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Mrs J Holland
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Dear Mrs Holland

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Religious Education

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 13-14 July 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 is judged to be good with outstanding features.

Achievement and standards

The achievement of students in RE is good.

- Results in the RE full course GCSE in 2008 are above the national average and the proportion of students gaining the top A*-A grades is exceptionally high. This pattern of high standards has been sustained over a number of years and represents outstanding achievement by the substantial cohort of students entered for the examination. The

subject is successful in recruiting a significant number of boys to the course and while they do not perform as well as the girls, the gap in achievement is narrowing.

- Further cohorts of Year 11 students are entered for the entry level qualification and, again, results in 2008 were significantly above the national average. Results in the GCE AS and A2 Philosophy and Ethics course are close to the national average and improving.
- Standards by the end of Key Stage 3 are generally above average reflecting good achievement but there is some unevenness in the progress students make across different aspects of their work. In units where they are encouraged to engage with challenging questions and issues, the progress they make is good. Elsewhere, and particularly in units where the focus is on learning about specific religions, work is often less challenging, links between the processes of learning about and learning from religion are not well constructed and, the progress made is more limited.
- The personal development of students in the context of RE is outstanding. They often approach their learning with enthusiasm showing a lively interest in the subject. They respond creatively to the opportunities to express their own ideas and feelings about a range of significant issues. RE makes an important contribution to students' awareness of diversity and global issues and, as a result, strongly supports the promotion of community cohesion. A number of students spoke powerfully about the way their learning in RE had impacted on their personal lives.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in RE is good.

- There are a number of important strengths in teaching and learning. There is a very welcoming and positive ethos for learning in RE lessons; relationships are good and a climate of respect for the views of others is established. Classes are well managed and resources and tasks are organised effectively. A wide range of different approaches to learning are adopted to offer variety and maintain students' interest.
- Teachers have very good subject knowledge and use exposition and questioning effectively. Lessons usually proceed at a good pace. Use is made of a variety of active learning strategies including group and pair work. However, lack of access to information and communication technology (ICT) limits the opportunity for teachers to use this in their teaching.
- Occasionally, and particularly at Key Stage 3, tasks are not challenging enough and there are insufficient opportunities to extend the learning of the most able. Also, sometimes, lessons are too dominated by the teacher limiting the scope for students to take ownership of their learning and work more independently. There are also occasions when the tasks set are not so well-matched to the stage of the students' learning.

- Work is generally well-marked and there are some outstanding examples of detailed feedback to students on their progress and of careful target setting, although this best practice is not consistent across all teachers.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in RE is good.

- The provision at Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form is very good. Large numbers are recruited for the GCSE and A level examination courses and other students have the opportunity to accredit their learning through the entry level qualification. Those not taking a qualification at Key Stage 4 follow an appropriate RE programme based on a GCSE short course syllabus, however there is no provision of core RE for all in the sixth form.
- There is some unevenness in the quality of the Key Stage 3 curriculum. Some units involve students in imaginative enquiry-based learning, for example a topic on religion and environment involves some very creative and challenging work. Other units, and particularly those which involve learning about specific religions, are less effective and do not extend students as well. Overall, the sequence of learning across Years 7 to 9 is not always progressive and is not always differentiated sufficiently to match the needs of the more able students.
- Planning makes careful reference to the opportunities to contribute to the development of cross-curricular aspects of learning including personal learning and thinking skills although these are not always then used enough to adapt the core of the planning of each unit.
- Assessment arrangements are well-developed and care is taken to use a wide range of evidence to judge students' performance. As with the curriculum, however, assessment tasks are not always sequenced in ways which secure good progression in student's learning.
- The subject makes a very impressive contribution to the schools' commitment to developing international and global links although the department is aware of the need to extend the opportunities for all students to visit and meet with representatives of local religious communities.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of RE are good with outstanding features.

- A major strength of the subject is the energetic and dynamic contribution it makes to the life of the school and to its humanities' specialist status. This is reflected, for example, in the involvement of the department in building a new faith garden at the centre of the school.
- The subject is well led and managed by an enthusiastic and experienced head of department who is very well supported by a high

quality team of specialists. They work well together in sharing and developing good practice. The arrangements for professional development are also good through involvement with the local authority, SACRE, the nearby university and examination boards.

- The subject is responsive to wider school initiatives and identifies a clear set of priorities within its action plan. It makes some key contributions to the schools' humanities specialism particularly through the pattern of enrichment activities and the development of international links with schools in the Yemen and India through, for example, the 'connecting classrooms' project.
- The subject is currently developing the arrangements for monitoring and self-evaluation alongside the wider whole school drive to establish robust procedures. Some good use is being made of student evaluations to support the process. Effective use is made of examination data to evaluate the success of the department although it is recognised that the assessment information about the performance of students at Key Stage 3 is not fully reliable.
- The RE department benefits from a suite of rooms and the teachers use display well to create a positive ethos for learning. The work of the subject is however restricted by the limited access to ICT.

Creative thinking in RE

There is some outstanding practice in the use of creativity to stimulate and extend students' learning in RE. Some of the units at Key Stage 3 offer students exciting opportunities to use a variety of forms of creative activity to express responses to their learning. Some of the students' work on religious responses to the environment is particularly impressive. Elsewhere, when units are less challenging, the opportunities to use creative thinking are less well-embedded in the learning.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- extending the best practice in teaching and learning at Key Stage 3 to secure greater challenge particularly for the more able
- using levels more rigorously to plan for progression in the Key Stage 3 curriculum
- developing the facilities for using ICT.

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