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Mr C Leach
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Dear Mr Leach

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Religious Education

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 23 – 24 February 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 inadequate.

Achievement and standards

The achievement of students in RE is inadequate and the standards they attain are well below average.

- In the short GCSE course, results in recent years are well below the national average. Current assessment data indicates that a higher proportion of students are on track to meet their target grades in 2009. While this reflects some improvement in achievement, overall this remains inadequate. Students' progress and the standards they attain are inhibited because they are not transferring the overarching skills and understanding

of philosophical, religious and moral argument into their thinking about specific issues.

- Achievement in RE at Key Stage 3 is inadequate with students attaining standards that are well below the expectations of the locally agreed syllabus. The progress made across the key stage is very uneven as a result of weaknesses in the structure of the curriculum and the variable quality of the teaching. Consequently, the students' skills in analysing and interpreting religion do not progress quickly enough. Where specific units of work or teaching approaches challenge students to think for themselves, progress is much better.
- The contribution of RE to the personal development of students is satisfactory. Most show an interest in religion and an appropriate respect for the beliefs and practices of others. Students report that they value opportunities for discussion and debate. However, they are less enthusiastic about the way in which they learn when finding out about religions because the activities lack challenge. Behaviour and attitudes to learning are generally good.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in RE is inadequate.

- Teaching incorporates many positive features including the effective management of behaviour, positive relationships with students, the use of some varied learning strategies and resources, and a clear commitment to the subject. In the best instances these features combine well to secure well-managed lessons resulting in satisfactory learning and progress.
- However, there is too much inconsistency in the quality of teaching. Where teaching is least effective, learning is not well-matched to the varying needs of students because planning takes insufficient account of the varied levels at which the students are working.
- Insufficient attention is paid to giving students a clear understanding of how work in specific lessons fits into a wider pattern of learning. For example, some units are challenging but others over emphasise low-level collection of information about religion. As a result, teaching does not consolidate learning effectively or make the links between different phases of the lesson explicit enough.
- The use of questioning and discussion is not planned in enough detail to ensure all students can participate effectively and there is a tendency to over-extend teacher exposition to the detriment of the learning.
- The quality of marking varies. The best is detailed, gives good feedback to students and relates to progress against the learning objectives. Some marking is less helpful to students with the use made of levels to assess students' attainment often inaccurate. Students' skills in literacy are not reinforced enough in RE lessons, particularly in Key Stage 3. This is further reason why some of the better teaching is not being translated into satisfactory overall achievement.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in RE is inadequate.

- Students engage with religious, moral, social and global issues from a variety of standpoints. There is appropriate provision for all students in Key Stage 4 to study an accredited course. However, the post-16 provision does not fully meet statutory requirements because insufficient curriculum time is devoted to enable students to study all of the areas required by the locally agreed syllabus.
- While careful thought is given to matching the curriculum to the interests of the students, less attention is paid to the systematic development of the skills of the subject. As a result, there is currently a lack of clear progression and continuity because insufficient use is made of levels in planning to ensure that learning in RE builds progressively and this leads to the inadequate achievement across the key stage.
- Regular assessment opportunities are in place, including self and peer assessment, which help students to evaluate their own, and others' work. However, as yet, judgements are not reliable or robust enough, because teachers are insecure in setting clear criteria by which students' performance can be accurately measured. This reduces the effectiveness of using the outcomes from assessments to inform further planning and to ensure that learning is pitched correctly.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of RE are inadequate.

- The head of RE is hardworking and very committed. In difficult circumstances, she has kept the department running smoothly on a day-to-day basis. Despite some of the weaknesses in provision noted above, she is aware of the next steps needed in the subject's future development. With the support of the senior leadership team, she is beginning to re-establish the status of the subject.
- Some of the arrangements for monitoring RE have lapsed owing to ongoing staffing difficulties. The current arrangements are not rigorous enough to ensure a clearer focus on students' progress and on the consistency of assessment and quality of teaching in the subject.

Creative thinking in RE

RE lessons are delivered using a range of creative activities including art, drama and discussion. At present, however, opportunities for students to use higher order skills in thinking creatively about the subject are not incorporated systematically into RE lessons.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- raising the level of challenge across the subject
- using assessment more effectively to inform planning and secure accurate judgements of students' progress
- establishing a clearer focus on development of the key skills and concepts of RE in planning the Key Stage 3 curriculum
- ensuring teaching and learning is of a consistent high quality across the department, particularly in Key Stage 3.

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