

24 July 2008

Mr A Walker
Headteacher
Broomfield School
Wilmer Way
London
N14 7HY

Dear Mr Walker

Ofsted survey inspection programme - mathematics and religious education (RE)

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit with Gill Close HMI on 10-11 July 2008 to look at work in mathematics and RE.

As outlined in our initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of each subject, the visit had particular foci on the effectiveness of the school's approaches to improving the quality of teaching and learning in mathematics, and 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 staff, discussions with students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work, and observation of lessons.

Mathematics

The overall effectiveness of mathematics was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards in mathematics

Achievement in mathematics is good and standards are above average.

- Students join the school with broadly average attainment. They make good progress to reach standards that are above average by the end of Key Stage 4 because boys do particularly well. Girls do not make as much progress as boys, especially the lower attainers; girls reach average standards. In the last two years, standards and progress have fallen. The school's data for current students shows that they are on track for similar overall performance to last year.
- At Key Stage 3, progress has risen significantly in the last two years and is good, even though data for current students shows a dip. Targets have been met for reaching the higher standard, Level 6, but just missed for the nationally expected Level 5.

- In the sixth form, progress and standards have varied between cohorts. Students make good progress and reach above average standards at AS and A level.
- Students of all ages work hard and collaborate well when given the opportunity in lessons. Their degree of enjoyment depends on their teacher. Some find mathematics lessons boring. Older students generally like lessons more as they become increasingly aware about the impact of doing well in examinations.
- Some students do not develop an independent approach to solving problems and rely heavily on their notes and worked examples.

Quality of teaching and learning of mathematics

The quality of teaching and learning of mathematics is good.

- Teachers use good knowledge of test and examination requirements to prepare students well. They explain steps clearly and structure examples carefully so that students find them easy to follow. They give lively presentations and create a focused learning atmosphere. Students behave well, work hard and are given homework regularly. They find teachers very helpful in and outside lessons. This support makes a good contribution to their progress, as does the support from revision sessions.
- In the best lessons, students are challenged to think hard and collaborate on interesting problems, explaining their reasoning. All are involved in responding and have the chance to draft their ideas using mini whiteboards. Information and communication technology (ICT) is used well to convey mathematical concepts.
- Where teaching is less strong, it provides rules without a sound conceptual foundation so some students then apply them mistakenly. Assessment is not used well enough either to set work that challenges each student or to identify during the lesson how well students are doing and give them additional challenge or further support. Sometimes students are required to listen for too long or are not all involved in responding.
- Marking varies in quality but generally provides ticks and supportive comments rather than a clear indication of the level of the work and guidance on how to improve. Assessment tends to evaluate whether procedures have been carried out successfully rather than whether the mathematics has been understood.
- Students know their current and target levels or grades. In some classes, assessment and recording systems are used to link marks for topic tests to a level or grade. They give students a useful insight into areas they find difficult, which helps them to revise for examinations. Although students regularly mark their own work, they are not involved in making an overall assessment of its level against National Curriculum or grade criteria, or in making qualitative judgements about meeting a learning objective for a lesson.

Quality of the mathematics curriculum

The quality of the mathematics curriculum is satisfactory.

- The schemes of work provide a broad and balanced curriculum with helpful timelines to sequence their delivery. They underpin the good progress that students make. Suitable objectives have recently been included for the different courses at Key Stage 4, although provision for the lowest attainers does not always lead to appropriate accreditation and for the highest attainers it supports

only a small number of A* grades. Objectives for the mixed ability Year 7 classes are not varied to meet all students' needs.

- There are good investigatory and data handling activities in Years 7 and 8 that build skills of using and applying mathematics, although there is no systematic development of these throughout the school. Staff share a wide range of resources, including software, but they are not linked to the schemes of work to provide guidance on teaching each topic. Many lessons include clear presentations using ICT but students do not have consistent opportunities to learn in this way. Few use computers themselves in lessons to develop their mathematical skills and understanding.
- A substantial number of students study AS and A level mathematics, but there is not a choice of units or of other courses.

Leadership and management of mathematics

The leadership and management of mathematics are satisfactory.

- Senior leaders have an accurate understanding of the quality of provision in mathematics. Observations of teaching by senior leaders and the new head of mathematics are accurate and have led to improvement. Nevertheless, there is room for sharper evaluation with a greater focus on students' progress.
- Staff are very committed to helping the students do well. They work together sharing resources and ideas, although roles are not clearly defined. Mathematics leaders set high standards and have a strong desire for improvement in provision and progress.
- Departmental evaluation leads to some appropriate actions but these are not prioritised with a focus on improving teaching quality and students' progress, as well as their attainment, or expressed in terms of measurable impact. Line management has successfully improved some skills but not the sharpness of evaluation of provision or examination performance.
- Assessment, tracking and reporting systems helpfully provide target levels or grades and some specific targets for mathematics expressed in words. They are less consistent in showing clearly when someone might be falling behind or involving students in assessing how well they are meeting their targets.

