards their learning in RE with most students valuing the opportunity to explore religious and cultural diversity. Some students are very enthusiastic and are, for example, keen to study the subject at A-Level.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in RE is good.

- Teachers use their subject knowledge to good effect to plan interesting and sometimes challenging lessons that are well organised and include well-conceived assessment opportunities.
- Teachers' expectations are mostly high, with the work pitched at the right level and building on what the students know and can do. In these cases, teachers know what they want the students to learn and make it clear to them.
- Students in Key Stage 4 are actively involved in assessing their own work and are given very clear advice on how it can be improved. They demonstrate a good understanding of how could they improve the quality of their answers in order to attain at the highest level. As a result, students are motivated, try hard, and make good progress in developing the skills needed to attain their predicted grades.
- Teachers have good relationships with students creating an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect. Occasionally, teaching strategies do not always ensure that all students are fully engaged, resulting in some challenging behaviour in Years 7 and 8.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of curriculum in RE is good.

- The overall curriculum for RE meets the requirements of the agreed syllabus. There is good provision for all students in Key Stage 4 to study an accredited course. Students engage with moral, social and global issues from a variety of standpoints.
- The post-16 provision meets statutory requirements. Students have the opportunity to study a course on the Philosophy of Religion and Ethics to A-Level. Those students not taking an accredited course have RE as part of a key skills element of sixth form study.
- Good use is made of levels to assess students' work. Teachers are less adept in using the level descriptors to plan work to ensure that there is challenge and progression across the units of study and across the Key Stage 3.
- There are too few opportunities to enrich students' learning through the use of visits and visitors from a diversity of religious traditions.

Leadership and management

Leadership and management of RE are good.

- The subject leader, with the support of the humanities faculty, has ensured that RE is well regarded in the school. Most students are positive about the subject and its contribution to their personal development.
- The department has three specialist teachers and is very well organised and resourced. The team make effective use of data to analyse student performance and target under-achievement.
- The arrangements for monitoring the quality of the provision are effective with the subject having the benefit of an in-depth review every two years.
- The subject attracts increasing numbers studying the subject to A-Level.
- A well-planned improvement plan shows key milestones and measurable success criteria clearly linked to improving teaching and learning and raising attainment.

The contribution of RE to the promotion of community cohesion

RE contributes well to the promotion of community cohesion. It provides opportunities to promote common values and builds students' awareness of cultural and ethnic diversity around them. There is scope to extend the way in which students have the opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of diversity within their community through contact with a wider range of religious and faith groups.

Inclusion

The ethos for learning within the subject encourages inclusion and successfully creates a climate in which students seek to succeed in class. Teachers lesson planning is generally mindful of the needs of the full range of abilities.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- make more effective use of the level descriptors to plan work at Key Stage 3 that builds upon students' prior knowledge and skills
- increase the opportunities for students to make more use of field work through visits to, and visitors from, a variety of faith groups
- vary the use of teaching styles to cater for the different learning styles of the students.

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

Michael Smith
Her Majesty's Inspector