

Alexandra House
33 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

T 08456 404040
F 020 7421 6855
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk



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Mr M Froggett
Headteacher
Culceth High School
Withington Avenue
Culceth
Warrington
Cheshire
WA3 4JQ

Dear Mr Froggett

Ofsted survey inspection programme:
Art and design and Religious Education

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit with Alan Brine HMI on 07 and 08 February 2008 to look at work in art and design and religious education.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subjects, the visit included a focus on the quality of assessment in art and design and its impact on students' progress and creativity. In religious education the visit included a 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 students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observations of lessons or part lessons including joint observations with the senior leadership team.

Art and design

The overall effectiveness of art and design is judged to be satisfactory.

Achievement and standards in art and design

Achievement and standards in art and design are satisfactory.

- Students make satisfactory progress during the Key Stage 3 course. Overall standards are in line with the expectations of the National Curriculum. However, good standards in Year 7 indicate that some pupils are able to build on skills established in primary school. For example, their still life studies inspired by Cubism. Some recent sketchbook studies and courseworks, for example the Year 9 mixed-media work inspired by Gothic architecture, are above average.
- A smaller than average proportion of girls have chosen to take GCSE in the past. Above average A-C grades have been attained but a lower than average proportion have gained A*-A grades. Overall, their grades have not been as high as in their other subjects. Nevertheless, some striking work has been created, particularly in textiles. A very small proportion of boys have taken the GCSE. Results have been below national averages and significantly lower than other subjects.
- Since September 2007 the proportion of boys and girls taking GCSE has improved significantly. Their portfolios contain a good standard of work. Students are able to use a range of techniques, tools and graphic media, particularly effective when mixed. They know about different artists whose work connects to their own but their writing remains too descriptive to reflect depth of understanding. Students specialising in textiles are able to select from a wide range of artists, craftworkers and designers to create original outcomes.
- Numbers taking the subject in the sixth form are also increasing from a small base. This includes students with limited prior experience and others from different schools. They investigate topics intelligently. The diversity and increase in scale of work indicates confidence. However, not all students are driven by sufficient knowledge of contemporary art, craft and design to fully exploit opportunities to express originality.
- Students' personal development in the subject is satisfactory. Most students observe demonstrations carefully, listen to the teacher and act on advice. However, some students have a naive understanding of the relevance of the subject or the opportunities it provides to express personal feelings and insights. Whilst many students value recent improvements in subject teaching and the curriculum the level and pace of active participation remains low. In the past, independent study skills including students' time management, lesson/exam preparation and follow-up has constrained their success in exams when compared to students in other schools.

Quality of teaching and learning in art and design

Teaching and learning in art and design are satisfactory with some good features.

- Teachers are knowledgeable about the subject, the requirements of the National Curriculum and examinations. These are explicitly shared with students through displays that clearly distinguish different levels of attainment and through objectives shared at the start of lessons.
- Display is used effectively to illustrate expectations. The most stimulating lessons use visual resources from the start. However, secondary sources predominate and opportunities to use ICT as a teaching tool are too limited.
- Demonstrations are managed well and show students how to organise their own resources. Nevertheless, lesson introductions are sometimes too long and dominated by teacher talk. This is influenced by the limited curiosity or questioning by students. Class reviews of work often conclude lessons purposefully but more could be made of plenaries during lessons to encourage students to learn from each other.
- Teachers share their specialist strengths with enthusiasm. For example, a project inspired by the ceramicist Kate Malone involved paired responses to subject matter and art media favoured by the teacher. Students' ability to learn by example underpins the success of the textiles course where they show increasing confidence in linking their work to artists, craftworkers and designers as they progress through the course.
- The literacy content of lessons is strong. Teachers explain specialist vocabulary clearly and check students' understanding by asking them to use words in context. This is reinforced when teachers incorporate specialist vocabulary in their comments when marking students' work.
- Good guidance is given to individual students during lessons. Encouragement and constructive criticism is reinforced through the use of 'post-its' attached to specific pieces of work. Students value the specificity of feedback and appreciate their drawings and designs remaining untouched by the marking.

Quality of the curriculum in art and design

The curriculum in art and design is satisfactory.

- Students are provided with a wide range of opportunities to learn about different techniques. The breadth of graphic media and presentation techniques evident in sketchbooks reflect the strengths of the course. Several projects encourage students to combine techniques to create effective mixed-media work.
- Opportunities for students to use three-dimensional media are increasing. Students will soon be able to learn about firing clay with the installation of a kiln. Existing 3D work in wire, textile and papier-mache is very well linked to artists, craftworkers and designers whose work is suitable for translation into the media available to students. The creative use of ICT is at an early stage of development.

