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Mr P Dick
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Dear Mr Dick

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Religious Education

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 19 - 20 May 2009 with my colleague Patricia Metham HMI 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 above average reflecting good achievement overall.

- Results in the RE full course GCSE in 2008 were significantly above the national average and the proportion of students gaining the top A*-A grades was exceptionally high. The school has a policy of entering more able students for the full course; the results represent good overall achievement by these students at Key Stage 4.

- In 2008 all the other students in Year 11 were entered for the RE short course GCSE. Results were in line with the national average, also representing good achievement given the pattern of entry. In the case of both the full and the short course, the results are particularly good given the modest curriculum time allocated to the study across years 10 and 11.
- By the end of Key Stage 4 many students are able to engage intelligently and thoughtfully in the discussion of ethical, philosophical and social issues. They appreciate how religious belief influences people's lives although their understanding of this dimension of the subject is fairly narrow.
- Results in the AS and A2 GCE religious studies courses have been somewhat disappointing in recent years but the current students are making good progress and recent test results indicate standards will rise this year. In the lesson observed the students were handling high order philosophical discussion about the existence of God with confidence and skill.
- Standards by the end of Year 9 are broadly in line with the expectations in the locally agreed syllabus although the progress the students make across Key Stage 3 is uneven. While there are examples of some extended well-argued evaluative writing about religion, too often tasks do not challenge the more able students. Progress in Year 7 in particular, where RE is taught by a range of humanities staff, is very uneven and sometimes too dependent on the subject expertise of the teacher. Generally students are not using higher level thinking skills enough in RE and their understanding of the meaning and significance of religion and belief is fairly limited.
- The contribution made by RE to students' personal development is satisfactory overall. They behave well in lessons; most are interested in the subject and value the contribution it makes towards their understanding of diversity. Some students express more negative attitudes towards RE and, very occasionally, they show a reluctance to respect or value religious and cultural ideas and traditions which are different to their own. The opportunities for students to develop skills of independent working are rather restricted in RE. The time provided for RE at Key Stage 4 tends to limit the opportunity for more extended discussion and analysis of the issues which the course covers.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in RE is good although it is more uneven at Key Stage 3.

- Lessons in RE are generally well-managed and orderly. Relationships with students are positive and good use is made of praise and encouragement. Teachers have high expectations about behaviour and communicate an interest in the subject. Good use is made of in-class support where this is available.

- In the best lessons students are provided with a clear understanding of the purpose and context of their learning. Questioning is used well and effective use is made of discussion and group work. Activities are carefully varied to take account of different students' needs and to ensure that they maintain concentration across the 70-minute lessons. In one outstanding lesson with Year 13 students, the pace and challenge in the learning were exceptional and excellent resources were used to encourage lively and exciting discussion.
- Generally, the opportunities for students to take responsibility for their learning and become involved in more extended independent enquiries are limited. At Key Stage 4 this is often because the allocation of time to the subject is very tight but at Key Stage 3 it tends to be because too much of the learning is teacher-centred.
- Where teaching is less effective, learning tends to be focused on completing tasks and students do not always have enough understanding of the broader purpose of their learning. In some lessons the questioning and activities lack challenge. Insufficient attention is paid to matching the work to the specific needs of the students to ensure they maintain their attention throughout the lessons. The work in Year 7 in some classes is particularly limited with over-reliance on low level tasks.
- While there are some examples of good marking with clear feedback and use of peer-assessment, this is not consistent and some work is not marked properly. Generally, insufficient attention is paid to checking and correcting weaknesses in literacy.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in RE is good overall and satisfactory at Key Stage 3.

- The opportunity for all students to take an accredited course at the end of Key Stage 4 is a strength of the provision. Careful decisions have been taken about the choice of examination courses to ensure that they match students' needs and enable them to achieve well. The more able are extended by taking the full course. The arrangements for the delivery of the short course, using a rotation system which incorporates delivery of personal, social and health education, needs to be carefully monitored. It makes it difficult to track the progress of the students and can disrupt some aspects of their learning.
- The school recruits well for the A level religious studies courses they provide. In addition, all students in the sixth form have some opportunity to explore religious, moral and social issues through their general studies enrichment programme. Statutory requirements are met.
- The key factor creating variability in the effectiveness of teaching and learning is the uneven quality of the curriculum at Key Stage 3. While good progress has been made recently in establishing a scheme of

work for the key stage, the sequence of learning and level of challenge require improvement. The provision in some areas of Year 7 is too fragmented leading to the low level learning in some classes. The core focus and purpose of each unit of work is not always clear and the planning does not take enough account of the needs and abilities of different students. The curriculum over-emphasises coverage of content at the expense of focusing on the key concepts, questions and skills which lie at the heart of the subject.

- As a result of these limitations, the students make much less progress at this key stage than they do in Key Stage 4 and the sixth form. Given that this is the stage where most of the learning about religious diversity occurs, these weaknesses in the curriculum impact on the progress students make in this dimension of the subject.
- Progress has been made recently in establishing more systematic assessment arrangements for the subject. As yet, these are not fully effective at Key Stage 3. Judgements against the level descriptors of the agreed syllabus are not reliable and assessment tasks are not always effectively integrated into the planning of units.
- While there are some enrichment activities linked to RE these tend to be restricted to the Christian tradition. There are few opportunities for students to meet with or visit the non-Christian religious communities in the local area. As a result the contribution the subject makes to this dimension of community cohesion is limited.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of RE are satisfactory.

- The subject is recovering from a period of difficulties with leadership and staffing. Action has been taken to address these issues but the legacy is still evident in the quality of the provision at Key Stage 3.
- The newly appointed subject leader has made progress in establishing a more secure structure for the subject. Schemes of work and assessment arrangements have been established and the day-to-day administration of the department is now secure. The subject leader is well supported by the senior leadership team, the strong team of subject specialists and the local authority RE adviser.
- As yet, however, the department has yet to establish a clear baseline of expectations against which to judge the effectiveness of the provision. Limited use is being made of data and the overall process of self-evaluation and improvement planning is under-developed.
- The new subject leader is new to the role and it has been recognised that she needs further support in establishing her leadership of the subject. In particular, the mechanisms for monitoring the effectiveness of the curriculum are limited.

Creative thinking in RE

The use made of creative thinking in RE is uneven but relatively limited. There are some examples of outstanding practice in the sixth form where learning can crackle with energy. Elsewhere, where teaching is good, lessons often involve students in discussions which prompt them to use their imagination to explore ideas and issues. Overall, however, and particularly at Key Stage 3, too many tasks and resources are uncreative and narrow. This limited the opportunities for students to engage creatively with the subject.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- supporting the head of department in establishing her leadership and management role and developing the arrangements for using data and evaluating the quality of the provision
- improving the quality of the Key Stage 3 curriculum by establishing a clearer focus on key concepts, questions and skills, and by ensuring that the planning is adjusted to match the differing needs of all the students
- securing greater consistency in the quality of teaching by developing more variety and challenge in the learning
- improving assessment and marking to ensure students are given a more consistent and reliable indication of their progress
- extending the opportunities for students to have first hand experience of the diversity of religion within the local region.

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

Alan Brine
Her Majesty's Inspector