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Dear Mr Owers

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Religious Education

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 03 and 04 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 pupils, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of pupils' work and observation of five lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE was judged to good.

Standards and Achievement

The achievement of pupils is good overall with some outstanding features

- Pupils arrive in the school with above average prior attainment. By the end of Key Stage 3 pupils reach standards which are above the expected level. By the end of Key Stage 4, standards are also above average and often well above. Results at A level are also well above average and achievement is outstanding.
- All pupils enter the GCSE full course, which is taught in three lessons over a two week period, commencing in the last term of Year 9. Over the past three years the proportion of pupils reaching the higher A* and A grades has increased and is now well above the national

average. In 2007, the proportion of girls awarded A*/A grades was about 40% above the national average although the comparative figure for boys was 8%. In lessons at Key Stage 4, pupils make good progress and quickly acquire the knowledge, understanding and skills needed to do well in the examination.

- Discussions with pupils and an examination of their work indicate that at Key Stage 3 they make good progress overall, particularly when learning about and from religious and ethical issues. Pupils acquire a good knowledge and understanding and develop skills that provide a firm foundation for GCSE work. Their skills of evaluation are particularly well developed although some find it difficult to understand how belonging to a religion has an impact on the way people lead their lives.
- Over the school as a whole the achievement of pupils is at least good and sometimes outstanding. The school has only recently begun to develop reliable assessment data and tracking systems in RE. These factors contribute to its difficulties in making convincing judgements about achievement and this is reflected in the uncertainties related to predictions, targets and achievement in RE. In particular, the department has not yet established whether it adds sufficient value to the standards achieved, particularly by boys.
- The school's analysis of pupils' progress in RE shows that there is significant variation in the achievement of different groups. For example, about one fifth of pupils did not reach their predicted grade and could have done better. The disparity in achievement is not constant across all teaching groups and reflects the variations in the quality of teaching in the department.
- The personal development of pupils in the context of RE is good. Pupils have positive attitudes towards their learning and show an enthusiasm for investigating religion. Most pupils enjoy religious education. They value the subject for its contribution to their personal development and preparation for life. Large numbers choose to take the subject in the sixth form, often because they enjoyed it at Key Stage 4 and others because they were impressed by the department's presentation of its sixth form course.

Quality of teaching and learning

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

- While teaching and learning are good overall, there is variation in the quality from outstanding to satisfactory. Lessons are structured and orderly. Most teachers have excellent subject knowledge.
- At best, teachers interact very well with pupils, set challenging and exciting tasks that engage all and relate well to the needs of boys. The best lessons are carefully structured so that pupils engage in a variety of activities in contrasting settings including individual and group work and whole class discussion. Pupils are encouraged to ask questions, which are discussed by the class. Teachers challenge pupils' judgements by interjecting further questions and suggesting new

avenues of enquiry. Effective use is made of the starter to establish prior knowledge and the plenary to provide evidence for pupils' learning. Where these features are present, teaching is outstanding and demonstrates that excellent learning at a brisk pace is not incompatible with enjoyment.

- The department prepares pupils very well for examinations, and activities such as peer marking help them to gain a good understanding of what they have to do to succeed. This contributes to the very good results.
- Where teaching is less strong, pupils are sometimes left to get on with less challenging tasks with limited help from their teacher and there are fewer opportunities for paired or group discussions. On occasions, pupils spend too much time copying or answering comprehension questions. In some classes the quality of provision leads to less engagement, particularly from boys. As a result, some boys are content to work for a pass grade at GCSE but are not interested in doing any better and this explains in part why fewer boys get A* and A grades.
- The department holds a good range of resources which when used to best effect develop the skills of independent learning. However, in some lessons learning is dominated by the text book.

Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in RE is good overall.

- The greatest strength of the RE curriculum is the entitlement to full course GCSE for all pupils at Key Stage 4. The modular examination relieves some of the pressure from Year 11 students. The AS and A2 options are among the most popular in the school, attracting up to a third of the cohort. Retention rates from AS to A2 are high. Planning for Years 10-13 covers examination syllabus requirements effectively.
- The Key Stage 3 curriculum meets the requirements of the agreed syllabus. Its particular strength is the focus of each unit of work on specific strands in the attainment targets and at appropriate levels of demand in such a way that pupils achieve in most of the subject requirements. There is very good continuity and progression from the Year 9 curriculum to Year 10.
- The subject matter covered in the curriculum at all stages is attractive to pupils and they often show a genuine interest in the issues covered. They value a curriculum that allows them to explore a range of religions and gives them opportunities to develop their own thinking.
- The curriculum makes good links with history, geography and citizenship and so makes an important contribution to enhancing the school's specialist status in the humanities. The subject contributes well to pupils' developing literacy skills through reporting and self-expression in written work.
- There is a good work-related dimension to the curriculum, as teachers explain the relevance of the subject to careers and working with others.

- There are limited opportunities for enrichment activities. Through the RE department, the school has links with local Christian organisations and the Torbay Youth Inter-Faith Forum. There are occasional visits to centres for religious communities, but few planned opportunities for pupils to listen to and speak with members of faith communities other than Christianity.
- Assessment procedures are good. The department was one of the first in the school to introduce level-based assessments and this has enabled teachers to set work at appropriate levels of challenge. The full value of departmental assessments for accurate baseline judgements, target setting and pupil tracking will be felt when whole school assessment and recording systems are well established.

The leadership and management

The leadership and management of RE are good.

- The subject is very well managed by a very well-organised head of department. 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 many pupils. The subject is very well-supported by the senior leadership team.
- The subject benefits from a team of four specialist teachers, a large collection of resources and two specialist teaching rooms. Day to day organisation is good. The schemes of work are comprehensive and detailed; deadlines are met; there are regular and purposeful departmental meetings; and, the subject is represented on major school committees. There are good opportunities for teachers to attend training provided by examining boards and the local authority.
- The department has begun to engage as a team with self-evaluation. This demonstrates a good understanding the many strengths of the department but does not give sufficient attention to the levels of underachievement. Explanations for underachievement and the comparatively low standards reached by boys do not take full account of all the available evidence, particularly the impact of teaching and learning and the relative indifference of some boys.

Community cohesion

The contribution the subject makes to the promotion of community cohesion is good and there is the capacity to improve it further. Pupils demonstrate a lively interest in exploring issues related to, and good awareness and understanding about, diversity in religion. The curriculum provides good opportunities to explore religion in the contemporary world at local and national level. Pupils have good opportunities to express their own views about religion and feel that their opinions are valued. They also have good opportunities to ask questions about and discuss religious issues which arise through, for example, the news or other media. The curriculum includes key issues such as prejudice and inequalities and study of these issues strengthens the respect for others evident in many pupils. There is scope to build on contacts the school has with local religious communities to provide

more opportunities for all pupils to engage directly with representatives of the religions they study.

Inclusion

RE is making good progress towards challenging targets at all stages. Many pupils make excellent progress although there is some underachievement. All pupils relate well to each other, respect staff, are keen to learn, behave well, develop personal qualities securely and many display a genuine interest in the subject. The curriculum meets the needs and interests of pupils well.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- securing clearer evidence for the achievement of all pupils from Year 7 to Year 11, including evidence for variations in levels of progress by gender and ability
- considering carefully the reasons for underperformance and tackling them vigorously
- continuing to work for greater consistency in the quality of teaching at Key Stages 3 and 4
- providing further opportunities for pupils to meet and ask questions of people who can talk first hand about their faith.

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

Barbara Wintersgill
Additional Inspector