Subject issue: the effectiveness of the school's approaches to improving the quality of teaching and learning in mathematics

- The school's central thrust on improving learning and teaching has enabled some mathematics staff to feel confident in taking on new approaches. Nevertheless, it is slower in enhancing students' independence and understanding through diminishing an underlying reliance on learning rules in preparation for examinations.
- The head of mathematics has found leadership training helpful but few other staff have attended professional development opportunities beyond those provided by the school.

Areas for improvement in mathematics, which we discussed, included:

- challenging all students to think hard, understand the concepts and methods they use, and assess their own understanding

- evaluating provision and performance, including students' progress, more effectively to pinpoint areas for improvement and prioritise actions with measurable impact to address them
- ensuring the courses and schemes of work meet all students' needs and provide entitlement to developing the full range of mathematical skills.

Religious education

The overall effectiveness of RE was judged to be inadequate but with a clear capacity for improvement.

Achievement and standards in RE

The standards in RE are just below average and students' achievement is inadequate.

- The results achieved by the Year 11 students in 2007, almost all of whom were entered for the GCSE RE short course, were slightly above the national average and broadly in line with their performance in other subjects. This represented good achievement. However, as a result of changes in the provision at Key Stage 4, all students now take a GCSE full course on the basis of the same, and, from next year, reduced time allocation. Results for those entered for the first part of the full course in Year 10 were well below the national average and reflected inadequate achievement. While the school believes that results will improve this year, assessment and tracking arrangements are not secure enough to be confident at this stage. In Key Stage 4 lessons, students' progress is sometimes good but, overall, the pattern of teaching is too narrowly focussed on securing success in the examination; not enough time is given to allow students to explore ideas in greater depth.
- Students bring a rich variety of religious background to the classroom. As a result, the standard of their knowledge of religion at the end of Key Stage 3 is sometimes quite high. They also often show an appreciation of the significance which belief plays in people's lives. However their ability to learn about religion is limited because they do not extend their skills of investigating, analysing and evaluating religious ideas sufficiently. Not enough attention is given to the area of 'learning from' religion and, consequently, students do not develop their ability to relate religious material to their own experience and thinking.
- While there are examples of students making good progress in some specific lessons, the pattern of this achievement is very uneven and overall it is inadequate. This is because: there is too much inconsistency in the quality of teaching; the overall curriculum lacks continuity and progression; and, assessment arrangements are very unreliable.
- The personal development of students in RE is good and a strength of the subject. Despite some weaknesses in the provision, students generally enjoy RE, behave well and respond very positively to higher levels of challenge when it is provided. The subject makes a strong contribution to the school's wider commitment to promoting cohesion and to celebrating and appreciating diversity. Although there is scope to extend further, the subject does make a good contribution to students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. A number of students expressed the view that RE helps them counter racism when they encounter it outside school.

Quality of teaching and learning in RE

The teaching and learning in RE are of variable quality but just satisfactory overall.

- Relationships with students are positive and lessons are generally well structured and managed. As a result, most students enjoy RE. A variety of different kinds of activities is used to promote interest. Most students remain on task and they often participate in discussions energetically. Homework is set reasonably regularly although this practice is not consistent.
- In the best lessons, teachers offer good models of high quality work to stimulate higher expectations and encourage students to take responsibility for their learning. This was most obvious in those lessons where students were using ICT to investigate religious responses to moral issues. There are some good examples of teachers using more challenging tasks to extend thinking and stimulate creativity. Lessons observed on Christian worship in Year 7 and on the Narnia stories in Year 8 demonstrated this good quality and students responded enthusiastically.
- Overall, however, significant limitations in planning and assessment mean the quality of teaching and learning is inconsistent. On occasions, tasks lack challenge and there is over-reliance on low level worksheets. Most classes are mixed ability but insufficient attention is paid to adjusting the work to match the range of different needs. While careful attention is paid to helping students understand GCSE examination requirements, sometimes this leads to mechanistic learning which does not extend thinking or enable students to understand the principles of effective argument or the ways in which religious beliefs impact on personal lives.
- The sequencing of activities in and between lessons is not based on a clear understanding of the process of learning in RE. While learning objectives are usually shared, students often move from task to task without a clear understanding of the underlying purpose or direction of their learning. In many lessons, the pattern is dictated by the teacher, leaving little scope for students to take responsibility for their learning and work at their own pace. On occasions, teachers are uncritical in the way they welcome all ideas and, as a result, students do not develop an understanding of, for example, the difference between a strong and weak argument.
- There is some very good marking of work with teachers offering helpful comments. However, some teachers do not mark work at all and the quality in students' books declines rapidly as a result. This level of inconsistency is unacceptable.

