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Mr D Watchorn
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Dear Mr Watchorn

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

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and students, during our visit on 20 and 21 October 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; and observation of lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE is satisfactory with a number of good features.

Achievement in RE

The achievement of students in RE is satisfactory with good features.

- The attainment in the accredited courses taken at the end of Year 11, while below the national average, represents very good achievement particularly given the very high proportion of students entered for the qualifications. Nearly all are entered for full course GCSE taught on the basis of one 50 minute lesson a week through Key Stage 4. In 2009, a high proportion of students achieved in line or above their predicted grades. Results in Year 10, where students take the first half of the full

course, were less positive but some students will have an opportunity to re-take the exam to boost their final grade. A small cohort is entered for AS level courses in Years 10 and 11 and results represent good achievement by the students.

- The attainment of students in Key Stage 3 is much more variable and, overall, they make satisfactory progress. In 2009, all Year 9 students followed a short course GCSE and just over 60 were entered for the examination. While the majority achieved a pass grade, the proportion gaining an A* to C grade was very low. A decision has been taken to drop this arrangement in 2009/10.
- There are no significant differences between the attainment of different groups of students at the end of Key Stage 4, although the results of those from white backgrounds tend to be lower, in line with the wider picture across the school. No clear analysis of the data about the performance of different groups of students at Key Stage 3 has been undertaken.
- A number of aspects of attainment in RE are strong. By the end of Key Stage 4, students can discuss and analyse a range of moral and social issues effectively and recognise how religion can impact on the way people respond to those issues. Overall, however, their understanding of a range of religions and their ability to undertake enquiries into religion are limited and tend to be superficial. This in part reflects weaknesses in the curriculum at Key Stage 3 where too many religions are being covered in too little time.
- Students generally enjoy RE and find it worthwhile. They appreciate the contribution it makes to their understanding of moral and social issues and the way in which it helps them develop an appreciation and respect for a diversity of cultures. There are some opportunities in RE to support students' spiritual development but these are constrained by the pressure of time in the curriculum. While students' attitudes to learning and their behaviour are generally good, a small minority do sometimes lose interest and fail to engage in the work.

Quality of teaching of RE

The quality of teaching in RE is satisfactory with a number of good features.

- Teachers generally have positive relationships with students and ensure that lessons are orderly and managed well. Good use is made of questioning, particularly at Key Stage 4, where the pattern of the students' learning is structured well and focused very carefully on the requirements of the examination courses. Teachers have good subject knowledge which they use well to develop students' thinking.
- Learning objectives are shared with students but, particularly at Key Stage 3, teachers do not give them enough understanding of the wider context and direction of their learning. The students sometimes complete tasks without really understanding their purpose and opportunities for more extended independent enquiry work are limited.

- At Key Stage 4 work is often matched carefully to students' abilities, enabling them to make appropriate progress. This is not so evident at Key Stage 3 where too often teachers do not ensure the range of tasks is suitable for the differing needs of the students. On occasion, the sequencing of tasks does not provide a coherent, progressive development of students' understanding.
- The arrangements for assessing work at Key Stage 4 are good. As a result, students recognise the progress they are making and how to improve. They have a good grasp of the examination expectations. However, at Key Stage 3 assessment arrangements are inadequate and students find them to be unclear.

Quality of the curriculum in RE

The quality of the curriculum in RE is satisfactory with some good features.

- The provision at Key Stage 4 is very good with a range of pathways to meet the interests and needs of different students. The time allocation of 50 minutes each week to cover the full course GCSE requirements is very tight and limits the opportunities for students to explore beyond the specific examination requirements. Students have opportunities to take AS level; however, some struggle with the syllabus requirements and do not complete the course. Others can follow entry level and Asdan courses. The full course GCSE allows students with a specific religious background to focus on the perspective of their own faith as well as studying another tradition.
- The curriculum at Key Stage 3 is less effective. The department has worked hard to meet the requirements of the locally agreed syllabus but the provision lacks effective continuity and progression in students' learning. Insufficient attention is paid to developing the skills of enquiry and much of the work is not matched well to students' needs. Planning does not always ensure there is clear link between the two areas of attainment – learning 'about' and learning 'from' religion. The schemes of work, while detailed in their reference to a range of cross-curricular themes, do not always make clear how each unit builds a structured sequence of learning.
- There have been no opportunities in recent years to use visits and visitors to enrich students' learning in RE.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE

The effectiveness of leadership and management of RE is satisfactory.

- The subject leader has worked hard over a number of years to re-establish the status and effectiveness of RE and has built a strong teaching team. There is a strong focus on improving the provision with an emphasis on securing good outcomes for students at the end of Key Stage 4.
- A detailed self-evaluation has been produced, together with a review of examination results. However, this has not been sufficiently informed by the school's wider analysis of data on students' performance or by rigorous

monitoring arrangements. A 'raising attainment plan' is in place but this would benefit from greater strategic direction and clearer success criteria.

- The subject benefits from three specialist teachers, a good range of resources with access to information and communication technology facilities and a suite of attractive, flexible teaching rooms.
- The department has sought to keep abreast of recent developments in the subject but has been unsure how to integrate these effectively within the requirements of the locally agreed syllabus.

The extent to which students are becoming effective learners in RE

The subject provides some good opportunities for students to develop their learning skills, particularly at Key Stage 4. For example, AS-level students have opportunities to plan their own enquiries into philosophical issues. Good support is given to students in developing their skills of evaluation. At Key Stage 3, however, the structure of the RE curriculum tends to limit the scope for students to use higher level learning skills and insufficient attention is paid to the systematic and progressive development of these skills.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- improving the Key Stage 3 curriculum to ensure greater continuity and progression in learning to raise attainment and meet all students' needs
- developing more effective and coherent assessment arrangements at Key Stage 3 to ensure students have a better understanding of their progress and how to improve
- ensuring that teaching has a greater focus on developing students' skills of enquiry
- developing more effective procedures for monitoring and evaluating the work of the department.

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
Susan Gadd
Her Majesty's Inspectors