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Ms M Litton
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Dear Mrs Litton

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Religious Education

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 06 and 07 March 2008 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 students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE was judged to be outstanding.

Achievement and standards

The standards reached by students in RE are well above average reflecting outstanding achievement overall.

- The results in the full and short GCSE courses are well above the national average. The proportion of students reaching the highest A*/A grades in the full course in 2007 was particularly impressive. While results in the short course dipped in 2007, they still represented good achievement.

- Student achievement at Key Stage 3 is also outstanding. Many attain standards which are high in relation to the expectations of the locally agreed syllabus. Although the department's own assessment suggest the percentage reaching the higher levels in 2007 was modest, the performance of the higher attaining students currently in Key Stage 3 is very impressive. Some of the current written assessments, which are very challenging, mean that lower attaining students sometimes find it hard to demonstrate in the tasks the level of attainment they show in their oral contributions in class.
- The strength of the achievement in RE lies in the ability of students to use higher order thinking skills. Many are handling complex concepts confidently and can use the skills of enquiry, interpretation and evaluation very effectively. On occasions, the level of insight shown by students is quite exceptional when, for example, skilful teaching enabled a higher ability class to offer well-structured reasons why Smart's ethical dimension of religion might or might not be seen as the most important.
- Students starting the newly introduced full course GCSE in Year 9 are making very good progress although sometimes their ability to make coherent and wide-ranging connections between the key concepts of Christianity and social and ethical issues is limited.
- An important strength of the subject is the impressive contribution it makes to students' wider personal and intellectual development through, for example, the emphasis on the promotion of higher order thinking and learning skills. Many students expressed the view that the subject is making a very distinctive and important contribution to their understanding of diversity in the society around them. In addition, the subject is making a very significant impact on their appreciation of the spiritual, ethical and social dimensions of life.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in RE is outstanding.

- A major strength of the subject is the consistency of the high quality teaching across the department. Those teaching the subject share a clear shared understanding about learning in RE. The locally agreed syllabus has played a key role in supporting this.
- There are many strengths in the quality of teaching. Relationships with pupils are very good and reflect a mature attitude towards the subject modelled by the teachers. There are very high expectations about both behaviour, which is usually exemplary, and learning, which is usually very challenging. Students respond positively to this challenge and often persevere when the tasks are tough and require a great deal of thought.
- The skilful management of discussion and oral work is a further important strength. As a result, students quickly acquire an understanding of the skills and attitudes required of successful debate. In a number of lessons the conditions were created which enabled students to debate and argue effectively without the teacher needing to intervene. This emphasis on oral work is carefully balanced with a very effective use of writing. Written activities are purposeful and

varied including, for example, mind-mapping, annotating imagery, extended and independent discursive work and some more open-ended creative writing.

- The focus on developing higher order thinking skills is skilfully linked to the use of a wide range of engaging and imaginative strategies and resources. Very effective use is made of questioning and exposition. Lessons are very well-structured and teaching secures the active involvement of all students in their learning.
- A further strength is the willingness of teachers to take risks by setting tasks which genuinely challenge students to think ideas through for themselves and take a high level of personal or group responsibility for their learning.
- Students' work is regularly and effectively assessed and some very good use is made of peer and self-assessment. As a result, students have a particularly clear understanding of their progress and what they need to do to be successful.
- Occasionally, and particularly in the context of the GCSE course, students would benefit for more opportunities to work with resources which reflect how those from religious traditions interpret and make decisions about the significance of their faith.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in RE is good with many outstanding features.

