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Mr Philip Stewart  
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Dear Mr Stewart

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Religious Education (RE)

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 7 and 8 November 2007 to look at work in RE.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a particular focus on the way the subject contributes 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 good reflecting very good improvement since the previous inspection of the subject.

Achievement and standards

The achievement of pupils in RE is good overall.

- Pupils arrive in the school with a pattern of prior attainment in RE which is well below average. By the end of Key Stage 3 pupils attain standards which are below the expected level and the pattern of their attainment is variable across the different aspects of the subject. By the end of Key Stage 4, standards are broadly average. Over the school as a whole the achievement of pupils is good with most progress made at Key Stage 4.

- GCSE results in both the full and short courses over the past three years have been broadly in line or just below the national average. However, the proportion of pupils reaching the higher A\* and A grades was well below the national average. While results dipped in 2007, there are clear reasons for this linked to staffing which the school has addressed. In lessons at Key Stage 4 pupils make good progress and quickly acquire a growing confidence in investigating and evaluating religious, moral and social issues.
- The department is working hard to establish patterns of learning in RE at Key Stage 3 which are challenging and promote good achievement. However, the requirements of the locally agreed syllabus, first introduced in 1997, are very focused on content and do not support the effective integration of the two areas of attainment: 'learning about' and 'learning from' religion. As a result, there is inconsistency in the progress pupils make across various elements of the provision. While pupils acquire a reasonable basic knowledge and understanding of some key features of religions, their ability to deploy higher order skills of enquiry, interpretation and evaluation are very limited.
- Many boys do particularly well and pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds make good progress. Generally the progress of higher ability pupils in RE is satisfactory rather than good.
- The personal development of pupils in the context of RE is particularly good and, on occasions, is outstanding. Pupils have positive attitudes towards their learning and show an enthusiasm for investigating religion and its impact on people's lives. They show respect for different points of view and value diversity. Behaviour is usually good. However, many pupils lack the confidence to work independently and to think for themselves. In some classes they rely too much on the teacher.

### Quality of teaching and learning of RE

The quality of teaching and learning in RE is good.

- Most lessons are structured and orderly; classes are well managed and relationships with pupils are good. Teachers have good subject knowledge, explain the purpose of the learning clearly, and make good use of information and communications technology (ICT) in their teaching.
- At its best, teaching is imaginative and lively. Lessons proceed at a good pace and effective use is made of a range of engaging and interesting resources; good use is made of discussion, exposition and questioning. At Key Stage 4 great care is taken to help pupils understand and prepare for the requirements of the examinations. Good support is provided for those who are underachieving.
- On some occasions, limited use is made of questioning to check understanding and, as a result, the structure of the learning activities is not appropriately adjusted to meet the pupils' needs.
- There is occasionally a tendency to focus slightly too much on coaching to pass the examination rather than on developing pupils' understanding of the material. However, overall, the good teaching at Key Stage 4 secures the rapid progress made by the pupils.

- At Key Stage 3 the quality of teaching and learning is more variable. Some of the tasks set are not challenging enough. Although the planning usually indicates how the learning should be adjusted to accommodate the varying ability levels in the mixed ability classes, in practice insufficient use is made of differentiated activities in some lessons.
- Marking is done regularly and is particularly effective at Key Stage 4 where pupils given a very clear understanding of the progress they are making and how to improve. Increasing use is being made of levelling at Key Stage 3 to help pupils appreciate how they can make progress.

### Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is satisfactory overall.

- At Key Stage 4 there is a variety of pathways which pupils can take in RE and this helps ensure there is a good match to their different needs and interests. The full course GCSE is a popular option; other pupils follow the short course or a school-based certificate of achievement. The latter is an imaginative and flexible programme which suits well the needs of less able and less well-motivated pupils. A small but significant number of pupils taking two performing arts GCSEs do not currently receive their statutory entitlement to RE because of timetabling difficulties. The school is alert to this issue and has plans to redress the problem.
- The Key Stage 3 curriculum is less effective. In seeking to secure coverage of all the requirements of the agreed syllabus, the pattern of work across the key stage and with Key Stage 4 lacks clear progression and continuity. Insufficient attention is paid to the progressive development of the skills of the subject. Work on Christianity in particular lacks clear coherence. The curriculum currently focuses too heavily on coverage of content and on 'learning about' religion. This is unbalancing pupils' learning and contributing to the more modest progress pupils are making at this key stage.
- The department is working very hard to develop assessment arrangements in the subject. At Key Stage 4 very close and effective attention is paid to the requirements of the examinations. The department has received limited support from the local authority in relation to ways of developing assessment at Key Stage 3. While it has made good progress in identifying a range of assessment tasks and criteria using the levels in the agreed syllabus, the accuracy and effectiveness of these procedures are still insecure.

### Leadership and management of RE

The leadership and management of RE are good and some features are outstanding.

- The subject is very well led and managed by a very proactive, enthusiastic and well-informed subject leader. She has been highly effective in raising the profile of the subject in the school and, as a result, it is now popular and well-regarded by pupils. The subject is

very well-supported by the faculty head and senior leadership team. Improvement in RE since the last subject inspection in 2000 has been very good and it there is a very good capacity for further improvement.

- The subject now benefits from a strong group of four specialist teachers; the main suite of teaching rooms is attractive, well resourced and there is good access to ICT facilities. The subject is very well organised on a day to day basis. The schemes of work are comprehensive and detailed providing a good basis for all the staff to work well together as a team.
- The arrangements for monitoring the provision are very thorough, comprehensive and incisive. As a result subject self-evaluation is accurate and effective leading to good improvement planning. The main aspect which needs attention relates to the lack of accuracy in the assessment data at Key Stage 3 and the impact this has on the ability of the subject to analyse the effectiveness of the curriculum.
- The department has good access to the school's generic professional development provision although opportunities to attend external RE training are very limited.

### The promotion of community cohesion

The contribution the subject makes to the promotion of community cohesion is good although there is scope to improve it further. The overall ethos of learning in the department encourages a positive attitude towards faith and diversity amongst the pupils. The curriculum has been developed to ensure that the needs of pupils from the Muslim tradition are appropriately respected. There is scope to build on contacts the school has with local religious communities to provide more opportunities in RE for all pupils to engage directly with representatives from the faith groups. The curriculum currently does not place enough emphasis on examining the place of religion in the modern world.

### Inclusion

Inclusion in RE is good overall and is reflected in the provision of a range of pathways of study at Key Stage 4 together with the good individual support pupils receive in the subject. While planning usually identifies a range of differentiated tasks to support the progress of all pupils, these are not always integrated effectively into classroom practice. As a result, the progress made by the higher ability pupils is sometimes limited by a lack of challenge in some tasks. Pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds do well and care is taken to devise strategies which ensure that the performance of boys in RE is often very good. The faculty monitors and analyses the performance of different pupil groups carefully.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- reviewing and improving, in the context of the planned revision to the locally agreed syllabus, the quality of the Key Stage 3 curriculum to secure greater continuity and progression in the pupils' learning
- extending the level of challenge for the more able

- developing the reliability of the assessment arrangements at Key Stage 3 and securing a better integration between the two areas of attainment
- extending the opportunities for pupils to engage more directly with the reality of religion in the modern world through, for example, greater contact with local religious communities.

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 the Ofsted website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Alan Brine  
Her Majesty's Inspector