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Ms S Coulton
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Dear Ms Coulton

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Religious Education

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 26–27 January 2009 to look at work in religious education (RE).

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject the visit had a particular focus on the 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 lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

The standards reached by students in RE are average reflecting good achievement.

- Standards at the end of Key Stage 3 are below the expectations of the locally agreed syllabus; nevertheless, students make good progress.
- Achievement in Years 7 and 8 is good in respect of students' ability to explore important personal aspects of human experience but is more limited in relation to their ability to investigate and interpret the major religious traditions.

- In Year 9, students are able to explain the significance of some key beliefs and teachings of the religions studied, making some comparisons within and between the faiths. Students are developing a growing understanding of symbolism in stories and are making increasing use of religious and technical vocabulary to support their opinions.
- Students starting the full course GCSE in Year 9 are making good progress although sometimes their ability to make reasoned and wide-ranging connections between the key concepts of Christianity and social and ethical issues is limited.
- At Key Stage 4, standards in the full GCSE course are broadly in line with the national average and the proportion of students reaching the highest A*/A grades is improving. In lessons at Key Stage 4 students make good progress in using the skills of enquiry, interpretation and evaluation effectively. Many are handling complex concepts confidently and can use a range of evidence and examples to justify their own ideas while providing an increasingly detailed evaluation of the perspective of others.
- Results in the GCSE short course in 2008 were below the national average. Current assessment data indicates that most students are on track to meet their target grades, reflecting good achievement.
- Throughout the school, good attention is paid to ensuring students learn 'from' as well as 'about' religion and the subject makes a positive contribution to their personal development. As a result, students are aware, for example, of the diverse nature of religion in the modern world. They appreciate the way religion is part of a wider pattern of cultural and social diversity. As a result, students can explain many of the feelings which underpin people's religious or non-religious responses to the world.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in RE is good.

- Lessons are well structured and orderly; classes are well managed and relationships with students are good. Teachers have good subject knowledge that lends confidence to their teaching styles.
- Lessons proceed at a good pace with effective use made of discussion, exposition and questioning, and information and communication technology (ICT). Occasionally, however, there is a tendency to try to cover too much in lessons, which prevents students from consolidating their learning before moving on, and this sometimes impedes their progress.
- Students' work is appropriately assessed with growing use made of self-assessment. Care is taken to develop students' understanding of the level at which they are working. Good emphasis is placed on using a range of assessment strategies to ensure that all students can make progress and to reflect their preferred learning style. Tasks set are purposeful and varied including, for example, extended and independent work with some more open-ended creative writing. Just occasionally, some tasks are not reliable enough as a basis for rigorous judgements against levels.

- At Key Stage 4 great care is taken to help students understand and prepare for the requirements of the examinations. Marking is completed regularly and is particularly effective at Key Stage 4 where students are given a clear understanding of their progress and how to improve.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in RE is satisfactory.

- The provision of both GCSE short and full courses are notable strengths. They contribute well to the students' enjoyment of learning because topics studied are effectively linked to contemporary issues.
- Overall, schemes of work are detailed with a consistent format in line with the provision of the agreed syllabus. The department is, however, aware of the need to consider whether the planning and delivery of some aspects of the curriculum are sufficiently differentiated to ensure the most able students are suitably challenged in all lessons.
- While careful thought is given to matching the curriculum to the needs and interests of the students', less attention is paid to the systematic development of the skills of the subject.
- Satisfactory use is made of visitors to the classroom and fieldwork opportunities.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of RE are good.

- Leadership of RE is well established with a drive for improvement and a strong sense of direction. The subject is well organised on a day-to-day basis. The schemes of work are comprehensive providing a sound basis for all the staff to work well together as a team.
- All aspects of the work of the department are driven by a shared commitment to raising standards and the enrichment of students' wider personal development, resulting in the subject having a high profile in the life of the school.
- The arrangements for assessing students' progress are satisfactory with appropriate use made of the analysis of assessment data to evaluate their achievement. Less effective use is made of the information gained from assessments to plan increasingly challenging work.
- The arrangements for professional development are good. A range of well-conceived strategies has been used to develop generic teaching skills and an understanding of effective learning in RE. The subject is well resourced and there is good access to ICT to support teaching.
- The roles and responsibilities for RE are clear, with suitable strategies to monitor and evaluate the quality of the provision. A well-focused improvement plan for the subject is in place with a set of clear and appropriate priorities targeted on improving provision and raising standards.

Creative thinking in RE

RE lessons and other activities are delivered in a wide range of ways using ICT, art, drama and discussion. At present, however, the opportunities for students to use higher order skills of thinking are not taught systematically across all aspects of the learning in RE. There are opportunities for students to think creatively about RE particularly in Key Stage 4, where students critically evaluate the various interpretations of religion with careful reference to historical, ethical and philosophical ideas.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- varying the use of tasks set in lessons to cater for the different abilities of the students
- securing greater development of the key skills of RE and building progression and challenge in students' learning.

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 Wordsworth
Her Majesty's Inspector