

25 March 2009

Mr S Peach  
Headteacher  
The Oldershaw School  
Valkyrie Road  
Wallasey  
Merseyside  
CH45 4RJ

Dear Mr Peach

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 26-27 January 2009 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 a 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 and representatives from local community links, discussions with students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work, and observation of lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE was judged to be inadequate. The subject has undergone staffing and leadership changes in recent years which have impacted on its effectiveness. The involvement of the school in the national challenge programme has meant that development of the subject has had to take its place within a pattern of other priorities which the school has had to address.

#### Achievement and standards

The achievement of students in RE is inadequate with standards below the expectations in the locally agreed syllabus.

- The achievement of the small cohort of students entered for short course GCSE in 2008 was good with most achieving an A\*-C grade. The school has no information about the standards reached by the majority of students in RE at the end of Key Stage 4 but the nature of the provision and discussions with students would indicate that this is below expectations representing limited achievement overall. While there is some scope for students to explore moral and social issues within the personal, social and health education (PSHE) programme, there is

insufficient planned opportunity to extend their understanding of the diversity and significance of religion in the modern world.

- The standards reached by students by the end of Key Stage 3 are also below the expectations of the agreed syllabus. Achievement is inadequate because the curriculum is not providing enough opportunities for students to make satisfactory progress across the range of the subject. Students in Year 9, for example, are making reasonable progress in terms of their ability to consider a range of moral and social issues but their ability to explain and apply religious concepts and perspectives is weak. They have limited understanding of nature and significance of religious belief and practice.
- Elsewhere in Key Stage 3, while students acquire a basic knowledge of a range of key features of some religions, their ability to deploy higher levels skills such as investigation and evaluation in their study of religious material is very limited. The impact on achievement in RE of the introduction of a competency-based curriculum in Year 7 has yet to be evaluated.
- In the absence of any clear or reliable data, it is not possible to judge the relative achievement of different groups of students in RE. Where students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities in Years 7 and 8 are working within nurture groups, progress of often good.
- RE makes a good contribution to students' personal development and well-being. Students generally show a positive attitude to learning in the subject, behave well in RE lessons, and are respectful of the views of others. Careful attention is sometimes paid to the way the subject can support the promotion of basic literacy skills and the ability of students to debate and discuss ethical and social issues. However, the limited opportunity for students to extend their understanding and appreciation of the personal and social significance of religion narrows the impact the subject has on students' spiritual and cultural development.

### Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in RE is satisfactory where there is specialist teaching.

- Where the subject is taught by a specialist, in Years 8 and 9 and in the after school GCSE group, the overall quality of teaching is satisfactory. Lessons are well-prepared and relationships are very positive. The classes are well-managed and the teaching reflects good subject knowledge. There are, however, insufficient opportunities for students to exercise independence and too much learning lacks challenge, particularly where students are studying specific religions. Insufficient attention is paid to differentiating work to match the varying abilities of the students.
- The quality of teaching is limited by weaknesses in curriculum planning. In Year 8 the emphasis on providing students with information at the expense of encouraging enquiry and questioning narrows the learning. In Year 9, where there is a predominance of work on moral and social issues, the structuring of learning is not enabling students to extend their questioning and discussion skills to include enough analysis of the meaning and significance of religious perspectives.
- There was no opportunity to judge the quality of teaching in the Year 7 competency curriculum or in the PSHE provision at Key Stage 4 where, in both

cases, RE is being delivered largely by non-specialists or, in the case of Key Stage 4, form tutors.

- In lessons taught by a specialist, work is marked regularly and in some detail. However, little use is being made of grades or levels to inform students about their progress and their targets for improvement. As a result, students have limited understanding of their achievement or what they need to do to improve.

## Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in RE is inadequate.

