

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 Johnston
Headteacher
The Earls High School
Furnace Lane
Halesowen
West Midlands
B63 3SL

Dear Mr Johnston

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) and Religious Education (RE)

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during our visit on 21 May 2008 to look at work in PSHE and that of Jacqueline Wordsworth HMI on Wednesday 21 and Thursday 22 May 2008 to look at work in RE.

Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE)

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of PSHE, the visit had a particular focus on:

- how the PSHE curriculum meets the specific needs of pupils in your local area, and how progress is tracked and assessed; and
- the contribution made by PSHE to the future economic well-being of your pupils.

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 in PSHE included: interviews with you and the vice principal, the deputy headteacher with line management responsibility for PSHE, the Year 9 co-ordinator, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work, discussion with three groups of students from Year 9 and two from Year 11, and observation of two lessons.

The overall effectiveness of PSHE was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Achievement in PSHE is good overall.

- Students have good knowledge of sex and relationships education and drugs education.
- Students develop good personal and social skills as they move through the school. Older students take on leadership roles that develop their confidence and self-esteem.
- Knowledge and understanding of global, political and financial issues are satisfactory.

Quality of teaching and learning

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

- Lessons move at a brisk pace and include a good variety of well planned activities that consolidate learning and motivate students.
- Role play is used well and allows students to respond emotionally to issues.
- The quality of teaching by form tutors is inconsistent and directly linked to how individual teachers adapt the curriculum materials they are given.
- In a few weaker lessons, over-reliance on worksheets creates a slower pace of learning. There are missed opportunities for active learning and group discussion.
- Assessment of PSHE is satisfactory. It is reported annually to parents and form tutors feed comments into the regular review and guidance process. However, insufficient account is taken of what students already know to inform planning within units of work, especially as they move up the school.

Quality of the curriculum

The PSHE curriculum is satisfactory with some good features.

- The curriculum is extensive and given a high priority in the once a week PSHE lesson taught by form tutors
- Sex and relationships and drug education are covered in depth and appear regularly in the scheme of work.
- There is currently insufficient focus on financial and environmental issues in the PSHE curriculum.
- Good emotional and practical support is provided for vulnerable students experiencing a crisis in their lives. Transition arrangements for these students when they leave school are robust to ensure they settle well in a new environment. All students are also well supported to cope with stress and pressure, such as the strategies to deal with preparation for public examinations.
- There is an imbalance between teacher-led and student-centred practical activity within the PSHE curriculum.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of PSHE are good.

- A good leadership structure with specialist team leaders for study skills, sex and relationships education, drug education, citizenship, and careers and work experience, ensures that the scheme of work is well mapped across the school.
- Good professional development opportunities are available for these team leaders.
- PSHE has a high status in the school and managed well by the deputy head teacher.
- The school's view of its overall provision for PSHE is slightly over-generous.

Subject issue: The contribution made by PSHE to pupils' economic well-being is good.

Good careers education and work placements provide students with a secure basis to support their economic well-being. They grow in confidence as they move through the school and take on various leadership roles and responsibilities. Students are not as well prepared to cope with financial issues. The vast majority of students continue in education post-16. Good pastoral support, the regular review and guidance process, mock interviews and support for writing CVs, prepares students well for the world of work.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- reviewing the PSHE scheme of work to include a greater focus on financial capability and environmental issues
- ensuring that all form tutors take ownership of PSHE lessons and adapt the delivery of the units of work to suit their own individual teaching strengths and the needs of their students.

Religious Education (RE)

The evidence used to inform the judgements made in RE included: interviews with staff and students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of lessons.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of RE, the visit had a particular focus on creative thinking in RE.

The overall effectiveness of RE was judged to be good with outstanding features.

Achievement and standards

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

- The results in the full GCSE course are well above the national average. The proportion of students consistently reaching the highest A*/A grades in the full course is particularly impressive.
- Student achievement at Key Stage 3 is excellent. Many attain standards which are high in relation to the expectations of the locally agreed syllabus. The performance of the higher attaining students in Key Stage 3 is very impressive.
- The evidence about standards and overall achievement at Key Stage 4 for those who do not study the subject to examination level is very restricted because of the limited provision made for them in RE.
- 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.
- RE makes an impressive contribution to students' wider personal development. They show curiosity, insight and reflect seriously on life's fundamental questions. They show an excellent understanding and respect of their own and other people's culture. In addition, 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.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in RE is outstanding.

- A significant strength of the subject is the consistency of the high quality teaching across the department. Teaching is stimulating and challenging because of the teachers' excellent subject knowledge and very high expectations about both behaviour and learning.
- Teachers 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 respond positively to this challenge, often persevering even when the tasks are demanding, and require a great deal of thought.
- Teaching methods are very well selected and time is used productively for independent and collaborative work. 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 with the teaching securing the active involvement of all students in their learning. The skilful use of discussion and oral work is a further important strength, resulting in students quickly acquiring an understanding of the skills and attitudes

required for successful debate. This emphasis is carefully balanced with very effective use of writing. Written activities are purposeful and varied including, for example, mind-mapping, extended and independent work with some more open-ended creative writing.

- Students' work is assessed effectively with excellent use made of peer and self-assessment. As a result, students have a clear understanding of their progress and what they need to do to improve.

Quality of curriculum

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

- Students enjoy RE as evidenced by the high take up of the full GCSE course. Students commented that, 'RE is much more than a lesson, it is a learning experience.' The Key Stage 3 curriculum is imaginative and demanding. There are excellent opportunities to promote literacy skills. Great care has been taken to ensure that units of work build on each other extending the level of challenge. Some of the topics for study are innovative including a unit exploring religious issues in the film 'The Matrix'. Overall, schemes of work are very detailed.
- Whilst the provision for students taking the full GCSE is excellent, it is relatively modest for those not following an accredited course at Key Stage 4. The school has introduced RE study days, which the students value highly. Limited use is made of further enrichment opportunities including visitors to the classroom and fieldwork.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of RE are outstanding.

- Leadership of RE is principled, well established and dynamic. There is a drive for improvement and a strong sense of direction within the department. The subject benefits from a staff of high quality specialists who work very effectively together as a team. The work of the department is driven by a shared commitment to high standards and the enrichment of students' wider personal development. This results in the subject having a high profile in the life of the school and in the eyes of the students.
- The arrangements for professional development are good. The subject has been enriched through the involvement of the department in wider training initiatives within both the school and the local authority, such as hosting a conference on assessment for learning in RE.
- 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 ICT to support teaching.
- The roles and responsibilities for RE are clear, with informal strategies in place to monitor and evaluate the provision, however, there is scope to extend the analysis of data further.

Creative thinking in RE

Excellent attention is paid to developing students' creative thinking skills. Very skilful use is made of strategies to engage students in deeper levels of analysis; students are encouraged at every opportunity to think about how and what they are learning. Students' ability to be innovative in the way in which they present their work enables them to take risks that ultimately lead to original and outstanding work. Students are able to improve their work as a result of effective self evaluation. Teachers demonstrate very high levels of confidence and competence to enhance the quality of teaching in a way that enriches and extends learning. In addition, the department is developing creative approaches towards the delivery of RE through, for example, the introduction of study days at Key Stage 4 and the use of aspects of contemporary youth culture as a way of engaging students' interest in the subject.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- examining ways to build on and strengthen the RE provision for those students at Key Stage 4 who do not take the subject at GCSE
- exploring opportunities to extend the opportunities to have first hand contact with religious communities through, for example, use of more fieldwork and visitors in RE.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop PSHE and RE 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

Clive Kempton HMI
Her Majesty's Inspector of Schools