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Mr C Grimshaw
Principal
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Dear Mr Grimshaw

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Religious Education

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 01–02 June 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 above average reflecting good achievement.

- Over the school as a whole, the achievement of students is good with most progress made at Key Stage 4.
- Standards in the full GCSE course taken by a small number of students are well above average, reflecting very good achievement. The proportion of students reaching the highest A*/A grades is particularly impressive. GCSE results in short courses over the past three years have been broadly in line or just below the national average. This year there are indications that results are likely to be slightly above average,

with students making good progress in their ability to make reasoned and wide-ranging connections between the key concepts of Christianity and social and ethical issues. Results for the small but increasing number of students who take RE as an A Level option indicate attainment in line the national average.

- In lessons, students quickly acquire a growing confidence in investigating and evaluating religious, moral and social issues. Many students are handling complex concepts well and can use a range of examples to justify their own ideas while providing some evaluation of the perspective of others. The most able students critically evaluate various interpretations of religion with careful reference to ethical and philosophical ideas.
- By the end of Key Stage 3 most students attain standards which are in line with the expectations of the locally agreed syllabus, reflecting good progress. Where specific units of work or teaching approaches challenge them to think for themselves, their achievement is better. For example, their understanding and evaluation of ideas about how humankind has tackled its stewardship of the planet is impressive. Students' grasp of the meaning and significance of the key beliefs of religions other than Christianity is more modest. 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.
- The contribution of RE to the personal development of students is good. Most show an interest in religion and appropriate respect for the beliefs and practices of others. They value the subject and recognise the contribution it makes to the development of understanding and tolerance. As a result, students are aware of the diverse nature of religion in the modern world. Throughout the school, good attention is paid to ensuring students learn 'from' as well as 'about' religion.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in RE is good.

- While there is some inconsistency in the quality of teaching and learning in RE, overall it is good and, on occasions, outstanding. At its best, teaching is imaginative and lively. Teachers demonstrate good subject knowledge and, in the case of the best lessons, they set very high expectations and ensure activities challenge students to think hard. Relationships with pupils are very good and reflect a mature attitude towards the subject modelled by the teachers.
- The skilful management of discussion and oral work is a further important strength. This emphasis on oral work is well balanced with effective use of writing. Written activities are generally purposeful and varied including, for example, mind-mapping and extended, independent discursive work. Good use is made of information and communication technology (ICT).

- A well-conceived, effective and manageable assessment process has been established which is implemented consistently. However, teachers do not always adjust their future planning effectively in the light of what they know about the students' progress. The RE department sets targets for the students and monitors their progress towards them closely, although the targets set are sometimes insufficiently challenging.
- Nonetheless, there are occasions where the quality of teaching and learning is more variable. There is a small minority of lessons when teachers adopt a more didactic style, or where all students complete the same work regardless of their ability or prior learning. As a result, set tasks that are not challenging enough to ensure that all students are fully engaged. This can promote passive learning and does not always stimulate student interest.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in RE is satisfactory with good features.

- The provision of GCE A level and GCSE short and full courses is a notable strength. These courses contribute well to the students' enjoyment of learning because topics studied are linked effectively to contemporary issues.
- At Key Stage 3, schemes of work are detailed with a consistent format in line with the provision of the agreed syllabus. Work on the Christian tradition is planned to secure a progressive understanding of the main beliefs, celebrations and practices of the faith. A strength of the provision is the emphasis placed on enabling the students to understand the significance of religion and its forms of expression in people's lives.
- There are good opportunities to explore issues about religion in the modern world and in the media. Nevertheless, 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 higher order skills of the subject. The department is, however, aware of the need to consider whether the planning and delivery of some aspects of the Key Stage 3 curriculum are sufficiently differentiated to ensure the most able students are suitably challenged. Some units of work offering high levels of challenge are followed by others that are much less demanding. In addition, the links between topics are not made explicit enough.
- Good 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 high standards and the enrichment of students' wider personal development.
- The roles and responsibilities for RE are clear, with suitable strategies to monitor and evaluate the quality of the provision. Regular monitoring of standards and achievement leads to an accurate evaluation of provision which is the foundation for good strategic planning.
- The arrangements for assessing students' progress are effective 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.

Creative thinking in RE

RE lessons and other activities are delivered in a wide range of ways using ICT, art, drama and discussion. However, overall, the use of creative thinking in the subject is under-developed. 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.

As yet thinking skills are not systematically taught in Key Stage 3 but there have been developments in more cross curricular approaches to the subject in Years 7 and 8 in the form of links with other subjects within the humanities faculty.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- establishing a clearer focus on the key skills and concepts of the subject that builds upon students' prior knowledge when planning the Key Stage 3 curriculum
- varying the use of tasks set in lessons to cater for the different abilities of the students.

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