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Dear Mr Hilton

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Religious Education

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit with Andrew Watters HMI on 16 and 17 October 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 and pupils, a scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of pupils' work and observation of nine lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Pupils' achievement in RE is good.

- Standards across the school are above those outlined in the Staffordshire agreed syllabus. The attainment of the students on entry is below average and they make good progress throughout the school.
- Results for the small number of students who take RE as an A Level option indicate attainment in line the national average.

- GCSE results in both the short and full GCSE course have been above average in recent years. However results dipped to slightly in 2007. The school has taken steps to analyse the reasons behind this and have successfully addressed the factors which had an impact on the results.
- Current assessment data indicates that most students are on track to meet their target grades. Some of the assessed work produced by students taking the GCSE full and short course is of high quality and demonstrates good achievement. Of particular note was a task requiring students to explain the place of marriage in three religions. They were able to explain the significance of marriage in the three traditions and make increasingly subtle and complex links between the religions and their own ideas of marriage.
- Standards and achievement in Key Stage 3 are good. The proportion of students achieving level 5 in RE in 2007 was above average. The department has set itself ambitious targets for Year 9 performance with current assessment data indicating that standards should continue to rise.
- Achievement in Years 7 and 8 although good is uneven. Students are able to explore important contemporary religious and ethical issues such as living in a community, what makes a good leader and dealing with conflict, but are more limited in their ability to investigate and interpret major religious traditions.
- Students show positive attitudes to the subject. They find RE interesting; however some students reported that they sometimes find the work too easy. This view is confirmed in the work seen in books and in some lessons. Students, especially the most able, are sometimes not being given challenging enough tasks to complete.
- The contribution of RE in supporting students' personal development is generally good. Students' understanding of diversity in society is satisfactory but there is scope for further development.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in RE is good.

- Teachers have very good subject knowledge. Relationships in all classes are good and students behave well.
- All lessons seen had learning objectives, although these varied in their precision, sometimes resulting in a lack of clarity in direction and purpose of the learning.
- There are rigorous and very effective mechanisms in place to assess students' progress. Worked is marked regularly and guidance given on how to improve. Less emphasis is placed however, on developing students' understanding of levels and on using the information gained from assessments to plan subsequent work. In particular, planning for students of different abilities are not always as sharp as it could be, which results in some students being given work to complete which is too easy.

Quality of curriculum

The curriculum in RE is satisfactory.

- The provision of a range of accredited courses in Key Stage 4 and the sixth form are notable strengths. They contribute well to the students' enjoyment of the subject because themes studied are well linked to topical issues. The provision of such courses has given rise to the subject being held in high regard within the school.
- The curriculum in Years 7 and 8 meets the requirements of the agreed syllabus. The schemes of work are mapped against the syllabus to ensure coverage of the requirements. Work on the four main areas of attainment is integrated satisfactorily. However, there is currently insufficient use of levels as outlined in the agreed syllabus to ensure progression and challenge in students' learning. Consequently some units of work do not place sufficient demands on students.
- A very useful website allows students and parents to access all units, schemes of work, assessment tasks and homework. The provision of a well attended, Saturday morning workshop also allows students to receive specialist support in their studies. However, there are too few opportunities for enrichment activities in terms of visits and visitors.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of RE are good.

- The subject leader has good subject knowledge and is committed to the continued improvement in standards. A clear action plan sets out measurable targets related to students' achievement.
- There is a systematic monitoring of teaching and learning through the analysis of students' work and observations of lessons. Planning however is not sufficiently scrutinised to ensure that sufficient challenge is built into each lesson.
- The department is staffed by well qualified subject specialists.

Community Cohesion

RE makes a useful 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 in Year 9 and Key Stage 4. The opportunities for students to engage directly with representatives of different local religious and cultural communities are limited.

Inclusion

Provision in RE reflects a positive approach to inclusion. Progress of students with learning difficulties or those with additional needs is often good. Data is well used to evaluate the performance of different groups. Any student at risk of underachieving is identified and receives targeted support either through the provision of a learning mentor or attendance at the Saturday morning

workshop. However, in teachers' planning, insufficient account is taken of the needs of the most able.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- further refining the curriculum in Years 7 and 8 to secure an explicit match with the levels outlined in the agreed syllabus and to provide greater challenge for the most able
- ensuring that lessons are more tightly focused by making it clear what students are going to learn with clear guidelines about how their success will be measured.

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

Jacqueline K Wordsworth
Her Majesty's Inspector