

14 October 2008

Mrs R Baldwin
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Dear Mrs Baldwin

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 22 September 2008 to look at work in RE.

As outlined in the initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, 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, discussions with pupils, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of pupils' work, and observation of lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE was judged to be satisfactory with a number of good features and a good capacity for future improvement.

Achievement and standards

The achievement of pupils in RE is satisfactory overall.

- Most pupils arrive in school with a limited background knowledge and experience of religion. They leave school with a good understanding of some of the key features of a diversity of religions. They are also able to talk sensibly about the significance which religions have in people's lives and can relate this to aspects of their own experience. Where they make less progress is in developing their use of skills of investigation and in engaging with some of the key concepts and questions which underpin the subject.
- RE makes a positive contribution to pupils' personal development. They respond positively to the opportunities to explore diversity of culture and belief and often show a lively interest in finding out about the lives of others. The subject provides some good opportunities to use talk and develop literacy

skills. On occasions the scope for pupils to work more independently and explore the more puzzling aspects of religion is restricted.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in RE is satisfactory with a number of good features.

- The teaching of RE has a number of strengths. Lessons are planned in detail and the management of pupils and activities is consistently good. Teachers often demonstrate good subject knowledge and use exposition well. Relationships with pupils and expectations in relation to attitudes to learning are also very positive. Good use is made of praise to encourage pupils and a range of interesting activities is provided. Good use is made of artefacts and creative tasks to stimulate interest and help pupils learn. Activities are planned carefully to match pupils' differing abilities. Work is marked well, offering feedback on progress.
- The progress made by pupils in the lessons observed was broadly satisfactory. Pupils are sometimes slightly too passive and do not always engage actively enough in the learning. The structure and sequencing of learning is not always quite secure and the links between activities are not made entirely clear to the pupils. Pupils at Key Stage 2 do not always have enough understanding of the broader purpose and direction of their learning because the key concepts and questions driving the work are not made explicit enough in the planning.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in RE is satisfactory.

- A great deal of effort has been made to develop the curriculum for RE to match the requirements and guidance in the recently published Sefton agreed syllabus. The co-ordinator has worked hard with the year teams to produce a pattern of work to meet those requirements and there is a broad balance of study across the two main areas of attainment and the key themes and religions indicated by the syllabus.
- However, the school would benefit from more support from the local authority with the process of implementation to ensure the medium term planning is clear or detailed enough. It does not always ensure that the key skills, concepts and questions driving the syllabus are placed at the centre of the learning.
- The school is at an early stage in developing assessment in RE. While level data on RE is provided, the school recognises it has some way to go to ensure that assessment is built more effectively into the planning in order to make the judgements of progress more reliable and manageable.
- Some provision is made for enrichment activities to support learning in RE including use of visits and visitors. A priority within the subject development plan is to extend this in order to give pupils more first hand experience of diversity across religions.
- The RE subject leader is alert to the need to develop cross-curricular links and is aware that there is scope to extend these once teachers become more

familiar with the new scheme of work. Strong links are forged with the school's Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning programme.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of RE are good underpinning the good capacity for improvement.

- The subject benefits from thoughtful and determined subject leadership. The good progress made with the implementation of the agreed syllabus reflects the positive team approach to planning RE across the school and the effectiveness of the subject leader. The subject is well-resourced with visual, artefact and Information and Communication Technology materials.
- The school recognises that opportunities for professional development and staff training in RE have been very limited and that, to date, little monitoring of the subject has occurred. However, a well-considered RE policy, an action plan and a self-evaluation document have been produced with a strong focus on monitoring and reviewing the effectiveness of the new curriculum and its impact on pupils' learning. The school has found it difficult to access training opportunities to support their work in interpreting and implementing the new agreed syllabus requirements.

Creative thinking in RE

There are good examples of the use of creative activities to support pupils' learning in RE. A Year 1 class had produced some delightful visual interpretations of the Christian creation story to help them engage more meaningfully with the ideas. Some of the questioning in a Year 4 lesson on the Bible was challenging and invited pupils to think more critically about the way people's lives are influenced. Similarly, a group of more able pupils in Year 6 were set a challenging task to create an acrostic to express their understanding of the Jewish Sabbath. Overall, there is scope to build on the good practice and develop a more consistent and sustained emphasis on using creative thinking and questioning to extend the level of challenge in RE. The school is very keen to consider more creative approaches to the way RE is organised within the curriculum. However, uncertainties about the degree of flexibility within the new agreed syllabus have tended to limit initiatives in this regard.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- monitoring and reviewing the new scheme of work and exploring the flexibility within the agreed syllabus in order to strengthen the medium term planning and provide a clearer structure and focus to support teaching and learning in RE
- ensuring pupils have a clearer overview of the purpose and direction of their learning in RE and, in the case of older pupils in particular, providing more opportunities for challenging, independent work
- providing more training opportunities to help staff develop their understanding of how to plan and teach the key concepts and skills which underpin effective RE.

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

As explained in our previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and 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