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07 November 2008

Mr S Morrison  
Headteacher  
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Dear Mr Morrison

### Ofsted survey inspection programme – Religious Education

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 22-23 October 2008 to look at work in religious education (RE). On a personal note I would like to thank your premises manager and his staff for their practical assistance during my visit. I am also grateful to Mr Lewis for coming into school on these two days.

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 five 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 students taking the GCSE full course in Key Stage 4 dipped in 2008 but are broadly in line with national expectations and above the school's overall performance. Students taking the short course reach standards that are well below both the national average and the school's overall performance.
- The majority of students who do not take an examination or who are entered for the GCSE short course at the end of Key Stage 4 make, at

best, satisfactory progress. The majority of those who take the full course make good progress. The standards reached by the students at the end of Key Stage 3 are slightly below the expectations of the agreed syllabus reflecting satisfactory progress. This means that overall achievement across the school in RE is satisfactory.

- By the end of Key Stage 3 students have a sound knowledge of religions and use technical vocabulary well. They understand the impact of religion on individuals and communities and can explain how religious sources are used to provide answers to ultimate questions and ethical issues. However, they struggle to explain why there are similarities and differences of belief and practice within and between religions. Students show their strengths particularly through oral work but only a minority of them maintain the same standard in writing.
- The personal development of students in the context of RE is outstanding. RE is a popular subject. Many students practice a religion and this stimulates interest in the subject. Students are interested in, and ask questions about, religion and are interested in comparing their opinions with those of people from different religious backgrounds. There is a genuine will to engage with others from different backgrounds. Students understand and value the multi-cultural and multi-faith context of their school. Their relationships with peers and adults are excellent and behaviour in lessons is exemplary.

### Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in RE is good.

- The quality of teaching is generally good and sometimes outstanding and as a result most students make good progress in lessons. The combination of teachers' excellent relationships with their students, their clear direction, good subject knowledge, high quality input and command of their lessons gains the respect of students. This shows itself in the students' enthusiasm, genuine interest in the subject and eagerness to do well.
- Lessons are well planned and learning outcomes are clearly displayed and understood. Teaching approaches and resources are tailored to the needs of particular classes. Students are keen to ask and answer questions and offer many mature insights; for example one Year 11 student answering a question about the key elements in the Christian view of the world said 'it's all about broken relationships'.
- Teaching is vibrant, brisk and purposeful and teachers 'teach' rather than take on the role of facilitator. Students' obvious enjoyment of lessons and the progress they make indicates that this method is effective. However certain activities, particularly those involving discussion, would benefit from group involvement and collaborative learning rather than the more usual paired work.
- The quality of marking and assessment is variable. At best, marking includes both a grade and a helpful formative comment. Several of the students interviewed identified the quality of written feedback as a

strength of the subject, although this quality is not consistent across all classes.

## Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in RE is satisfactory.

- The strength of the curriculum lies in its match to the needs of students. At both key stages the focus of the curriculum is on the study of religions. Students find this interesting. The provision meets the statutory requirements set out in the Southwark locally agreed syllabus.
- The quality of planning is variable. It is thorough at Key Stage 4 but weak at Key Stage 3, where it consists of no more than a list of topics to be covered over the three years. Key Stage 3 planning gives limited guidance to the department on continuity and progression, aims and objectives, resources, assessment or differentiation. This can give rise to inconsistency of approach. The lack of detailed planning seriously disadvantages inexperienced non-specialists and is a key reason why the good teaching in individual lessons only translates into satisfactory achievement over time.
- The department believes the flexibility offered in the Key Stage 4 curriculum is a strength providing opportunities for students to take GCSE short course, to choose from two GCSE full courses and to follow an advanced level course. However, the majority of students either get poor short course results or no qualification at all.
- The department provides extra-curricular or enrichment activities which are popular with students, who spoke enthusiastically about visits to Islam EXPO and Rochester Cathedral.
- The quality of the overall assessment arrangements and use of levels is satisfactory. Some good principles are in place, for example students have copies of the level descriptions in their exercise book and a note of the level they are working towards. Levels are used for assessment and for measuring progress but they are not always used accurately and some work is over-graded.

## Leadership and management

The leadership and management of RE are satisfactory.

- The RE department benefits from three specialist teachers and a small number of non-specialists. Most are very good teachers who are confident in planning their lessons and developing their particular teaching styles. However, less experienced non-specialists get insufficient support for developing their subject knowledge and understanding of RE.
- There is a sound development plan and some thought has been given to completing an instrument for monitoring the department's contribution to community cohesion. Assessment is managed adequately. There is regular monitoring of teaching in the department and there are

opportunities for professional development, although these need to be brought forward for new non-specialists.

- The department's self-evaluation over-estimates the progress made by students and also the quality of leadership and management on which this progress depends. In its evaluation of standards and achievement too much emphasis is given to the achievements of the groups of students who take the GCSE full course and not enough account is taken of the progress of other students taught by the department.
- There is insufficiently rigorous analysis of the reasons for the dip in full course results this year or the students' poor performance in the short course. The department is aware of the need to improve students' performance in the short course but insufficient progress has been made to this end over the last two years. In addition, not enough questions have been asked as to why good progress in lessons is not translated into better and more consistent achievement over time.

### Creative thinking in RE

Students are generally creative with ideas and particularly in sharing their diverse experiences of religion. Teachers provide opportunities to learn from sources other than the printed word; for example a practical experiment to illustrate omnipresence was enthusiastically received by Year 7 students who went on to complete an interesting task to reinforce understanding of the characteristics of deities. Year 10 students became a panel of advisers suggesting how the Anglican church might improve attendance. RE provides several opportunities for students to present their work in the form of posters, presentations, art and drama. There has been a recent move to create a cross-curricular topic for Year 7 on 'human identity' which encourages them to compare the perspectives on this theme of several subjects including RE, science and English. As yet it is too early to evaluate the impact of this topic.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- improving GCSE short course results
- improving the quality of the Key Stage 3 curriculum
- making provision for more Key Stage 4 students to enter for a nationally recognised qualification
- undertaking closer analysis of GCSE data to investigate any fluctuations in results and the comparable performance of boys and girls
- improving the consistency of marking and assessment, particularly at Key Stage 3.

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