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Mr A Robinson  
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Dear Mr Robinson

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Religious Education (RE)

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation and that of your staff and students during my visit on 21 and 22 September 2009 to look at work in RE.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the RE, the visit had a particular focus on the extent to which pupils are becoming effective learners in the subject.

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; observation of five lessons; and attendance at a house assembly.

The overall effectiveness of RE is satisfactory. However, there are a number of significant areas which require improvement, including students' examination performance.

#### Achievement in RE

The achievement of students in RE is inadequate and their attainment is below average. However, the subject makes a satisfactory contribution to many of the wider aspects of the students' personal development

- Students' attainment on the GCSE short course has improved in recent years but is still well below the national average, reflecting inadequate

progress. In 2009, a very high proportion of students underachieved and failed to meet their targets. However, since the school has a policy of entering almost all students for the qualification, most leave with some form of accreditation. A key factor affecting the results is the very limited time allocated to the subject in Key Stage 4. This restricts students' ability to evaluate and interpret religious perspectives effectively.

- Students' attainment by the end of Key Stage 3 is just below the expectations of the locally agreed syllabus. Achievement across the key stage is inconsistent. While work in Years 7 and 8 often lacks challenge, students make better progress in Year 9 where they begin to investigate more demanding material. By the end of the Year 9, students have acquired a reasonable, if basic, knowledge of a range of religions and have gained some awareness of moral and social issues. However, their skills of enquiry and evaluation are relatively underdeveloped.
- Girls significantly outperform boys at GCSE level and this pattern is often evident in lessons. Too many of the tasks set do not engage boys enough. Students of middle and higher ability are often not challenged sufficiently and make limited progress. However, effective support ensures students with special educational needs progress well.
- The under-achievement reflected in the students' academic performance is balanced by the more positive contribution the subject makes to some of the wider aspects of their personal development. Behaviour in lessons is generally good and some students show a lively interest in the subject. However, a significant number, particularly at Key Stage 4, do not respond positively to the requirement to study RE.
- While aspects of the moral and social development of students in RE are good, the limited time allocated and the narrow focus of some of the learning restricts their opportunity to develop and reflect on their insights into issues. Their spiritual and cultural development is satisfactory but they have too few opportunities to engage directly with representatives of religious and belief communities. The department's contribution to these areas of development is complemented by the school's provision for assemblies. The example observed involved students in a lively presentation about the European Day of Languages and provided a meaningful opportunity to reflect on issues of diversity.

### Quality of teaching of RE

The quality of teaching in RE is satisfactory.

- RE lessons are well organised and orderly. Teachers manage students and tasks well. Relationships with students are very positive. Effective use is made of in-class support to enable students with special educational needs to make good progress.
- In the best lessons, teachers use good explanations and a range of different strategies to maintain a lively pace of learning and ensure students are engaged and interested in their work. In one outstanding Year 10 lesson, particularly effective use was made a number of challenging and, at times, witty, activities and resources to extend

students' thinking about perspectives on the environment. This was a model of good practice in managing learning to enable students to understand and apply key concepts and perspectives.

- In lessons which were at best satisfactory, learning objectives were shared but were not always clearly defined or sufficiently matched to the range of students' needs and abilities. Tasks lacked challenge and the structure of learning did not enable all students to make good progress.
- While work is marked regularly, the overall pattern of assessment is inadequate. Limited and inconsistent use is made of levels and assessment criteria. As a result, students are not always clear about the progress they are making or how they can improve.

### Quality of the curriculum in RE

The quality of the curriculum in RE is inadequate.

- A key factor which limits the progress of students and narrows the range of teaching is the weakness of the overall RE curriculum.
- The time allocation of one period each fortnight at Key Stage 4 is not sufficient to meet the requirements of the GCSE short course. The pattern of delivery is now under review, with decisions to be taken about how to improve the situation. Provision is made for a small cohort of students to extend their learning and study for a full GCSE qualification in their own time. While there is some provision to enrol on a philosophy course, as part of the enrichment programme in the sixth form, not all students receive their full entitlement to RE.
- The Key Stage 3 curriculum is also inadequate. While the time allocation ensures the subject can meet the basic statutory requirements, little use has been made of the locally agreed syllabus to help to structure and pitch the curriculum. The scheme of work lacks challenge and clear continuity and progression and there is no detailed medium-term planning in place.
- While the subject has identified a number of cross-curricular links, insufficient attention has been paid to ways in which the subject can benefit from, and contribute to, the development of the students' literacy and wider personal thinking and learning skills.
- Good use is made of representatives from local Christian communities to enrich the students' learning. However, this provision does not extend to representatives of other religions and belief communities.

### Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE

The effectiveness of leadership and management of RE is satisfactory.

- The subject is led by an experienced head of department who supports the non-specialist members of his team with clear lesson plans and

resource materials. There has been very little subject-related professional development for either the subject leader or his team in recent years.

- While efforts are made to ensure that the non-specialist staff are effective classroom practitioners, with an interest in teaching RE, too little time is made available for joint planning, review and moderation of work. As a result, there is limited opportunity to enrich the curriculum and teaching through sharing good practice.
- A subject self-evaluation has been produced which reflects some of the concerns about student underachievement. Active consideration is being given to ways of reconfiguring the RE provision to resolve these issues. The subject development plan links well with the whole-school priorities, although the planned actions are not always defined clearly.
- While RE makes a sound contribution to the promotion of community cohesion, the school has identified that more needs to be done to reflect the diversity of life in modern Britain.

### How far students are becoming effective learners in RE

A key factor restricting the success of RE is the limited focus on developing students' ability to become effective learners. Planning does not incorporate a clearly defined process of enquiry linked to the development of higher-order skills of investigation, enquiry and evaluation. There are examples of good practice which lead to excellent response on the part of the students. However, these are not embedded across all aspects of the subject. Some good use is made of end-of-unit evaluations by the students but generally they do not have enough opportunities to take responsibility for, and reflect on, their learning.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- increasing the challenge for all students, especially boys and the more able
- developing the Key Stage 3 curriculum by ensuring:
  - a closer match to the expectations of the locally agreed syllabus
  - a stronger enquiry-based approach to learning
  - clearer progression in the acquisition of higher-order skills
  - more effective use of levels in setting expectations and assessing students' work
- resolving the issues about the provision for RE at Key Stage 4 to ensure it best matches the needs of all students and makes better use of the time allocated to the subject
- providing more opportunities for subject-related professional development for both the head of department and the non-specialist teaching team
- increasing the opportunities for students to have first hand experience of the religious diversity in the local area.

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 the Ofsted website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Alan Brine  
Her Majesty's Inspector