

Alexandra House
33 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

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



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Mr R Knight
Headteacher
Shavington High School
Rope Lane
Shavington
Crewe
CW2 5DH

Dear Mr Knight

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

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 19-20 November 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 students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work, and observation of lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE was judged to be satisfactory with good features.

Achievement and standards

The achievement of students in RE is satisfactory.

- Results for those students entered for the full course GCSE in 2008 were above the national average. This reflects a trend of good results over some years. A high proportion exceeded their target grade. The percentage gaining the highest A*-B grades was particularly high reflecting the good progress made by the more able students. The performance of boys was particularly positive. Achievement overall on the full course is therefore good. Students demonstrate a lively interest in, and good ability to think about, the significance of religious belief and practice.
- The majority of students are entered for the short course GCSE where results are below the national average and over half did not reach their target grade in

2008. The percentage achieving the higher A*-B grades was particularly low representing the inverse of the picture on the full course, and a pattern of underachievement amongst the more able.

- However, there are patterns of significant variability in the short course results. Students in some teaching groups made good progress and attained results in line with expectations. In other teaching groups, students made much less progress partly as a result of patterns of disruption in their provision. Changes have been made to the choice of short course GCSE syllabus and to the timetabling and grouping arrangements which have led to improved attitudes towards the subject this year. Although the overall impact of the changes on achievement is not yet clear, the evidence from much of the students' work indicates a more positive picture of progress.
- Many students on the short course find argument and evaluation very challenging. Their use of evidence about the meaning and significance of religious viewpoints is often weak. They also find it difficult to identify central aspects of Christian belief, a key element of the short course syllabus. This reflects a weaker aspect of the school's current Key Stage 3 RE curriculum.
- At the end of Year 9, the standards reached by students are broadly in line with expectations of the agreed syllabus and this reflects satisfactory achievement across the key stage. Again, however, the pattern of this achievement is variable reflecting inconsistencies in the quality of teaching and the curriculum.
- Where students are well taught, progress in lessons is often good. Less able students sometimes achieve very well where learning is carefully adapted to meet their needs. Most students acquire a broad knowledge and understanding of key features of religion and recognise the significance which religion plays in people's lives. In some classes they are enabled to ask pertinent and challenging questions linking their knowledge of religion to everyday life and contemporary issues. However, this pattern of good progress is not consistent across all classes. Generally, students find it difficult to deploy higher level skills of investigation and analysis in their learning in RE and this limits the progress of the more able in particular. Students' ability to link aspects of their learning together, particularly in the context of work on Christianity, is not strong.
- The quality of personal development in the context of RE is, again, variable but good overall. Most students are interested in the subject and are keen to ask questions, particularly where they are clear about the focus and direction of their learning. In some classes, however, students are less engaged and do not demonstrate positive attitudes towards the subject. Where this happens their ability to participate maturely in sensible discussion is limited.
- The subject makes a good contribution towards students' social, moral and cultural development and towards the promotion of community cohesion. The subject often helps students to value and respect diversity as well as understand a range of social and ethical issues. Recent surveys of students' response to RE show an improving trend as a result of changes in the pattern of teaching and learning in the subject.

Quality of teaching and learning

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

- The quality of teaching and learning in RE reflects the inconsistencies in the pattern of student achievement.

- In the best lessons, teaching is characterised by a number of good and sometimes outstanding features. In these lessons, the ethos for learning is very positive, enthusiasm is communicated, and expectations about attitudes and learning are high. Relationships are very good and classes are managed very effectively. An outstanding feature is the way the teaching develops confidence in the students and stimulates them to ask questions and offer their own responses to the learning. Tasks are carefully explained and activities and resources are used well to match the varying needs of different students. Questioning and discussion are handled well to help students make progress and to check their understanding. Tasks are varied and engaging with some good use of lively group work and creative activities. There is sometimes a clear emphasis on helping students to understand how to learn. As a result: students make good progress; they are actively involved in their learning; they develop confidence; and, they make good progress.
- Where teaching and learning is less effective, work is not sufficiently differentiated to meet the needs of all students, the purpose and direction of the learning is unclear, tasks are not challenging or engaging enough, and the pace of learning is slow. Occasionally, there are weaknesses in the management of classes.
- Generally, even where progress in lessons is good, some features of teaching and learning limit the overall achievement of the students. Sometimes the wider context of the students' learning is not made clear enough so they find it hard to understand the 'bigger picture'. There is also scope to extend the opportunities for students to take more responsibility for their learning and make more decisions about what and how they should learn.
- Students' work is usually marked regularly and carefully. Systematic use is made of the school's policies on annotating work.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in RE is satisfactory although some improvements are needed at Key Stage 3.