Quality of the RE curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in RE is inadequate and a key factor limiting progress.

- The curriculum meets most of the requirements of the locally agreed syllabus although there is no provision for RE in the sixth form. The allocation of time for RE at Key Stage 3 is adequate to cover the syllabus but at Key Stage 4 it is not well matched to the demands of the full course GCSE, particularly given that the subject is taught in mixed ability groups. This situation will become worse from September 2008 if plans to reduce time further are implemented. This pattern of

provision is having a negative impact on students' achievements and on the quality of teaching and learning.

- The overall structure of the Key Stage 3 RE curriculum lacks coherence, continuity and progression. There is an over-emphasis on coverage of too much content at the expense of a pattern of increasing challenge in learning. It is not entirely clear to the department what the expectations of the agreed syllabus are in relation to the balance between breadth of coverage and depth of learning.
- The medium-term planning and the arrangements for assessment are weak. No use is made of levels of attainment to plan work and the overarching purpose of each unit of work is not clear. Assessment is poor. Although attainment levels are used in marking, there is no shared understanding about their meaning and use.
- There is little structured planning to promote students' literacy and oracy skills. The students often display confidence in expressing views orally but opportunities are missed to use more structured approaches to discussion work in RE to build on these skills and link them to the development of their more limited literacy.
- Students have no opportunities for fieldwork in RE and links with local religious communities are not used well.

Leadership and management of RE

The leadership and management of RE is inadequate but there is clear capacity to improve.

- The newly appointed permanent head of RE is committed, enthusiastic for success and well supported by his head of faculty. The staffing difficulties which have affected the provision in recent years have been largely addressed and from next September all the RE will be taught by specialists. This is a major achievement. There are some very interesting curriculum initiatives being introduced in Year 7 from September 2008, which should provide a positive opportunity to review the way the subject is planned, taught and assessed. The school's newly acquired humanities specialist status is also providing a good context to develop RE and there are plans for an advanced skills teacher to support the subject from next September. Crucially, the students' strong interest in RE is a key to its capacity for improvement.
- A process of self-evaluation and action planning at subject level is in place, based on the wider whole-school arrangements. At present, however, the analysis of standards and achievement is limited, partly because the performance of students at GCSE is not judged against clear overall targets and is not analysed in enough depth. At Key Stage 3, assessment data is inaccurate and generous. This is frustrating the department's ability to identify and address areas of weakness. In addition, the process of evaluating success is limited because personal development, the strength of RE in the school, is not included in the school's departmental self-evaluation tool. While there are appropriate arrangements to monitor and support teaching, these are not comprehensive enough and have not been extended sufficiently to identify issues with marking and the quality of work in students' books.
- The department has had no recent subject specific professional development. It has not been able to access any support from the local authority to help interpret and implement the latest agreed syllabus.

Creative thinking in RE

The use of creative thinking in RE is limited. Too many tasks do not challenge students to use higher order and more demanding thinking skills. However, there are some good examples of more imaginative tasks, particularly at Key Stage 3. On occasions, students have the opportunity to investigate and interpret ideas independently or in groups and to respond using more creative forms of expression. Overall, however, opportunities in RE are restricted because there is too much emphasis on coverage of content and coaching to pass examinations. The school's access to expertise in the Philosophy for Children approach to learning provides an important opportunity to extend creative thinking in the subject. The new approach to the Year 7 curriculum is a further and very positive context within which thinking about the delivery of RE is developing creatively.

Areas for improvement in RE, which we discussed, included:

- reviewing the overall planning for RE, using levels of attainment more effectively to secure greater coherence, continuity and progression in students' learning
- providing more challenge, more effective differentiation, and more opportunities for students to take responsibility for their learning
- ensuring consistency in marking and greater reliability in assessment
- monitoring carefully the impact of the Key Stage 4 arrangements and the proposed changes to the Year 7 curriculum on students' learning and achievement
- capitalising effectively on the more secure staffing and management in the subject by ensuring the RE team have access to appropriate support and professional development
- extending opportunities for students to have first-hand experience of religious communities through use of fieldwork or visitors as part of their learning in RE.

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

As explained in our previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority, the local Learning and Skills Council and, in the case of RE, SACRE. The letter 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