- There is limited provision for students to accredit their achievement in RE. Very small groups are entered for the short course GCSE. While some students opt to follow this voluntary after-school provision, numbers dwindle over time and only a minority finally take the examination.
- There is currently no specific examination group in religious studies in the sixth form. However, the provision of a clear RE focus within the General Studies A level taken by all in the sixth form, has ensured the school meets its those statutory requirements. There are also positive opportunities for those following the Critical Thinking A level to explore a range of religious, moral and philosophical issues.
- Core RE for all students in Key Stage 4 is delivered by class tutors as part of the wider PSHE provision alongside citizenship. There was limited scope to investigate this provision. While some resources are provided to support the tutors, there is limited detailed overarching planning in place to identify and structure the RE provision in relation to the requirements of the agreed syllabus.
- Provision at Key Stage 3 is undergoing transition. The competency-based curriculum in Year 7 is in the process of establishing a pattern of provision for RE linked to the agreed syllabus. While the school is confident that the new provision is impacting positively on students' overall learning, the initial planning for the RE component to be delivered in the Summer term needs to be taken forward to ensure it provides a coherent and challenging programme.
- The provision for RE elsewhere in Key Stage 3 is variable in quality. The subject has yet to decide how to revise the wider Key Stage 3 curriculum to take account of the changes in Year 7. In particular, it will need to decide how to incorporate well-structured opportunities for students to investigate the Christian tradition. The Year 9 provision is focused on the study of philosophical, ethical and social issues sometimes incorporating a Christian perspective. However, the students' prior understanding of Christianity is not sufficient to sustain this investigation and, in practice, much of the programme avoids engagement with explicit religious concepts.
- The nurture groups in Years 7 and 8 for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, where some or all of RE is delivered by a primary trained teacher, provide a supportive environment with strong opportunities to enhance students wider learning and literacy skills in the context of work in RE.
- While data on student progress in Years 8 and 9 is collected on a routine basis in line with the school's overall policy, there is little evidence of this being used systematically or reliably within the process of planning, setting assignments or marking students' work. There are no procedures for moderating judgements and no use is made of exemplification materials.
- The school provides a wide range of enrichment activities linked to their promotion of community cohesion, a number of which support the development

of students' understanding of religion, including use of some visitors on the PSHE programme in Key Stage 4. The new Year 7 provision has created the scope to incorporate opportunities for visits to a range of local places of worship to further enrich the RE curriculum.

## Leadership and management

The leadership and management of RE are inadequate.

- The arrangements for subject leadership in RE are not working well. The head of subject is not a specialist, is not involved in the planning, teaching or assessment of RE. The curriculum organisation for the subject in Year 7 and Key Stage 4 make the overall co-ordination and leadership of the provision difficult.
- These factors are reflected in the subject self-evaluation and action planning cycle which is not well-developed or clearly focused. The use made of data to inform judgements about the provision for RE is weak. Monitoring of student progress, teaching and the effectiveness of the curriculum is also of limited effectiveness.
- The subject specialist teacher provides most of the planning for the provision but has other important responsibilities within the school which limit the time she has available to develop RE.
- To date, little use has been made of the 2007 locally agreed syllabus or of any local authority support to help plan, monitor and review the curriculum. The opportunities for other subject training in RE have also been very limited. The main subject teaching room is attractive and well-organised and RE is reasonably well-resourced.

## Creative thinking in RE

While there are examples of some imaginative work in RE including letter writing and poetry, overall the contribution of creative thinking to students' learning in the subject is limited. This is mainly because students are not being asked to engage critically with religious concepts and material. Many students find it very difficult to think creatively about religion. RE is involved in the innovative Year 7 curriculum but it is too early to evaluate the impact on the subject. The plans have potential but will require further subject expertise to ensure the RE component builds effectively on the competency-based programme.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- developing the plans for RE within the Year 7 competency-based curriculum and monitoring their impact carefully
- revising the Key Stage 3 RE curriculum to take account of the Year 7 programme to ensure that learning in the subject is more strongly focused on developing students' skills in understanding and evaluating the key concepts and questions of the subject
- improving the quality of teaching, planning and assessment in RE to ensure that students' learning is more progressive and challenging
- improving the arrangements for the leadership and management of RE to secure a more coherent pattern of monitoring and improvement planning
- improving the provision for both core and examination RE at Key Stage 4.

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