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Mr I Evans
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Dear Mr Evans

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 2 and 3 November 2009 to look at work in RE.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of RE, the visit had a particular focus on the extent to which students 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 included: interviews with staff and students; scrutiny of relevant documentation; analysis of students' work and observation of lessons.

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

Achievement in RE

The achievement of students in RE is good and, in some respects, outstanding.

- Results in examinations in RE have been consistently above the national average for a number of years, reflecting outstanding achievement by students across Key Stage 4 and also in Year 9, where there is a policy of entering a number of higher-attaining students for the short course GCSE. In 2009, for example, over 50% of Year 11 students entered for full

course GCSE gained an A* to A grade. Nineteen students were entered for AS level where results were impressive, with over 75% gaining an A or B grade. Provision is also made for some students to complete level 2 Higher Project and level 3 Extended Project Qualifications and results, again, reflect very good achievement.

- A major strength of the students' progress on the examination courses is their ability to analyse and debate a range of moral, social and philosophical issues at a high level. They also understand and can apply a range of religious perspectives to these issues, recognising some of the more complex matters of interpretation which are involved.
- A new pattern of curriculum provision for humanities is being introduced into Key Stage 3. Evidence from discussions, lessons and students' work indicates their achievement is currently satisfactory. In the context of RE-related topics, they make good progress in acquiring and consolidating a range of important skills of learning.
- In regard to the expectations of the locally agreed syllabus, they are also making reasonable progress in the fields of enquiry related to 'shared human experience' and 'the search for personal meaning'. However, their ability to explain key concepts and issues related to the beliefs, values and practices of living religious traditions is much less secure because of some limitations in the current pattern of the curriculum. This limits the degree to which they can apply religious perspectives effectively to wider aspects of human experience.
- There are few differences in the achievement of different groups of students. For example, the gap between the proportion of boys and girls achieving A* to C grades in the full course GCSE is narrow, although a much higher percentage of girls than boys gain A* to A grades. Students with special educational needs and those who are gifted and talented do well.
- The students' personal development in the context of RE is outstanding. They show persistence and resilience even when work is challenging. In lessons they show a willingness to work well together, to exercise their initiative and to take responsibility for their learning.
- RE makes a strong contribution to students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. There are good opportunities for them to reflect on their work and on important aspects of human experience when, for example, Year 7 students considered the impact of war on personal lives. There is less scope to consider the more spiritual aspects of religious traditions. Students have very good opportunities in RE to consider a range of moral and social issues and the subject is successful in promoting students' awareness of, interest in, and respect for cultural diversity.

Quality of teaching of RE

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

- Teaching, particularly in examination classes, is lively and well-organised. Teachers have excellent subject expertise which they use very effectively to structure students' learning. They make very good use of a range of lively strategies and resources to engage and challenge the students. A particular strength is the way the teaching blends a careful focus on the requirements of the examination with very positive opportunities for students to reflect on their learning. As a result, students engage actively in debating and analysing a wide range of concepts and issues.
- The quality of teaching at Key Stage 3, where the subject is taught by a wide range of humanities staff, is more variable. In the best lessons, teaching is lively and purposeful. Very good use is made of a range of activities to sustain interest and develop a wide variety of different learning skills. On occasions, the match of the tasks to the students' needs and abilities is not quite secure enough. The sequence of the learning is not always clear and, sometimes, there is a loss of focus on the subject.
- Good use is generally made of questioning to prompt thinking and to check on students' progress. There are some outstanding assessment for learning strategies in the examination classes. Some good use is made of learning journals in Years 7 and 8 to help students reflect on their work but this is not consistent.
- Work in RE is generally marked frequently and carefully. Particularly effective use is made of assessment in the examination classes where students receive excellent feedback on their progress and guidance on how to improve. Very good use is made of arrangements to track students' progress in the examination classes and this is now being extended across the other year groups.

Quality of the curriculum in RE

The curriculum in RE is good overall with a number of outstanding features.

- An outstanding strength of RE is the variety of different pathways to accredit students' learning. This ensures the RE curriculum from Year 9 is very well matched to the variety of students' needs. Building on the humanities specialist status in the school, the subject is playing a lead role in developing opportunities to fast-track able students at GCSE and then provide further enrichment in the form of advanced level courses.
- The curriculum meets statutory requirements. There is a commitment to maintaining a focus on the core principles of the locally agreed syllabus while developing the more innovative integrated humanities programme at Key Stage 3. It is recognised that, in evaluating the new model, attention needs to be given to securing a balance across the main fields of enquiry in the agreed syllabus. At present, these are not fully reflected in the pattern of work. In particular, the selection and sequencing of RE work are not ensuring enough continuity and progression in the students' learning about religion and this is having an impact on their progress.
- RE makes a strong contribution to the development of students' personal learning, literacy and thinking skills. In Years 7 and 8, the department

recognises more work needs to be done to ensure the skills are well-integrated with the needs of the subject.

- The use of fieldwork and visitors to enrich the students' learning is a developing strength of the subject. The curriculum arrangements in Key Stage 3 have created good opportunities to extend this use through, for example, faith days where members of local religious communities were invited to a 'Question Time' style panel to answer students' questions.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE

The effectiveness of leadership and management of RE is outstanding.

- The subject benefits from the outstanding leadership of the experienced and talented head of department who is well-supported by a strong team of subject specialists and the wider humanities faculty. Line management is effective in supporting and challenging the work of the department.
- The arrangements for monitoring, reviewing and improving the subject are also strong. This is reflected in the approach being adopted to the evaluation of the Key Stage 3 curriculum initiatives. The humanities specialist status is providing a very strong context for developing the subject. As a result, the commitment to and capacity for further improvement are excellent.
- The resources of the subject are also excellent. Good use is made of information and communication technology and a wide range of stimulating and challenging resources. Opportunities for professional development are good and are supported by the joint planning and sharing of good practice within the faculty. The department is well-informed about current developments within the subject.
- RE makes a strong contribution to the wider school approach to promoting community cohesion, particularly through the bridges it has built with representatives of the range of religious communities in Blackpool.

How far students are becoming effective learners in RE

- The subject makes a very strong contribution to the development of students' skills as learners. They use a wide range of higher-order skills in the context of RE. A strong enquiry-based approach to learning is adopted throughout, with regular opportunities for students to question, interrogate, interpret and evaluate ideas. This strength is seen to best effect in the examination classes where the use of the skills is particularly well-integrated within the subject.

The area for improvement, which we discussed, was:

- developing the curriculum in Years 7 and 8 to ensure it incorporates greater continuity and progression into students' learning, especially with regard to their study of the beliefs, values and practices of living religious traditions.

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