

25 March 2009

Mr S Knight
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Dear Mr Knight

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Religious Education

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 04-05 February 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 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 four lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE was judged to be satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

Students' achievement in RE is satisfactory.

- Students' attainment in Key Stage 3 is broadly in line with expectations set out in the local authority's agreed syllabus for RE. The proportion of those achieving the higher levels is rising, though the gap between the achievement of boys and girls, whilst generally narrowing, still remains.
- Results in the GCSE short course are generally above the national average. However, some students who follow the course are not entered for the examination. For those who do enter, the longer term trend is improving, though there have been fluctuations in results, both in relation to the national average and in comparison with achievements in other subjects in the school. Last year's results were significantly above average. The standards attained by boys and girls are closer in Key Stage 4 than in Key Stage 3. The introduction of the GCSE short course has, over time, contributed to a much more effective and challenging programme for all students. A small group of students follow the

GCSE full course on a voluntary basis. Likewise, a small group enter for GCE A level courses at AS and A2 level, where they make good progress.

- During Key Stage 3 they acquire a sound working knowledge of different religious traditions, and are able to articulate areas of common ground between traditions as well as examples of beliefs in which they differ. Where teaching is suitably challenging, students make good progress, particularly in responding to issues about beliefs and values.
- Students' personal development through RE is also good and improving, though there remains a certain scepticism among a minority of students about the value of the subject to their personal development. The majority, however, are well-motivated by what they learn, and appreciate the contribution of the subject to their understanding of the modern world, and to their awareness of the important role played by beliefs and values in shaping their own lives. They also articulate clearly the significant contribution that RE makes to their awareness of differences in the field of religion, and the importance of valuing diversity.

Quality of teaching and learning

The overall quality of teaching and learning in RE is satisfactory.

- Students make some progress in most lessons because the teaching is sound and well organised and pitched at the right level. Planning takes account of students with different needs and abilities; learning is structured around generally clear objectives; students are supported in their tasks; and, a range of activities helps to motivate learners.
- In the better lessons, teachers use a diversity of strategies to encourage learning. Some use questioning techniques skilfully to draw out ideas and to encourage more thoughtful responses. Others sustain students' interest and involvement with lively and brisk group activities which help them to approach the subject matter from different perspectives. Some lessons are less effective, for example when the teacher is not fully at ease with the conceptual framework of what is being taught, or when there is a over-emphasis on dealing with examination questions at the expense of the intrinsic interest and value of the issues being explored.
- In both key stages, teaching usually succeeds in maintaining a suitable balance between learning about different religious traditions and exploring issues and questions through the perspectives of different faiths. Teachers' subject knowledge is sound, including that of some non-specialist teachers who are usually well-informed about the aspects of the subject which feature in their lessons. Some teaching places too little emphasis on the impact of visual images to stimulate learning, and does not draw sufficiently on the wider use of information and communication technology (ICT), though some improvements in the latter are in train. Classroom management is usually effective, providing a sound and secure framework for learning.
- In most cases, learning is supported effectively by regular formal assessment, and students have a basic awareness of the level at which they are working. They are less clear about how they might improve their work and make further progress, particularly in Key Stage 3.

Quality of the RE curriculum

The quality of the RE curriculum is good.

- The curriculum in Key Stage 3 follows the guidelines of the locally agreed syllabus for RE, maintaining a balance between understanding the beliefs and values of different religious traditions and exploring issues and questions which arise from the study of religion. The Year 7 course builds effectively on work in the local primary schools. The GCSE short course is well matched to the needs and aspirations of adolescents, with its emphasis on beliefs and values particularly from Christian perspectives.
- RE schemes of work are well planned. Long and medium term plans are progressive, encourage continuity in learning and provide effective guidance for non-specialists. The curriculum is enhanced by a variety of enrichment opportunities including visits to places of worship and the introduction of outside speakers into school. A particularly effective learning opportunity was provided when students were able to meet and talk with one of the survivors of the 'Kindertransport', as part of their learning about the holocaust.

Leadership and management of RE

The leadership and management of RE are satisfactory.

- Some aspects of subject leadership are good. The department's self-evaluation is thorough, well focused and accurate. It identifies areas for improvement and development. RE is led by an experienced teacher with a perceptive and professional understanding of the subject. Specialist and non-specialist staff are well supported, and their work monitored and evaluated. The department has carried out a helpful survey of student responses to the subject.
- The close involvement of the school's senior leadership in supporting and monitoring the department is also a helpful factor in identifying its needs and the possibilities for further development and change.
- The subject leader's range of commitments as head of the humanities faculty, in a school which is a specialist humanities college, places considerable constraints on the time available to attend to the detailed management of RE and to monitor its development, for example in areas such as taking forward an effective programme of target setting. The overall impact of the school's specialist status on subject teaching is limited, apart from some opportunities for joint activities, such as visits to places of educational interest.

Creative thinking in RE

The development of creative thinking does not feature prominently or explicitly in the department's priorities. It can, nonetheless, be observed in some aspects of planning and teaching. Some activities used, for example, do lend themselves to more creative styles of thinking, as when students are invited, as a homework activity, to explore the issue of whether the authenticity or otherwise of the 'Turin Shroud' is in any way significant for Christian faith. A particularly good example was observed in a sixth form lesson, exploring the ethics of war, in which different groups of students were invited to work out the implications of alternative ethical

theories. Overall, however, examples of this kind were observed only occasionally and some of the teaching tends to rely overmuch on teacher input, leading to a more passive role in learning for the students.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- finding ways of securing greater consistency in the quality of teaching and ensuring all students are more actively involved in their learning
- developing further the use of assessment for learning to improve target setting for individuals and to guide effective planning and teaching
- improving the quality of teaching through a wider use of visual materials and ICT
- considering how to offer students a greater range of opportunities in their lessons to think creatively.

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

John Rudge
Additional Inspector