- The overall curriculum for RE is rooted in the commitment to high expectations and challenging learning. The schemes of work at Key Stage 3 are closely aligned with the expectations in the locally agreed syllabus. The department is extending this by working to embody the distinctive approach to learning in the agreed syllabus across its wider GCSE provision. This is particularly important because of the decision to start full course GCSE for all in Year 9 and complete Key Stage 3 in two years.
- The Key Stage 3 curriculum is imaginative and demanding. Care has been taken to ensure that units of work build on each other extending the level of challenge, although this progression is not always made explicit in the planning. Some of the topics for study are very original including a very innovative unit exploring Smarts' seven dimensions of religion. Overall, schemes of work are very detailed and thorough with good use being made of the QCA planning format. The department is, however, aware of the need to consider whether the planning and delivery of some aspects of the curriculum are sufficiently differentiated to ensure all students can access the learning and assessment tasks effectively.
- The decision to introduce GCSE full course for all in Year 9 and teach within mixed ability groups is bold. Care will need to be taken to monitor the impact of the decision on student learning and achievement. The department is already considering whether the most able will require an additional level of challenge.
- Two major strengths of the RE provision are the use made of home study and the virtual learning environment (VLE). Home study activities are well-conceived and make a very positive contribution to students'

progress. They value greatly the opportunities to take responsibility for their own learning and the freedom it gives them to make their own decisions about how their projects will be presented. Some boys, for example, were very motivated by the opportunities to use video to present their work. Similarly, the use of the VLE by the department is exceptional, supporting students' learning very effectively and encouraging them to share questions, ideas and resources.

- Very good use is made of a wide range of further enrichment opportunities including visitors to the classroom and a variety of fieldwork and visits.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of RE are outstanding.

- The subject is led by a highly talented, well-organised and visionary head of department who receives very good support from the senior leadership team. The subject benefits from a staff of very high quality specialists who work very effectively together as a team. All aspects of the work of the department are driven by a shared commitment to high standards and the enrichment of students' wider personal development. As a result the subject has a high profile in the life of the school and in the eyes of the students.
- The arrangements for professional development and the induction of new staff and teacher trainees are impressive. This has ensured that despite a number of staffing changes over the past 18 months the high quality of the department's work has not been diminished. The subject has been enriched through the pro-active involvement of the department in wider training initiatives both within the school and the local authority. The subject has played a role in supporting the implementation of the locally agreed syllabus across the local authority.
- Arrangements for monitoring and improving the provision are also impressive. The department is particularly effective in its analysis and use of data both to identify patterns of student achievement and evaluate the quality of the provision. Alongside well-organised monitoring of teaching and learning through, for example, lesson observation and work scrutinies, very effective use is made of forums to gather student views about the subject. Improvement planning is of high quality.
- The subject is well-resourced and the main teaching rooms are used well to promote a very positive and exciting approach to learning. There is good access to information and communication technology (ICT) to support teaching.
- The subject has to contend with a number of relatively minor issues related to staffing, accommodation and timetabling. There is some non-specialist teaching and a number of split classes taught by two teachers. Some lessons are taught in less attractive, non-specialist rooms. It is to the department's credit that these matters are managed well and rarely have a negative impact on student learning and achievement.

The contribution of RE to the promotion of community cohesion

The subject makes a very effective contribution to the promotion of community cohesion. The approach to learning secures a positive attitude towards diversity. This is complemented by the focus on a range of important social and ethical issues related to cohesion. The encouragement of students to express their views and become actively involved in their learning ensures that their thinking about the issues they explore is both challenging and reflective. The department has placed a high priority on maintaining a pattern of enrichment activities enabling students to engage directly with representatives from the diverse religious communities in the area. In addition, the department is playing an important role in a social cohesion project organised by the local authority. This has encouraged links with another school with a very different ethnic and cultural profile. To date these links have not explored the religious dimension of cohesion explicitly but the project has great potential to enrich the work within the subject.

Inclusion

Inclusion within the context of RE is good. All student groups are actively involved in lessons. Very good use is made of a wide range of different ways of learning and presenting work to ensure that the varying strengths and needs of students are acknowledged. Occasionally, some of the assessments do not enable all students to demonstrate what they can do as well as they might.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- monitoring the impact of the recent changes to the curriculum to ensure that all curriculum planning and assessments address the needs of all students.

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