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Dear Mrs Hollinghurst

Ofsted 2008-09 subject survey inspection programme: religious education (RE)

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 16 - 17 September 2008 to look at work in religious education (RE). On a personal note I would like to thank you all for your assistance in making areas of the school so accessible.

As outlined in the initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of RE, the visit had 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 staff and students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of four lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE was judged to be satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

Achievement and standards in RE are satisfactory.

- The standards reached by the students at the end of Key Stage 3 are below the expectations of the agreed syllabus, while those at the end of Key Stage 4 are broadly in line with national expectations. Students arrive at the school with below average levels of attainment and, given the overall progress made from Year 7 to Year 11, achievement across the school in RE is satisfactory.
- By the end of Key Stage 3 students understand similarities and differences between the religions they are studying. A particular strength is their understanding of ultimate questions and their ability to distinguish between

different opinions and to understand the arguments that underpin those opinions. Students show their strengths particularly through oral work but few of them maintain the same standard of explanation in writing. Some also struggle to learn and use the technical terminology of the subject.

- Standards at Key Stage 4 are variable and the disaffection of some students, coupled with low standards of literacy, results in some students not sitting the GCSE short course examination. The percentage of students who achieved A*-C grades in 2008 exceeded the national average and also exceeded by a wide margin the school's overall performance.
- The personal development of students in the context of RE is good overall and the subject makes a very positive contribution to their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. There are strong links between RE and the social and emotional aspects of learning. For example, Year 8 students analysed key sayings of Gandhi and considered their application to their own lives. An imaginative homework required them to keep a diary to show how effectively they had lived up to Gandhi's principle of non-violent action during the past week.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in RE is satisfactory.

- The subject is taught by two teachers with good specialist knowledge who use a wide range of approaches to teaching and learning. Activities are generally well organised, imaginative and, for most students, enjoyable. Teachers use an interesting range of resources, including booklets produced in-house, to meet students' needs. Group work is used creatively, particularly to support lively discussion. Writing frames are used to help students explain what they have learnt about religions and also to reflect on the impact of what they have learnt on their own beliefs and ideas.
- However, the creativity and imagination invested in task-setting is not matched by clear attention to overarching learning objectives. There is little use made of an understanding of conceptual development in planning or teaching. This has real dangers, For example, teachers' over-reliance on sequences of activities designed to fit any class can leave them at a loss when a class fails to respond. In addition, teachers have a tendency to leave students to get on with tasks without monitoring their progress.
- Assessment is inadequate. Plenaries are weak and are not used to assess students' progress or evaluate the lesson. There is little regular marking and few signs of the assessment of literacy, which is a school priority for all subjects. The level descriptions for RE are not properly understood and although some tasks are more difficult than others they do not necessarily meet the requirements of the attainment targets for RE.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in RE is satisfactory.

- The department has made good progress in restoring confidence in RE and dispelling negative attitudes to the subject. The effects of measures to improve the subject are particularly evident in Key Stage 3, where students respond well to the range of interesting and stimulating activities. However,

continuity and progression in the curriculum are weak and at Key Stage 3 there are few apparent links between the distinct units of the curriculum and concepts running through the curriculum to help students make connections between these units.

- The department is embarking on new and creative ways of planning the RE curriculum. The cross-subject planning for Year 7 is very thorough, and sensible links have been made between RE, English and information and communication technology (ICT). However, the RE-based weekly programmes are in need of further development. Like the rest of the planning in the department the emphasis is on activities and resources rather than learning outcomes and rigorous assessment to inform planning.
- There is insufficient attention paid to the agreed syllabus, differentiation and the levels at which students should be working. Some of the inventive links between RE and English in the overarching cross-subject planning do not appear so clearly in the RE weekly plans.
- The innovative provision for Year 10, while reducing the time for RE, has the potential to compensate by providing enhanced learning opportunities. Whole days devoted to RE give students opportunities to visit places of worship and engage with ideas and beliefs in greater depth.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of RE are satisfactory.

- There is a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the provision for RE and sensible targets have been set for improvement. The department has suffered several years of disruption through staff illness and the excessive use of non-specialists. This largely accounts for the residual negativity expressed by older students. Now the department is staffed by two committed RE teachers and the head of department has made considerable progress in reversing students' attitudes by making RE enjoyable.
- The head of department has embraced enthusiastically school initiatives to drive up standards, such as the creative use of group work. Less attention has been given to the organisational and supervisory roles of departmental management. Marking and assessment remain under-developed. Planning is brief and insufficiently detailed to be informative.
- The piecemeal approach to planning in unconnected units points to the need for a more overarching strategy for the development of the subject. Recent initiatives for Years 7 and 10 are promising but will require careful monitoring to judge their impact on students' progress.

Creative thinking in RE

Creative thinking is a strength of the department. Students have ample opportunities to discuss their ideas with others and those interviewed talked of the importance of RE for the development of their personal beliefs and opinions. The activities on offer present students with opportunities to express themselves in a range of media.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- improving the quality of planning and teaching by setting clear learning outcomes which are related to the expectations in the agreed syllabus
- monitoring the curriculum, particularly new initiatives for Years 7 and 10, to ensure that they are having a positive impact on students' attitudes, enjoyment and learning
- improving the quality and regularity of marking and assessment, including the assessment of literacy
- developing an overarching vision for the subject which is shared by colleagues and which focuses on raising achievement.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop religious education 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