- There is good provision for all students to begin a GCSE course in the subject and, where it is not appropriate to enter the exam, to follow a non-examination programme. Option numbers for the full course GCSE are often good but timetabling means students taking this course also have to attend the short course lessons and some find this frustrating.
- The curriculum meets statutory requirements. The Key Stage 3 provision broadly reflects the locally agreed syllabus although the department knows it has more work to do on implementing some of the detail. Some of the limitations in the quality of teaching and learning mentioned above reflect issues with curriculum planning. Planning for the short course GCSE is not ensuring that all teachers adjust the pattern of teaching and learning to reflect the specific needs and time constraints of the provision. In particular, the planning does not make explicit enough the need to provide students with more opportunities for discussion and independent writing and avoid extensive note-taking and low level written work.
- A clear and detailed scheme of work is in place for RE at Key Stage 3. However, the structure of the curriculum is not securing continuity and progression in the students' learning. At present, limited use is being made of levels to help support planning and differentiate outcomes for students. The links within and between units of work are not clear enough and, as a result, teachers and students are

not making enough connections between different aspects of the learning. Too much content is included at the expense of focusing on key concepts and questions. While key questions are identified for each unit, it is not clear how students are encouraged to engage with these questions or have a voice in thinking about how the questions might be decided upon and explored. Overall, units of work are not being planned to incorporate a clear enough process of learning.

- The weaknesses in the curriculum are particularly evident in relation to teaching about Christianity and this is reflected in the significant insecurities students have about the key beliefs and ideas of the religion at Key Stage 4.
- Assessment tasks are identified clearly with levelled criteria to support moderation of students' work. However, it is not always clear how these tasks build on, and relate to, the key questions and main foci of the learning. As a result students sometimes find it difficult to see the progress they are making and explain how they can improve their work.
- A pattern of enrichment activities is in place which this year will include an interesting opportunity for some of the gifted and talented students in the subject to attend a study day at another local school. At present the pattern of enrichment is relatively limited and focuses mainly on local or regional Christian contacts. Most students have had no significant opportunity to engage directly with representatives from non-Christian or minority ethnic communities.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of RE are satisfactory with good features.

- The subject is led by a thoughtful, experienced and enthusiastic head of department who is well supported by her line manager. She has a very good understanding of the subject and a passionate commitment to promoting students' well-being and their ability to respond maturely to the issues raised by RE. She is supported by a small teaching team and the use of non-specialists in the subject is being managed efficiently. The subject functions well on a day to day basis and is generally well organised. Recent changes to the accommodation have had a very positive impact and helped secure better access to information and communication technology (ICT) to support teaching. Displays in both the main classrooms are attractive and stimulating. Resources are adequate to meet the requirements of the curriculum.
- Opportunities for professional development are limited. The head of subject uses local support networks and conferences to keep up-to-date and attended a local training event on the implications of the Key Stage 3 review for RE. The school has accessed subject support from the local authority. However, overall, the department has had limited opportunity to build subject expertise across the whole team. The department has not been able to access enough training in ways of interpreting and implementing the more recent locally agreed syllabus – particularly in thinking about ways of developing the Key Stage 3 curriculum.
- A clear pattern of monitoring, evaluation and improvement planning is in place and the overall judgements in the most recent self-review are broadly accurate. However, the analysis of some of the factors which are impacting on the variability in the students' achievement is not always sharp enough. As a result, the priorities in the improvement plan do not focus enough on improving the curriculum and securing greater consistency in the quality of the teaching.

- The department has good capacity for improvement. The strengths of the subject leader coupled with the opportunities for RE to link into some of the ways the school is responding to the Key Stage 3 curriculum review offer scope to address some of the current limitations in planning. The school's science specialist status incorporates a drive to develop more enquiry based learning across the curriculum and the subject could benefit greatly from this initiative.

Creative thinking in RE

The use made of creative thinking in the context of RE is often good but also quite variable. Both the specialists have made very good use of creative activity to encourage students to reflect on and express their responses to aspects of their learning. Some of the art work in classrooms is of high quality. The visit afforded the opportunity to observe some highly creative responses to the Lost Son story produced by students in Year 9. Some of the tasks in lessons do require students to think for themselves and make decisions about, for example, ways of interpreting different forms of expression. The department realises it needs to ensure this use of creative activities is carefully linked to the wider learning objectives of the students' work. However, this pattern of creative and critical thinking is not consistent across all the provision. The department has made a start in thinking about the way it might respond creatively to the opportunities provided by the Key Stage 3 review but recognises it needs further support to exploit these fully.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- securing greater consistency in the quality of teaching and learning
- developing curriculum planning at Key Stage 3 to ensure greater continuity, progression and coherence in students' learning
- improving the ability of short course GCSE students to use skills of analysis and evaluation and their understanding of religious perspectives
- extending challenge for the more able.

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