- The natural world and built environment are revisited throughout the curriculum. However, there is insufficient emphasis on personal identity, particularly through projects that explore and express individual differences, feelings or insights into contemporary issues. Themes such as 'manufactured' promote more depth and diversity of ideas than those where the subject matter implies an outcome such as 'still life'.
- There are good projects in each year but the use of some subject matter, media or methods remain similar. Whilst this is an appropriate short term strategy to improve the quality and impact of the curriculum it represents an inadequate model of progression. The confidence and depth of work as students move through the school is an important area to address in order to improve the proportion of students able to achieve the highest grades.
- Visits to art galleries and other sources of inspiration are used effectively to enrich the curriculum but not all students experience them before choosing their examination courses. The Year 9 work inspired by a visit to Liverpool Cathedral and Year 10 work started at the Lowry in Salford demonstrate the impact of first hand experience on the quality of observation and confidence to work on a large scale.
- Students discussed their enjoyment of subjects such as Design and technology because projects have a practical as well as aesthetic purpose. A small proportion of students have learned about the applications of art, craft and design by working with a practising artist but more explicit links could be made in the curriculum to the creative and cultural industries.

Leadership and management of art and design

The leadership and management of art and design are good.

- Following a period when the subject was judged inadequate the subject has developed a more prominent profile in the school, evident in good quality displays of work in public areas and a significantly higher proportion of examination students including a better balance of boys and girls.
- Determined subject leadership supported by capable teachers who are able to perform well when working to their strengths, has set and achieved higher standards across all years. However, some work of above average quality in Years 7 to 9 indicate that with continued challenge and structured progression results can continue to improve.
- An effective range of strategies are used to evaluate and build on the strengths within the subject including lesson observations, team teaching and mentoring trainee teachers. Some collaboration with other subjects such as media studies is proving fruitful but there are few connections with other art forms through for example the Arts Award scheme or a shared focus on students' creative development.

- There is good analysis of comparative data to evaluate the impact of teaching on outcomes. Students' responses are taken into account when reviewing and modifying teaching and the curriculum but opportunities for students to discuss and influence the direction of the subject could be formalised.
- The subject leader makes effective use of her experience of other schools. The headteacher supports the principle of shared visits by the department to inform future improvement priorities.

Subject issue: The quality of assessment and its impact on students' progress and creativity.

This is satisfactory.

- Teachers provide clear and constructive feedback to students in lessons and through their marking.
- The tutorial diary used with sixth formers is particularly effective because it provides a central record of targets set by students' different teachers. It also complements the work journals maintained by the students.
- A systematic approach to tracking performance against different objectives used in textiles is now being used more widely.
- Student self-assessment is at an early stage of development. Group reviews of work are beginning to develop students' critical skills but teachers have to use direct questioning before views are forthcoming.
- The tracking of creative development is underdeveloped. Features of creativity such as originality, risk-taking and improvisation could be more explicitly targeted through lesson and assessment objectives.

Inclusion

- The curriculum has not in the past been effective in interesting a good proportion of boys and girls in continuing their subject studies to examination level. However, opportunities to use more 3D and digital media albeit in the early stages, are proving effective in making the subject more inclusive to students' different needs and interests.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- increase students' participation in lessons by developing their responsibilities and curiosity
- promote the depth and diversity of students' work by structuring progression and challenging their creativity
- improve awareness of the relevance of the subject by increasing students' first hand experience of the creative and cultural industries
- strengthen the contribution of the subject to students' personal development through reflection, criticism and expression.

Religious education

The overall effectiveness of RE is judged to be satisfactory with a number of good features.

Achievement and standards

Standards reached in RE examinations are well above the national average. The achievement of students in RE is satisfactory overall.

