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10 October 2007

Mr Paul Salter
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Dear Mr Salter

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Religious Education

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 3 and 4 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, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of pupils' work and observation of four lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE was judged to be inadequate.

Achievement and standards

Standards in RE are below average and achievement in RE is inadequate.

- The standards that pupils attain are not high enough when set against their capability and starting points. GCSE results compare unfavourably with other subjects and in 2007 only 8% of pupils gained A*-C grades compared with 46.7% for the school overall.
- Most pupils are not reaching the levels they should. Many pupils under perform and so make unsatisfactory progress. There are several

reasons for this. The levels used in assessing pupils are not those in the agreed syllabus. The challenge of much of the work is generally low and many pupils are not sufficiently motivated to want to improve.

- Pupils, particularly those at Key Stage 3, do not have sufficient opportunities to express and develop their beliefs. Few of them understand the potential value of the subject.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in RE is inadequate.

- The two non-specialists in the department apply their good generic teaching skills to the benefit of RE lessons. In one lesson a teaching assistant helped a group of pupils make good progress. However, these efforts are impeded by the overall negative attitudes of pupils to the subject that sometimes result in poor behaviour and lack of interest.
- The weaknesses in teaching exceed the strengths. Planning lacks flexibility and generally is not adapted to meet the needs of different groups. Often, too much content is planned for one lesson with the result that pupils do not have time to consolidate their learning before moving on.
- Approaches to teaching and learning are inadequate and characterised by undemanding worksheets and low level tasks. Pupils are not provided with sufficient information to develop their knowledge and understanding or to make judgements. Some of the text resources are not suitable for all ability groups; for example a Year 11 top set was using a foundation level book.
- Pupils say that they do not know what level they are working at or towards and GCSE students don't know what they have to do in order to make progress because the assessment criteria are not used effectively with the pupils.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is inadequate overall.

- The RE curriculum for Years 10-11 is satisfactory in that it covers the GCSE syllabus.
- The RE curriculum is not adequately matched to pupils' needs. For Years 7-9 it is based on the previous agreed syllabus and includes several topics that are for primary schools in the current syllabus. There is insufficient continuity in the curriculum from year to year.
- The subject offers a limited range of enrichment activities.
- The RE department does not follow clear school policies on marking and homework. This hinders further pupils' progress. Assessment policy and practice does not draw on the helpful guidance in the current agreed syllabus.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of RE are inadequate overall.

- The judgements in the RE self-evaluation document are over-generous. This is due in part to insufficiently rigorous monitoring of the department.
- The subject leader needs more support in understanding of how to improve current practice and the development plan does not recognise how improvements have to start with teaching and learning, rather than from the provision of additional time and The resources and learning activities are not always well-matched to the pupils' needs. Insufficient use is made of the clear policies and guidance from the school and local authority.
- Subject leadership has not taken sufficient advantage of strategies put in place by senior managers to bring about improvement.

The contribution of RE to promotion of community cohesion

Pupils have limited opportunities to explore how religion shapes their own or other people's sense of identity and relate their study of religion to the local area or the modern world. The subject makes little contribution to the promotion of links to the local community.

Inclusion

The subject does not accurately evaluate the progress of pupils and there is minimal evidence of differentiation. The setting of pupils is not used to their advantage and there is little difference in the activities and resources provided for each class, regardless of ability. However, in one class a teaching assistant worked effectively with a group of pupils who made good progress as a result.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- implementing the programmes of study and level descriptors within the new agreed syllabus
- providing an appropriate range of resources to support the development of pupils' knowledge and understanding and enables them to make informed judgements
- planning lessons and set learning outcomes for different groups according to ability
- implementing the school's marking, homework and assessment for learning policies.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop religious education 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

Barbara Wintersgill
Additional Inspector