

Alexandra House
33 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

T 08456 404040
F 020 7421 6855
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk



05 January 2009

Mr R Whatmough
Principal
Longsands College
Longsands Road
St Neots
Cambridgeshire
PE19 1LQ

Dear Mr Whatmough

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Religious Education

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 03-04 December 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 the use of 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 good. There are also particular strengths and the potential for further improvement is good.

Achievement and standards

The standards achieved by students in RE are good.

- Standards of students' work in Key Stage 3 are broadly in line with the expectations set out in the locally agreed syllabus for RE.
- Achievements in Key Stage 4 for the majority of students are also in line with expectations, though the standards achieved by some are above average, partly because of the emphasis placed on understanding the impact of beliefs and values on people's lives and

on developing students' abilities to present reasoned and reflective responses of their own.

- The number entering for the GCSE full course varies year on year, but the standards they achieve are overall above average and represent significant progress by the students involved.
- The students taking the GCSE short course, which has been introduced for the current cohort, and those who are currently entering for the full course option make good progress because of the quality of teaching and learning.
- Students' personal development through RE is also good and improving. This is partly because of the good quality teaching and learning in relation to promoting personal and social development, which has a high profile in the school. RE makes a significant contribution to this aspect of learning. Students are able to articulate clearly how the subject contributes to their personal development and preparation for adult life, in particular through their growing awareness and understanding of the viewpoints of other people.

Quality of teaching and learning

The overall quality of teaching and learning in RE is good.

- The two subject specialists, together with a committed team of non-specialist teachers, complement each other effectively in providing lively and interesting lessons in which students are encouraged to think for themselves and to contribute their own ideas, based on a sound understanding of religious beliefs and values.
- Lessons are usually well-focused and provide effective stimulus for all learners. Occasionally, when a lesson may lack some conceptual clarity or an activity may not sustain interest fully, learning is less effective but teachers are aware of how these aspects can be improved, and they evaluate their own teaching reflectively as a basis for improvement.
- The department has evolved an effective scheme of formal assessment and is working to implement fully the school's programme of assessment for learning and target work more directly to the needs of particular students.
- A particular strength is the evolving GCSE short course, taught mainly by well-motivated and well-informed non-specialists, which brings together the two main aspects of RE, learning about religion and learning from religion, in a coherent and stimulating programme.

Quality of the RE curriculum

The quality of the RE curriculum is good.

- RE courses are well planned on the basis of the guidance given in the agreed syllabus. Units in Key Stage 3 have been revised to

accommodate the newly-introduced level descriptors in the agreed syllabus. Carefully selected material contributes to the overall quality of the courses offered in both key stages. Most students speak highly of their interest in, and enjoyment of, their course, which is well matched to their needs. This is enhanced by a variety of enrichment opportunities including visits to places of worship and the introduction of outside speakers into lessons.

- One of the reasons for the effectiveness of the curriculum is the stimulus provided by the school's overall policy of giving a high profile and sufficient resources to the development of all aspects of personal and social development, including RE.
- All those involved in planning the GCSE short course make a contribution to its overall quality, so that the course benefits from the input of a range of teachers with complementary skills and abilities. The course is underpinned by clear objectives and the scheme of work is well planned to ensure that students have a sound understanding of the application of religious beliefs and values to contemporary moral and social challenges. It also encourages them to develop the use of skills of reflective reasoning in supporting their own points of view. It is supported by detailed guidance and ideas for lessons, as well as a comprehensive range of resources.

Leadership and management of RE

The subject leadership and management are good.

- The department is well led by an experienced teacher. Effective medium and long term planning helps to ensure continuity and progression in learning. After a period of some staffing disruption, the department is now staffed by two specialists, with complementary skills and expertise, and has a sense of direction and purpose in introducing further improvements in the provision.
- The close involvement of the school's senior leadership in supporting and enhancing the quality of RE has been a major factor in recent developments. Central to these developments has been the appointment of a creative non-specialist teacher to lead the GCSE short course. As a result, the planning, resourcing and direction of this course is thorough and imaginative, and is supported by a well-motivated team of specialist and non-specialist teachers. Arrangements for monitoring and evaluating the course, which include the views of the students themselves, ensure that it offers a challenging, stimulating and relevant programme. This is a strong feature of the provision.
- The department accurately evaluates its own achievements and needs and the steps that are required to ensure further improvements. Once again, the support and guidance of the school's senior leadership has been an important factor in encouraging the department to move

forward. The work of all those who teach RE provides a good example of collaboration in the interests of the students.

Creative thinking in RE

The school's policy of focusing on the quality of learning helps to ensure that students are fully engaged with the material they are studying. The best example of the success of this approach lies in the quality and perception of some of the questions and issues raised by students themselves during their lessons. It is not unusual for them to show the level of their thinking by recognising the implications for themselves and others, of holding particular beliefs, values and opinions. Teachers often help students to appreciate the potential breadth and depth of the concepts they are dealing with by drawing together a wide range of examples for discussion. As students are encouraged to make links between concepts, the quality of their discussions improves. The emphasis on 'thinking outside the box' has given positive encouragement to students to move away from expected answers, because their views are valued and respected in the classroom context.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- considering how the stimulating work at Key Stage 4 might be further extended by developments in Key Stage 3 and provide impetus for new developments in the sixth form
- developing the range and use of assessment for learning especially in terms of target setting in Key Stage 3.

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/SACRE and will be published on Ofsted's website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

John Rudge
Additional Inspector