- The results in both the full and short GCSE RE courses in 2007 were well above average. In the case of the full course, a very high proportion of the pupils achieved A*-A grades and overall achievement was very impressive. In the short course, results in recent years have improved significantly. In 2007, the percentage of pupils achieving A*-C grades was also well above the national average and the results were broadly in line with the overall school performance. However, the proportion achieving the highest A*-A grades was slightly below the national average. Results at A level were broadly in line with expectations, reflecting satisfactory achievement. The students currently following the A level courses in Philosophy and Ethics are making good progress.
- The arrangements for the delivery of GCSE courses in the current year 10 have been changed significantly. The progress being made by the pupils taking the various full course programmes at Key Stage 4 is good. However, many pupils taking the short course in Year 10 are not making appropriate progress.
- The standards reached by pupils at the end of Key Stage 3 are broadly in line with the expectations in the agreed syllabus and this represents satisfactory achievement. There is, however, some unevenness in performance of the pupils. Those in higher ability sets often achieve well and there are examples of some exceptional extended written work on, for example, arguments for and against the existence of God in year 8. Some pupils in middle ability and lower sets make less progress, sometimes as a result of their limited engagement in the subject. The progress of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is usually satisfactory.
- Overall, the Key Stage 3 curriculum is not quite broad, balanced and progressive enough to ensure achievement across all aspects of the subject is even. Pupils often make good progress in some areas of study, particularly where the planning enables them to grasp the overall purpose and direction of their learning. In some other areas of study, progress is more restricted where planning does not build as effectively on prior learning.
- The personal development of pupils in the context of RE is satisfactory. In the case of those taking the A level and full course GCSE courses, the attitudes to learning and enthusiasm for the subject are good. Similarly, many of the pupils in the upper sets in Key Stage 3 enjoy the

subject and see its value. In these cases, the subject is making a positive contribution to the pupils' wider spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. It is helping them to develop positive attitudes towards diversity and a willingness to challenge racism and prejudice.

- However, many of the pupils in the short course GCSE classes and in the middle and lower sets at Key Stage 3 show much less positive attitudes and are unwilling to take much responsibility for their learning. As a result, occasionally, behaviour is poor. Too many pupils show a limited sense of curiosity about the subject and are too content to be passive in lessons.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in RE is satisfactory with some good features.

- The overall quality and effectiveness of teaching in RE is variable. Many features are good, particularly, although not always, where there is specialist teaching.
- Where teaching is effective the strengths include: good subject knowledge and clear exposition; well-organised and orderly lessons; clear guidance about the purpose of the learning; positive relationships and high expectations; and, some imaginative use of engaging learning activities.
- While much of the teaching does make some adjustments to take account of different levels of ability, the strategies to engage pupils in middle and lower sets are not always effective. As a result, many pupils in these groups find it hard to concentrate and are not actively participating in their learning.
- Insufficient attention is paid in some lessons to the active management of learning. Many lessons involve questioning and discussion but these are not always structured to ensure all pupils participate actively or to help them develop the skills of debate and argument. Also, not enough attention is paid to managing the grouping of pupils in the classroom. It was rare, for example, to see any mixed gender groupings in lessons.
- The effectiveness of the use of writing in lessons is also variable. There is much good practice with pupils writing purposefully, independently and using a range of different kinds of written forms. Elsewhere, however, there is too much note-taking and passive writing which lacks challenge and clear purpose.
- Pupils and students taking the A level and full course GCSE are given very clear guidance and support to enable them to understand and apply the examination requirements; marking is usually regular and helpful. However, the non-specialists teaching the short course GCSE are not enabling pupils to understand what they need to do to succeed and how to improve.

- The department has not received any clear guidance from the local authority about the interpretation, use and exemplification of levels of attainment. As a result, although the teachers are working hard to develop their practice, assessment in the subject at Key Stage 3 is not yet secure or rigorous enough. More attention needs to be paid to matching tasks to the level descriptors and using the language of progression more actively in lessons to help pupils understand the skills they are developing.

Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the RE curriculum is satisfactory with some good features.

- The curriculum broadly meets the requirements of the locally agreed syllabus, although the absence of guidance from the local authority on the interpretation of the requirements at Key Stage 3 and post-16 has made it difficult for the department to make sure their coverage is in line with expectations. All sixth formers have opportunities to explore some moral and social themes as part of their general studies programme.
- The examination provision at Key Stage 4 fully meets requirements and it is notable that those pupils on vocational programmes are provided with separate lessons to ensure they receive their entitlement. The opportunity provided for some pupils in Year 11 to 'top-up' their short course to a full course in their own time is a further strength. There is good provision for A level.
- The arrangements for the full course in year 10 mean pupils in the upper sets are required to take the full course which is being delivered on the basis of 1 hour a week across the two years. Pupils in the lower sets are all required to take the short course. A priority for the subject is to monitor carefully the impact which these new arrangements are having on the attitudes, learning and progress of all the pupils and particularly those following the short course.
- The school is actively exploring some innovative curriculum arrangements at Key Stage 3. The Year 9 top set is following a Humanities GCSE which has a modest RE component. The school has plans to ensure their RE work at Key Stage 4 will secure their subject entitlement. It also needs to make sure it provides a progressive programme matching their needs and interests.
- The department has responded very positively to the more philosophical and issues-based approach to the subject at Key Stage 3 advocated in the current Warrington agreed syllabus. It has included some interesting and challenging units of work. As yet, the overall selection and sequencing of units does not always ensure pupils' learning is progressive and coherent. The skills and content developed in one unit are not always built upon and consolidated enough in the subsequent areas of work. Some units of work provide pupils with a very clear sense of the overall coherence, purpose and direction of

