

Alexandra House  
33 Kingsway

T 08456 404045  
F 0800 7122 1000



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Mr E Wilkes  
Headteacher  
Madeley High School  
Newcastle Road  
Madeley  
Crewe  
CW3 9JJ

Dear Mr Wilkes

### Ofsted survey inspection programme – Religious Education

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 23 and 24 May 2007 to look at work in 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 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 students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of five lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE was judged to be inadequate although the school has made an additional staffing appointment for September 2007 with the intention of addressing the problems of non-specialist staffing which are currently impacting significantly on the subject.

### Achievement and standards

The achievement of students in RE is inadequate and the standards they attain are just below average.

- GCSE results in recent years have been well above average representing very good achievement for the small cohort of students entered. For the majority of students at Key Stage 4 achievement was inadequate because curriculum provision was limited. The provision now meets statutory requirements and all students in Year 10 take the

short course GCSE. However, many are making only limited progress and recent test results indicate that overall achievement is inadequate.

- Key Stage 3 results in 2006 indicated students were performing broadly in line with other subjects although few were reaching the highest levels, indicating some underachievement by the most able. Less able students, were achieving well. However, the assessment arrangements are not providing reliable judgements of students' performance across the whole range of areas of attainment in the subject.
- Currently, the achievement of students at Key Stage 3 is very uneven. They make good progress at the outset of Year 7 quickly building on their prior learning in primary school. Similarly some of the work towards the end of Year 9 challenges students and they produce some good extended argumentative writing. Overall however, too many of the tasks across the key stage do not extend learning sufficiently and, as a result, the students' skills in investigating, analysing and interpreting religion do not progress quickly enough. The tendency to separate tasks related to 'learning from religion' from the study of religion itself compounds the problem of under-achievement. Most of the students' independent written work does not advance their learning about religion.
- The personal development of students in the context of RE is satisfactory. Some students take the subject very seriously and value the opportunity to explore issues and develop their understanding of diversity. This is particularly reflected in those students who, in recent years, have undertaken additional independent study to complete a full GCSE course. However, in some lessons, particularly in Key Stage 4, there are less positive attitudes towards the subject combined with some immature behaviour.

## Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in RE is inadequate.

- Where lessons are taught by specialists or semi-specialists they are often of at least satisfactory quality. In the best lessons, activities are engaging and encourage independent and collaborative learning which challenge all students effectively. However, the necessity to produce very tightly structured lesson plans to support non-specialists has contributed to a tendency to use narrow and over-directed patterns of teaching. As a result, much of the learning lacks challenge with over-reliance on copying or clozed procedure tasks. In some lessons the structure of the learning is weak and students do consolidate or apply their learning effectively. In most lessons, learning is not matched well enough to the range of abilities within the class.
- The currently pattern of staffing necessitates the use of a wide range of non-specialist teachers. This is having a detrimental impact on the overall quality of learning. Uncertainties about subject knowledge mean some teachers do not provide students with a clear enough understanding of the purpose and direction of their learning, and, in some cases, lessons lose focus on any subject-related objectives.
- RE work is marked regularly and some use is made of levelling in assessment. However most students do not understand the notion of

levelling in RE or how to improve their work. This is particularly the case in the Year 10 GCSE classes.

## Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in RE is satisfactory.

- Good progress has been made in the past year to ensure that the curriculum now meets the statutory requirements of the locally agreed syllabus. The schemes of work for Key Stage 3 are very carefully mapped against the syllabus to ensure coverage of the requirements. Provision of overview sheets for each unit of work is helpful although the learning outcomes for each are not properly differentiated. Unfortunately the need to provide highly prescribed plans for every lesson means much of the flexibility and imagination in the overview plans is often lost.
- The documented Key Stage 3 curriculum has a clear structure; however this is not embedded in practice. The use of levels in the overarching planning is not being transferred consistently to learning in the classroom. Crucially, work on the four main areas of attainment is not being integrated effectively and this is a factor which limits the challenge in students' learning.
- While there is now good provision at Key Stage 4, the progress of the students is inhibited because they are not transferring and reinforcing the overarching skills and understanding about philosophical, religious and moral argument into their thinking about specific issues.

## Leadership and management

The leadership and management of RE are satisfactory.

- Despite the shortcomings noted above, the overall leadership of the subject is satisfactory and improving. The senior leadership team has taken active steps to support the subject by, for example, securing provision at Key Stage 4 and making an additional staffing appointment for September 2007. There is recognition that the subject leader working as the sole member of the department has contributed to shortcomings in the current situation.
- The Head of RE is hardworking and very committed. She has worked tirelessly to support her non-specialist colleagues and, in recent years, to provide additional teaching for students keen to gain a qualification in the subject.
- She has made good use of the support within the local authority and this has, for example, helped her produce a detailed and useful self evaluation document which is very frank about the aids and barriers to success in the current provision. There is scope to use the available data to analyse patterns of achievement more rigorously. Judgements about teaching and the curriculum could be more evaluative and based on closer monitoring of the provision.
- In addition to the issues about the use of non-specialist staffing, developments in the subject are constrained by limited access to

information technology in the otherwise attractive and suitable main subject teaching room.

## The contribution of RE to the promotion of community cohesion

RE makes a positive if modest contribution to the school's clear commitment to the promotion of community cohesion. Issues affecting the local, national and global community have high profile in the RE curriculum particularly at Key Stage 4. There are occasional opportunities to focus more directly on issues about religion in the contemporary world such as islamophobia. Support for charities is included within the scope of the department's work. Students are particularly positive about the impact the visit of a mobile exhibition about refugees made on their thinking.

The opportunities for students to engage directly with representatives of different local religious and cultural communities are limited and there is scope to extend the way the curriculum for RE includes topics related to the role and impact of religion in the modern world.

## Inclusion

The subject is clearly committed to inclusion. It is working to investigate and address the underachievement of boys and some effective use is made of teaching assistants in lessons. Students with learning difficulties achieve well. However, the limited challenge of much of the learning means the more able are not extended enough. More active teaching is required in some lessons to ensure all students, and particularly boys, participate more fully in the learning.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- using the context of the staffing changes in September to resolve the negative impact of non-specialist teaching in the subject
- improving the management of students' learning by increasing the level of challenge; incorporating more opportunities of independent and collaborative learning; and, ensuring learning is consolidated more effectively
- providing all students, but particularly those in GCSE classes, with a clearer understanding of how to improve their work
- reviewing the pattern of writing in the subject to eliminate low level tasks and incorporate more independent work
- reviewing the current curriculum at Key Stage 3 to ensure it provides effective continuity and differentiation of students' learning and ensuring tasks integrate the areas of attainment in the agreed syllabus more effectively
- extending access to ICT in the RE teaching accommodation
- developing the use made of data about student performance to analyse patterns of achievement by different groups and individuals
- extending the use made of visits and visitors to allow students to engage directly with representatives from a diversity of cultures and religions.

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

Alan Brine  
Her Majesty's Inspector