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Mr C Sambrook
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Dear Mr Sambrook

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Religious Education

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff and children, during my visit on 17 June 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 creative thinking in RE.

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 yourself and your subject-co-ordinator, discussions with pupils, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of pupils' work, and observation of two lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE was judged to be satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

Standards in RE are broadly in line with the expectations of the agreed syllabus and pupils' achievement is satisfactory.

- By the end of Key Stage 2, pupils reach standards which are broadly in line with the expectations in the locally agreed syllabus. However, the pattern of progress pupils make is very uneven largely because of weaknesses in the RE curriculum. Pupils in Year 2 have a rather restricted understanding of their learning in RE. They can recall some

basic information but have only a limited ability to talk about their understanding of the diversity of religion. However, pupils observed in Year 1 had a more coherent and informed grasp of the importance of religion in peoples' lives.

- Throughout Key Stage 2 pupils extend their knowledge of different religions. However, the depth of their understanding and their ability to investigate, analyse and apply religious concepts are limited because of weaknesses in planning.
- The contribution of RE to the pupils' wider personal development is good. Pupils are interested in the subject and are attentive in lessons. They develop a clear appreciation of the diversity of religion and show respect for differences of opinion. The development of their ability to debate and discuss religious ideas and human issues is more constrained because teaching does not focus carefully enough on these skills.

Quality of teaching and Learning

The quality of teaching and learning in RE is satisfactory.

- Lessons in RE are well-managed and orderly and often planned in great detail; relationships with pupils are positive. A range of different teaching approaches and resources is used to engage pupils' interest. For example, a role play in Year 1 provided a delightful opportunity for the pupils to explore the features of a church marriage. On occasions, teachers use questions well to recap learning and invite pupils to share their experiences. There are examples of more challenging activities being used to extend pupils' thinking. For example, in one Year 5 lesson they considered how the 10 commandments might be developed in the modern world.
- However, the quality of teaching and learning is uneven across the school. Some planning is over-complex, tries to cover too much and, as a result, does not provide a clear enough focus for pupils. Learning objectives are not always pitched at an appropriate level and, as a result, tasks are either not challenging enough or lose their focus.
- The RE co-ordinator has, rightly, identified pupils' curiosity about religion as a strength. They often ask questions about their learning. However, teaching is not always capitalising on this strength. Opportunities to investigate, discuss and debate are not structured into enough lessons and, where they do occur, are not always extended sufficiently. The pupils are very clear that, in RE, too many activities are not challenging, they have few opportunities to find things out for themselves and there are too many undemanding writing tasks.
- In some classes, work in RE is well-marked with helpful feedback to the pupils. In others, however, the only focus of marking is on literacy skills and no helpful subject comments are made.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in RE is inadequate and a major factor restricting progress.

- The RE curriculum pays very close attention to the requirements of the locally agreed syllabus. Reasonable time is allocated to RE and it is clearly identified in the overall pattern of planning. It is well-matched to the backgrounds of the pupils and ensures they have opportunities to explore diversity in religion.
- However, in practice, the agreed syllabus is not being used effectively. There is no clear model to guide medium term planning in RE, setting out an appropriate pattern of learning in the subject. As a result, the quality of the individual teachers' medium term planning is very variable.
- The suggested areas of study in the agreed syllabus have not been re-constructed effectively to ensure that: learning is pitched effectively; skills and understanding are developed progressively; and, units of work are sequenced appropriately, particularly at Key Stage 2. In addition, the delivery of RE on a lesson a week basis is not encouraging teachers to develop more extended and challenging activities and the subject is planned in relative isolation from the rest of the curriculum. A number of links to, for example, literacy or history, which would enrich and extend learning, are missed. Overall, the interpretation being placed on the expectations of the agreed syllabus are proving a barrier to effective learning.
- The school is making a start in developing manageable arrangements for assessing pupils' progress but these have yet to be implemented.
- While some use is made of the local church as a resource for learning and occasionally representatives of other faiths contribute to pupils' learning, overall the use made of fieldwork and firsthand experience in RE is very limited. The school has identified this as a target for improvement.

Leadership and management of RE

The leadership and management of RE are satisfactory.

- The subject co-ordinator has raised the profile of RE in the school. She is enthusiastic and committed to improvement of the subject and has, for example, used and provided opportunities for professional development both for herself and her colleagues.
- A simple action plan linked to a subject review has been established and a clear policy for the subject has recently been agreed. Progress has been made in developing resources for the subject, annotating examples of pupils' work to exemplify standards, and establishing a model for assessment. Crucially, the leadership is committed to

ensuring that improvements in RE are integrated within the schools' wider priorities for improving learning.

- In addition to concerns related to the effective implementation of the agreed syllabus, the arrangements for monitoring, reviewing and action planning in RE are not sufficiently rigorous and are not focused enough on standards and the quality of learning.

Creative thinking in RE

The school has recognised that RE has the potential to make a positive contribution to the promotion of creative thinking. As yet, however, it has not identified clearly the ways in which this contribution might be secured in order to raise achievement in the subject to a better level. Limited progress has been made in developing more creative ways of incorporating RE within the curriculum and building challenging patterns of thinking into pupils' learning. There are examples of pupils using more creativity in their thinking in RE but they are not sufficiently embedded in planning.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- improving planning to secure a clearer focus on key concepts and more progression in the development of learning skills in RE
- exploring the flexibility within the requirements of the agreed syllabus in seeking more creative ways of incorporating RE within the overall curriculum
- developing greater challenge in pupils' learning in RE
- introducing more opportunities for fieldwork and visits in RE.

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