

10 December 2008

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Dear Mr White

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Religious Education

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 19 - 20 November 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 satisfactory. However, given improvement in the overall provision for RE, the potential for better progress and higher achievement in the subject is good.

Achievement and standards

The standards reached by students in RE are broadly average and their achievement is satisfactory.

- Standards in Key Stages 3 and 4 are generally in line with expectations in the Essex agreed syllabus. Students' levels of attainment in their written and oral work in RE show that they have been well taught, but their progress is hampered by limited curriculum provision, so that their achievement does not reflect the very good progress that the majority of students make in the school as a whole.
- Within the constraints of limited curriculum time, many students do achieve well, and engage fully with questions and issues which are dealt with in a lively and interesting way. In learning about different religious

traditions they are encouraged to focus on significant concepts, beliefs and values, so that their overall understanding of the religious commitment of others is sound, though limited in range and scope. The quality of teaching often compensates for the limited provision, for example in the unit on beliefs and values in the programme for students following a vocational course.

- In line with the school's philosophy, students are challenged to respond to issues which are relevant to themselves as young adults, so that their personal development is good and the work they do matches their needs and interests. They enjoy their learning and value the contribution the subject makes to their thinking and to their spiritual and moral development. As a result, students behave well, participate fully in lessons and are keen to raise issues of their own.

Quality of teaching and learning of RE

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

- Almost all students make good progress in their lessons because the teaching is pitched at the right level, the classroom is well organised, and the pace of work is lively. Activities are varied and interesting and support the learning goals. Teachers are careful to review what they have taught with their students and to summarise the learning.
- All lessons are well prepared, and planning is thorough, because the subject leader provides all those who teach the subject with clear lesson outlines, suggestions for activities and a range of learning resources of high quality.
- Outstanding lessons are characterised by careful attention to clarifying concepts through a range of connected activities. Questioning probes students' thinking and challenges them to apply their ideas to different situations and circumstances. Stimulating resources are used to help students to use their own imaginations, and helpful support and guidance is provided for those who need it.
- In one particularly effective lesson, students were engrossed in exploring the Buddhist concept of impermanence through the experience of designing and then dispensing with a sand mandala, carefully linked with the students' own experience of changes in their own lives. The teacher's evaluation of the lesson highlighted some of the other possible developments of the concept in Buddhism which could have been followed up if more time was available for the teaching of RE.
- Students' work is usually assessed formally at the end of each unit of work through a summative task. However, the limited evidence available, given the fragmentary nature of the curriculum provision, means that only a broad assessment can be made of students' progress. Nevertheless, students receive careful and targeted feedback on their written work.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in RE is satisfactory.

- Within the tight time constraints, the RE curriculum is designed effectively and is closely geared to students' needs and interests. Aspects of the

programmes of study from the Essex agreed syllabus are deployed in such a way that, as far as possible, all students learn about religion and from religion, at a sufficient depth to challenge their thinking about contemporary spiritual, moral and social issues.

- Particular emphasis is given in Key Stage 4 to the exploration of significant contemporary issues, for example, exploration of what it means to be British, in which consideration of different religious perspectives plays a pivotal role. Issues have been carefully chosen to ensure that the RE focus can be adequately addressed within the overall provision, so that students can develop their thinking about religion at the same time. This provides a refreshing context within contemporary society for exploring other peoples' ideas and values.
- There is currently no provision for external examination in RE. However, some of the Key Stage 4 course follows the broad outline of a typical GCSE short course, with an emphasis on the application of religious, and particularly Christian, beliefs and values.
- Within the curriculum framework for RE, there is provision for enrichment activities, particularly in the form of focussed days to explore issues with a cross-curricular perspective. These opportunities also add to students' sense of the relevance of RE to their own development.
- The school's specialist status as a performing arts college has helped to enhance the level of creativity in learning in all areas associated with students' personal and social education, including RE. Many of the skills that students learn as part of this specialism are deployed to enrich and stimulate their learning. This means that, in discussion and debate in the classroom, for example, a variety of techniques are used to encourage students to express their own ideas cogently and to understand and respect the views of others.

Leadership and management of RE

Leadership and management are satisfactory

- Leadership and management at a subject level are good. The subject leader has overall management responsibility for a number of areas related to personal and social education and, in relation to RE, has oversight of a large team of non-specialist teachers. Within this management structure, the quality of support and monitoring is effective in ensuring that colleagues are aware of their roles and responsibilities and have the necessary resources and skills to teach RE. This is built mainly on the quality and the thoroughness of the schemes of work which provide a good balance of direction, for example in terms of learning outcomes, and of flexibility, for example in relation to the choice and deployment of resources. All are accessible electronically. Additionally, the subject leader also monitors the quality of teaching, peer observation is encouraged and regular meetings with colleagues help to deal with issues as they arise.
- The main constraint, which restricts students' current progress and hampers them from achieving as well as they do in most other subjects, is the limited curriculum time which often makes any sense of coherence and continuity in learning very difficult to realise.

- The department's self-evaluation gives an accurate and focussed assessment of the current provision and presents clear goals for future development.

Creative thinking in RE

The school's overall drive to improve the quality of learning through encouraging creative thinking is one of the factors in promoting this facet of learning in RE. The main strength of this feature, which is thoughtfully deployed in the teaching of RE, is the emphasis on the investigation of concepts. Where creative thinking is encouraged, its purpose is to deepen students' understanding. One way in which this is done is to help students to explore a concept, such as the Buddhist idea of anicca, through a variety of activities which are then skilfully drawn together by the teacher, so that students see the concept from a variety of perspectives, and thus begin to perceive how the various ideas are linked together. Skills drawn from the performing arts are used to sharpen the focus of discussion, so that students move beyond their current knowledge and thinking and, in the best examples, learn how to develop lines of argument. This in turn strongly supports the emphasis in RE on evaluation. In some cases, the teacher's questioning techniques can be a further stimulus to students to think outside their own zone of reference. Occasionally, some teachers appear reticent to use questioning in this way and tend to revert to the basic approach of merely gathering information from students.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- ensuring that all students in Key Stages 3 and 4 have the opportunity to benefit from their full curriculum entitlement in RE
- providing a curriculum for RE which incorporates greater continuity, progression and coherence.

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