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24 June 2009

Ms E Wilson
Headteacher
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Dear Ms Wilson

Ofsted 2009-10 subject survey inspection programme: religious education (RE)

Thank you for your cheerful hospitality and very thorough co-operation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 10-11 June 2009 to look at work in RE.

As outlined in the initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had particular focus on 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, discussions with 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 achievement of students in RE is good and standards are above average.

- Progress is good overall, with no significant differences between the different ability and language groups in the school. RE results in both the GCSE short course and the full course are better than national averages, with an upward trend over the past two years.
- In Years 7 and 8, the greater focus on learning *about* rather than *from* world religions develops students' powers of recall rather than higher order thinking skills. They show a sound grasp of the main beliefs and ceremonies of the religions studied, especially Christianity, but there is little evidence that the particular significance of concepts such as resurrection are really understood. In Year 9 students tackle a range of challenging topics. More able students respond well to opportunities to develop their ideas creatively.

- RE makes a positive contribution to students' wider personal development. Students recognise that it extends their understanding of, and respect for, diversity. They enjoy the subject and appreciate that it strengthens their ability to communicate individual points of view persuasively and clearly.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in RE is good.

- There is only one RE specialist but all those involved in teaching the subject have appropriate subject knowledge.
- Teachers have a positive rapport with students. Open questions are well used to encourage students to think before answering. In the lessons observed, management of time was an issue. Pace was not always well matched to students' learning needs.
- Students respond positively when there are opportunities to be independent learners and to present their views effectively: especially through group work, debate and the use of information and communication technology (ICT).
- A review of teaching and learning across Humanities has led to a greater focus on self-assessment, with students tackling sample test papers and evaluating their answers against a mark scheme. Booster classes provide well targeted support. Standards have improved. Students feel confident of success.
- Action is being taken to raise the level of challenge in Key Stage 3 - including clearer identification of students' current and target levels - but the impact is not yet visible. Whereas most students make good progress in RE from a low starting point, the school recognises that the most able are not consistently challenged in lessons or through the homework given.
- RE-based enhancement activities are limited but do have a positive impact. Students spoke of their visit to St. Paul's Cathedral as both enjoyable and illuminating but visits to other faith centres – mosques, synagogues, Hindu temples – did not figure even though each of these is represented locally.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in RE is satisfactory.

- The curriculum meets statutory requirements. In the past 13 years, only one family has withdrawn their child from RE. Working to the locally agreed syllabus, the department's medium term curriculum planning creates a sound framework to support effective teaching and learning. The schemes of work set out appropriate learning objectives, indicating a variety of activity and making specific reference to differentiation. The two areas of attainment - 'learning about' and 'learning from' religion - are well represented. Individual lesson plans, however, do not consistently reflect these strengths and this has an impact on classroom practice.
- RE is taught as a discrete subject in all year groups, with one 50-minute period per week. In Years 7 to 9, the agreed syllabus is followed carefully, based principally in the study of Christianity's narratives, beliefs and festivals. Students also learn about major world faiths.

- In Key Stage 4, the short course GCSE has a focus on Christianity and Islam, which students feel is manageable. From September 2009 all students will follow a full GCSE course, taking some modules at the end of Year 10.
- There are considerable overlaps between RE and citizenship. Some elements of the agreed syllabus for RE are embedded within the school's citizenship provision.
- Formal assessments come at the end of units of study and trouble is taken to ensure that students are aware of their current levels and target grades. Marking in students' exercise books is often sketchy, with praise not regularly accompanied by guidance.
- Community cohesion is promoted on local and global level through students' study of world faiths. This is enhanced by the confidence and the mutual respect with which students in this highly diverse school discuss their beliefs and traditions.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of RE are good.

- The subject leader is strongly supported by the acting head of humanities and by the school's senior leadership. As she herself acknowledges, she would benefit from extended opportunities to interact with RE departments in other secondary schools.
- The quality of teaching and learning is carefully monitored by the senior leadership team and well targeted support is given when areas for development are identified.
- Resources for RE are good with positive use made of ICT to support learning and teaching.
- The school's humanities specialism has promoted the development of cross-curricular links which extend students' points of reference in debate and help to improve literacy levels.

Creative thinking in RE

The quality of creative thinking is satisfactory overall. In Years 7 and 8, more attention is paid to ensuring that students build up a secure knowledge about major world faiths, and in particular about Christianity, than to developing students' critical and creative thinking. This is evident in lessons and in students' written work. In Year 9 and through GCSE work in Years 10 and 11, study of challenging and controversial topics alongside aspects of Christianity and Islam more successfully encourages creative thinking.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- ensuring consistency in differentiation, especially in Key Stage 3, so that the more able are encouraged to demonstrate higher order thinking both in lessons and in their individual assignments
- embedding consistent good practice in the marking of work
- extending and strengthening links with the local community through visits to a greater variety of religious centres
- finding opportunities for the subject leader to share experiences with, and learn from, RE leaders in other secondary schools.

We hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop RE in the school.

As explained in our previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and SACRE. The letter will be published on Ofsted's website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Patricia Metham
Her Majesty's Inspector