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25 March 2009

Mr R Denly
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Dear Mr Denly

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Religious Education

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 28 January 2009 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 subject's contribution to the promotion of creative thinking.

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 pupils, a scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of pupils' work and observation of three lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE was judged to be satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

Pupils' achievement in RE is satisfactory.

- Standards across the school are in line with those outlined in the Staffordshire agreed syllabus. Pupils make satisfactory progress throughout the school.
- In the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), pupils show an interest in elements of religious life and know about some key figures, such as the local vicar. They are able to recall and recount simple religious stories, including the nativity. Pupils also recognise that some things are valued by others and can talk simply about what matters to them.

The youngest pupils are able to compare the experiences of people in religious stories with their own experiences and feelings suggesting, for example, reasons why we should be kind and helpful to each other.

- In Key Stage 1, pupils are beginning to identify a range of religious practices knowing that some are common to more than one religion. They are also able explain the place of celebration and festival in their lives using appropriate simple religious vocabulary.
- Pupils in Key Stage 2 have a growing understanding of the effects the commitment to belief may have on their own lives and the lives of others. They are able to consider the key beliefs of the religions they are studying and are able to make links with specific religious practices. They are increasingly able to make reference to two religions, pointing out similarities and differences. Too often, however, activities related to 'learning about religion' lack depth and pupils do not extend their skills in interpreting and evaluating information. As a result, pupils do not always develop their ability to relate religious material to their own experience or thinking.
- Attitudes towards the subject are positive; pupils enjoy RE and welcome opportunities to build confidence in a subject they value because 'there are no right or wrong answers'. Most show positive attitudes to the subject and find RE interesting.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in RE is satisfactory.

- Lessons are typified by good relationships, mutual respect, humour and warmth. Displays related to RE around the building also help to secure pupils' interest and enthusiasm for the subject.
- In most lessons, pupils experience a range of approaches and this helps to sustain their interest. They respond well to group and pair work and collaborate well with each other. Teachers have good generic teaching skills. They are good at explaining to pupils exactly what they are expected to do in lessons and this helps them make sense of their learning.
- However, some teachers lack subject knowledge and are insecure in teaching the subject. In less effective lessons, teachers do not plan adequately for the range of abilities in the class or build on pupils' prior knowledge. This slows progress because a minority of pupils are either not challenged enough or struggle to comprehend.
- Marking is satisfactory but there are few diagnostic comments to support pupils' learning in the subject. There is variability in the way in which some teachers use assessment information to check pupils' progress in order to detect and address any potential underachievement.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of curriculum in RE is satisfactory.

- The quality of the curriculum is satisfactory. Approaches to the planning of units of work are based heavily upon the use of guidance in the Staffordshire agreed syllabus. Provision of detailed activities for each unit is helpful although the learning outcomes for each element are not properly differentiated. Although a suitable range of tasks is planned, too often work does not extend to the most able. As a result, the contribution being made by the subject to the pupils' wider learning and literacy skills is restricted.
- The school has developed some good cross-curricular links, in particular with citizenship where pupils consider religious and moral beliefs and values that underpin personal choices and behaviour. This is well illustrated in the work completed by pupils in the global citizenship week.
- There is some use of visits and visitors to enrich pupils' experiences. However, given the limited direct experience that most pupils have of religion, there is scope to extend this further.

Leadership and Management

The leadership and management of RE are satisfactory.

- The subject co-ordinator is hardworking and very committed. She has worked tirelessly to support colleagues and is very enthusiastic about the development of RE throughout the school.
- Although formal monitoring of RE is not carried out, there is a keen awareness of what needs to be done to raise standards. Judgements about teaching and the curriculum could be more evaluative and based on closer monitoring of the provision. There is scope to use the available data to analyse patterns of achievement more rigorously.
- Resources are well organised and wide-ranging.

Creative Thinking

RE is taught in a thematic approach covering a two year rolling programme. The school has introduced a number of additional themes such as global citizenship in order to formalise the contribution of RE to community cohesion. This particular unit is an important step in developing pupils' knowledge and skills in examining and selecting evidence. For example, pupils were presented with several news reports containing various religious issues, they were required to evaluate whether the presentation of views expressed were fair to the particular religious group. The school is currently exploring ways of systematically teaching critical thinking skills.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- enhancing teachers' security and confidence in delivering RE through appropriate and targeted subject specific staff development
- making the planning for progression more explicit within the curriculum
- using assessment to plan challenging activities which are more precisely matched to the needs of individual pupils.

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 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

Jacqueline K Wordsworth
Her Majesty's Inspector