their learning; others do not and pupils feel they move from lesson to lesson with a limited sense of the links between them.

- Liaison with the primary feeder schools in relation to RE is fairly limited and, as a result, the transition unit in the locally agreed syllabus is proving of little use. However, while the subject has yet to benefit strongly from the school's recent acquired Humanities specialist status, there are plans to use this status as a context for forging stronger links with the primary sector.
- The department makes very good use of a range of enrichment activities to support pupils' learning and make a strong contribution to the wider life of the school. These include visits to a mosque and interfaith centre in Bradford and the Manchester Buddhist Centre, work related to Holocaust Memorial Day, visits from local Christian groups, and links with the school's wider assembly programme.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of RE are satisfactory with good features.

- The subject benefits from the clear and committed leadership of an experienced head of department who is very well supported by her subject colleagues. As a team, they have successfully raised the profile and performance of the subject.
- The day-to-day management and organisation of the subject is good. The policies are clear and appropriate subject documentation is in place. While the pattern of curriculum planning at Key Stage 3 is uneven in quality, there are clear plans to secure greater consistency once the wider whole school developments at the key stage are clearer.
- The process of monitoring the subject is embraced within the wider faculty arrangements. These are robust but not always focused quite enough on the specific needs of the subject. There is scope to extend the use made of data to analyse patterns of pupils' achievement.
- Subject improvement planning is detailed and closely follows the broader priorities of the whole school. It has an appropriate focus on raising achievement and improving teaching and learning. There are quite a number of priorities included. Care needs to be taken to ensure the capacity within the subject team is not overstretched by the demands of the improvement plan and the wide range of commitments of the head of subject.
- Some of the recent decisions in relation to the staffing and curriculum at Key Stage 4 will require very careful monitoring to evaluate their impact. All the current GCSE short course groups are taught by non-specialists and insufficient opportunities have been provided to address their training needs in this regard.
- The opportunities for subject professional development of the specialists in the department are very limited. There appears to be no local authority support or networking in place for the subject.

- While the subject accommodation is quite dated, good effort is made to ensure the rooms are stimulating. However, very limited use is being made of ICT to support teaching and learning due to limited access to hardware. Otherwise, resources and funding for the subject are good.

The promotion of community cohesion

RE plays a very positive and leading role in the school in promoting those aspects of community cohesion related to race and faith. The pupils speak very positively of the way the ethos and expectations within the subject support a celebration and respect for diversity while challenging any negative racist attitudes or stereotyping. The programme of visits, visitors and enrichment activities make a very positive statement in the school about the importance of community cohesion.

Inclusion

Inclusion in RE is satisfactory. Good provision is made for pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and in-class support is effective. Good provision is made to ensure all pupils receive their entitlement to RE. The teaching and staffing in the context of the current pattern of setting in the subject means some ability groups underachieve and attitudes towards learning are not always as good as they should be. Teaching is not always active enough to ensure all pupils maintain their concentration and participate in their learning.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- ensuring pupils participate more actively in their learning in RE to extend their interest, curiosity, enthusiasm and enjoyment
- review the strategies used to manage discussion and use writing to ensure these are consistently purposeful and effective
- monitoring very carefully the impact of the new arrangements for GCSE in RE on pupils' attitudes, learning and achievement
- provide subject training opportunities for the non-specialists delivering the short course GCSE
- ensuring the range of commitments of the subject leader does not detract from maintaining her focus on improving the subject.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop RE and Art in the school.

As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your Local Authority and, in the case of RE, SACRE and will be published on the Ofsted website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Ian Middleton
Her Majesty's Inspector

Alan Brine
Her Majesty's Inspector