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Dear Mrs Heath

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Religious Education

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 08-09 June 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 good with outstanding features.

Achievement and standards

The achievement of students in RE is good.

- The standards students reach are high reflecting the good progress they make. In 2008 nearly all Year 11 students took the full course GCSE and 75.5% of them were awarded A*-C grades and 30% A*/A grades. These results compare very favourably with those attained nationally.

- Standards at Key Stage 3 are at least in line with expectations in the Devon agreed syllabus. At the beginning of Year 7 students demonstrate very good understanding and skills in the context of a unit entitled 'Who am I?' Their work on Sikhism later in Year 7 and on Buddhism in Year 9 is generally thorough and detailed but more factual than their earlier work and therefore the progress students make tends to plateau. Later in Year 8 standards rise again as students make a careful examination of the life of Jesus, concentrating on the religious and political context of his ministry and on interpretations of his teachings. They respond thoughtfully to challenging questions, such as 'Does the world need saving?' This leads them to compare theories about the purpose of Jesus' death; exploring key notions such as the suffering God, ransom and substitution. At the end of Year 9, when students begin the GCSE course, they can explain the basis of making moral decisions in various contexts, such as modern attitudes to marriage.
- Achievement, although very good overall, is too uneven to be outstanding. In 2008, while over half of all students made good or outstanding progress, a quarter failed to reach their target grade and so underachieved.
- Students' personal development has a number of strengths and is good overall. Most students spoken to enjoyed RE lessons although some said that lessons could be dull. The impact of the subject on their personal development varies depending on the topic taught. For example, the unit 'who am I' in Year 7 gives students excellent opportunities to reflect on their identity, relationships and purpose and the GCSE course studied in Years 9, 10 and 11 gives students a good understanding of their rights and responsibilities. The study of specific religions in Key Stage 3 gives fewer such opportunities. Through regular discussions students learn to listen respectfully to each other and express their views with confidence.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in RE is good with several outstanding features.

- In the lessons observed teaching was never less than good. Teaching has several outstanding features, although these are not evenly distributed across the department. Students make most progress when they are challenged and when teachers have high expectations of them. The best teaching is characterised by meticulous planning for the development of thinking skills, excellent questioning and discussion techniques, a range of varied sequential learning activities, and the use of teachers' knowledge to interject detail and explanation to add depth to students' answers and ideas.
- There are outstanding procedures in place for preparing students for GCSE. Assessment at Key Stage 4 is excellent and is applied well by

most teachers. All students have minimum target grades and there are rigorous intervention strategies for those falling below target. Particular attention is given to A/A* and C/D borderlines.

- Students are thoroughly aware of assessment systems, regularly engage in peer assessment using GCSE grade criteria, and know what they have to do to reach and exceed their minimum target. However, the careful analysis of GCSE data reveals that not all RE teachers implement these practices effectively. There are occasional gaps in their otherwise good subject knowledge.
- Teachers use information and communication technology effectively in their teaching and employ some particularly good strategies, such as encouraging students to write their ideas on the portable keyboard so that they can all be printed and shared with the class.
- Teaching meets the needs of high ability students particularly well. However, at Key Stage 3 the opportunity to meet the needs of other students through the school setting system is not always achieved. A review of students' work reveals that all students regardless of ability often do the same tasks using the same resources. As a result the needs of some lower ability students are not always well met.
- Teaching styles throughout the department vary but overall might be described as precise and well-structured rather than exciting. Consequently the development of the students' understanding and skills is not always matched by the parallel levels of enjoyment.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in RE is good.

- The greatest strength of the RE curriculum is the appropriate allocation of time for the subject at Key Stage 4 which allows all students to take the full course GCSE. The GCSE syllabus has been well chosen and proves interesting for students who value its contribution to their awareness of 21st century issues.
- Continuity and progression in the curriculum is satisfactory at Key Stage 3 and excellent at Key Stage 4. Key Stage 3 begins with a very challenging unit, 'Who am I?', but some of the following units are less challenging and more focused on detailed factual learning and less on the development of skills. The department has chosen to teach the agreed syllabus through the systematic study of religions, which provides good opportunities to explore the diversity within each religion, but fewer opportunities to make comparisons between religions.
- There are strengths and weaknesses in the department's implementation of the new agreed syllabus. There are residual references to Key Stage 2 topics in the agreed syllabus such as pilgrimage and buildings and these do not promote high standards. Several Key Stage 3 themes, such as beliefs and concepts, and ethical issues are planned to a high standard. Other themes in the agreed

syllabus have yet to be developed, notably those of 'inter-faith dialogue' and 'expressions of spirituality'. These omissions reduce opportunities for cross-curricular links with, for example, the English and creative arts departments.

- Curriculum planning is thorough and clear. It uses and adapts the QCA exemplar units effectively. Long and medium term planning for Key Stage 4 is excellent and builds in opportunities for assessment and review. Planning at this key stage is well matched to students' needs. Learning is pitched to GCSE target grades, which are different according to ability group.
- The department makes good provision of enrichment activities, which are much appreciated by students. There are regular visits from local clergy, youth workers, prison chaplains, and scientists. Students have gained considerably in understanding and attitudes from visits to a gurdwara and mosque.

Leadership and management

Leadership and management of RE are good.

- The school benefits from three well-qualified specialist RE teachers. The head of department brings knowledge and expertise to the department. He continues to develop his professional skills through involvement in SACRE working groups, involvement with the National College of School Leadership and in his role as visiting tutor to the PGCE course at Exeter University, where he also carried out research on a Farmington fellowship.
- Management of the department is meticulous. Roles and responsibilities are clearly defined; departmental minutes and action points are attached to identified staff and followed up at the next meeting. The quality of planning and assessment is at least good and development plans are clearly focused on raising standards. The department's self-evaluation is very accurate in its judgements.
- The quality of teaching is not consistent across the department and there is insufficient dissemination of the existing good practice in the department.
- The department's detailed analysis of GCSE data indicates under-achievement in classes taught by non-specialists. Since the department is about to lose its temporary and effective specialist the question of appointing appropriate non-specialists with an enthusiasm for the subject is about to arise again.

Creative thinking in RE

Students have several opportunities for creative thinking which are managed exceptionally well. As a result they demonstrate a range of higher order thinking skills and can, for example, investigate, compare, interpret and apply beliefs and ideas effectively. They have some

opportunities to use creative writing and art to express ideas. But lack of attention to the agreed syllabus theme of 'expressions of spirituality' reduces opportunities for links with the creative arts and the unit on religion and science would benefit from liaison with the science department.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- reducing the under-achievement of some groups of students at GCSE
- disseminating the best teaching strategies throughout the department
- including in the Key Stage 3 curriculum topics from the agreed syllabus that promote opportunities for creative learning and further links with other areas of the curriculum.

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/SACRE and will be published on Ofsted's website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Barbara Wintersgill
Additional Inspector