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Dear Mrs Briscoe

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

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 24 November 2009 to look at work in RE.

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

The evidence used to inform the judgements included interviews with pupils and teachers, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of pupils' work and observation of three lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE is good.

Achievement in RE

Achievement in RE is good.

- Standards in RE are at least in line with the expectations of the Dudley agreed syllabus and a small number of pupils exceed these expectations because of the good teaching they receive.
- During the Foundation Stage, pupils quickly acquire confidence in talking about religion and beliefs using a range of appropriate subject terminology. For example, pupils were able to explain in simple terms why the festival of Hanukkah is important to the Jewish tradition and were able

to recognise some of the artefacts and practices associated with the celebration. The main reason for their good progress is that children in the Early Years Foundation Stage enjoy asking 'why' questions, and respond positively to the teachers' skill in using structured and graded questions effectively. As a result, they enjoy their learning because it focuses on just the kind of questions they love to raise. Simple, but effective. By the end of Key Stage 1, pupils can identify key features of the religions they have studied and are beginning to use religious terminology appropriately. A strong aspect of their learning is their understanding that religion is diverse and important in the lives of many people.

- Throughout Key Stage 2, pupils develop their understanding to cover a wider range of religions and beliefs. They also make effective use of some of the technical language used in studying religion. Pupils have made good progress in drawing together their learning to understand the connections between belief and practice. Most significant to the good achievement is the way the pupils develop their skills of investigating and enquiring into different traditions and ideas. Year 6 pupils are beginning to discuss and debate religious questions with some confidence and enthusiasm and many are able to grasp and explain some of the more complex issues underpinning those questions.
- RE makes a positive contribution to the pupils' wider personal development. It makes a considerable contribution to their understanding of, and respect for, diversity. However, it goes further by supporting the development of a wide range of learning skills. Throughout work in RE, pupils are able to exercise some responsibility for their own learning. They work well independently and in groups. Pupils are encouraged to think for themselves and come to personal judgements about matters being investigated. As a result, they develop the confidence to express themselves both orally and in writing. Pupils enjoy the subject and respond with enthusiasm to the opportunities it provides to participate in some challenging and engaging activities. Behaviour and attitudes to learning in RE lessons are exemplary.

Quality of teaching of RE

The quality of teaching of RE is good.

- Teaching is based on a very clear appreciation of the need for open, investigative learning within an ethos of respect for others. In some cases, the quality of the teaching is excellent. Teachers use great sensitivity when dealing with issues related to stereotyping, helping pupils recognise and explore their own misconceptions or prejudices.
- Lessons are typified by excellent relationships, mutual respect, humour and warmth. In-class support is used effectively to support all pupils. Good quality displays related to RE around the building also help to secure pupils' interest and enthusiasm for the subject. Effective use is made of opportunities for reflection.

- Teachers have good subject knowledge which they use well to ask challenging questions and organise interesting and well-managed tasks. Effective use is made of strategies, such as group activities, role-play and paired work, to ensure learning is both fun and purposeful.
- All lessons proceed at a good pace and are skilfully managed. Care is often taken to plan work which extends the pupils' learning skills. For example, there is a clear focus on developing confidence in talking about their learning. However, not all the activities are carefully adapted to ensure all pupils' learning needs are met.

Quality of the curriculum in RE

The curriculum in RE is good.

- The schemes of work have been carefully mapped against the requirements of the 2001 Dudley agreed syllabus. The two areas of attainment 'learning about' and 'learning from' are well-represented and are interwoven effectively.
- A significant strength of the provision is the flexible and thoughtful approach to the way the subject is timetabled. A range of approaches is adopted depending on the nature of the topic, the opportunities for cross-curricular links, and the pattern of learning. When appropriate, good use is made of blocked units. Additionally, work is sometimes integrated well with other subjects and some use is made of short, more intensive patterns of learning.
- On occasions, where units of work are too prescriptive or attempt to cover too many different threads of learning, teachers are not always sure of the central focus of each unit of work. As a result, the connections between different tasks and topics are not as clear as they could be and more natural lines of enquiry are not followed through appropriately.
- There are some good opportunities for learning outside the classroom and enrichment activities linked to RE. Good use is made of the local church community to support learning in RE. Efforts are being made to make contact with other faith communities in the area but, at present, these links are underdeveloped.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE

The effectiveness of leadership and management is good.

- The subject coordinator, who is well-supported by the senior leadership team, is experienced, enthusiastic and dedicated to RE. She intends to focus very carefully on the teaching of key concepts and skills and the development of stronger cross-curricular links, particularly with literacy, to promote a clearer progression between individual units of work.
- Opportunities for professional subject development of the staff have been limited but the recent inclusion of RE in the school's planning for the

creative curriculum is proving a useful context to re-energise thinking about the subject.

- The subject has good capacity for further improvement and clear links are being forged between the development of RE and wider initiatives in the school, particularly in relation to curriculum planning and community cohesion.

How far pupils are becoming effective learners in RE

The school has begun to focus attention on the place of creativity in RE. It has rightly identified this as a development need both in terms of curriculum planning and pupils' learning. Partly through the use of the Building Learning Power, the school has recognised and is tackling the need to develop pupils' critical-thinking skills in RE. The use of challenging questions and highly structured thinking strategies are being applied in some RE lessons to good effect. The school is also beginning to explore more flexible and creative approaches to the RE curriculum, building on its skills-based approach in other areas.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- reviewing the pattern of the curriculum for RE to ensure it incorporates greater progression in pupils' learning and provides teachers with a clearer understanding of the central focus of each unit of work
- developing more opportunities for pupils to use creative thinking when undertaking investigations into religion and belief
- extending the range of links with local non-Christian communities to provide pupils with more first-hand experience of religious diversity and support the promotion of community cohesion.

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

Jacqueline Wordsworth
Her Majesty's Inspector