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Mr N Clark  
Headteacher  
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Dear Mr Clark

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 my visit on 24 and 25 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 well students 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 students and teachers, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work, attendance at school assembly and observation of lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE is satisfactory. However, before September 2009 the effectiveness of RE was inadequate. Recent changes in the provision for the subject have started to raise attainment but the school recognises that significant work is needed to sustain this improvement.

#### Achievement in RE

Achievement in RE is satisfactory.

- Short course GCSE results in RE in recent years have been well below the national average representing inadequate achievement by the students. The performance of students by the end of Year 9 in 2009 reflected a similar picture of underachievement. Recent improvements in the provision

are beginning to have an impact on students' progress which, while still uneven, is now satisfactory overall.

- More stable staffing and improved arrangements to identify and tackle underachievement mean that a higher proportion of students in the current Year 11 is on track to reach their target grades. Students at Key Stage 4 now make satisfactory progress in organising their ideas about a range of philosophical, social and moral issues. They are much less secure in applying religious perspectives to these issues because their understanding of these perspectives is fairly superficial.
- Radical changes to the curriculum in Key Stage 3 are also beginning to have a positive impact on progress in RE. The school is aware that these changes are not as yet embedded fully and there is still some unevenness in achievement across different elements of the subject. Students' grasp of RE when they arrive in the school is very weak. Few have a framework of ideas within which to locate new learning in the subject. Students in the current Year 7 are beginning to develop this framework by, for example, exploring the significance of Christianity within the life of the local community. Year 8 students develop their understanding of the language of religion through work on the meaning and significance of different creation stories. The students' grasp of the beliefs of different religions remains very superficial.
- RE makes a satisfactory contribution to students' wider personal development. Attitudes to the subject are improving, although there is still a legacy of some disaffection among a minority of older students. There is a very strong commitment across the school to helping students expand their understanding about, and respect for, cultural and religious diversity. Recent curriculum changes are designed to embed this more effectively within learning. At present, RE makes a good contribution to the promotion of students' social and moral development but the impact on their spiritual and cultural development, while improving, is less secure.

#### Quality of teaching of RE

The quality of teaching is satisfactory with some good features.

- In Years 7 and 8, there is much good practice in the teaching of RE but this is not consistent across all lessons because of some variability in the quality of curriculum planning. At their best, lessons are lively and engaging. A wide range of different strategies is used to challenge students and encourage them to take an active part in their learning. Some very good use is made of questioning and explanation to ensure students understand the purpose and wider context of their learning in RE. Resources and tasks are often differentiated carefully to meet the needs of different students. In asking students to review their learning, a balance is maintained between the process of learning and the main ideas which have been explored.
- In some lessons, while a focus is maintained on challenging students and on using a range of different personal learning and thinking skills (PLTS),

these are not as well-matched to the students' needs or to their level of understanding of RE.

- No RE teaching was observed in Years 9 and 10. Teaching at the current Year 11 is generally satisfactory. While there is a clear focus on developing students' understanding of the GCSE examination requirements, they are not always provided with enough opportunity to process their thinking before they commit ideas to paper.
- RE work is marked regularly and increasing use is being made of levels of attainment in helping students recognise the progress they are making. As yet, teachers' understanding of these levels is not secure or consistent. Careful attention is paid to assessment at GCSE and students have a sound grasp of their progress.

### Quality of the curriculum in RE

The curriculum in RE is satisfactory.

- Very careful thought has been given to ways of re-organising and re-branding RE within the school curriculum. From September 2009, all students are following a full course GCSE from Year 9 as part of a new life studies programme linked to citizenship. Initial indications are that they will require more support in recognising the relationship between, and different examination expectations of, the two subjects.
- In Year 7 and 8, RE takes its place within a new integrated humanities programme. Early indications are that many of the initiatives are proving successful. The school is taking active steps to evaluate the impact on students' learning, both in terms of their overall PLTS and their subject understanding. In particular, the time allocated to humanities in Years 7 and 8 is quite limited and it is recognised that this will need to be monitored very closely to ensure there is enough opportunity to meet the needs of all the subjects incorporated within the programme.
- The humanities curriculum has been designed skilfully to focus on key concepts which can embrace different subject areas and incorporate a more enquiry-based approach to learning. In RE, some of the plans provide a very positive development in thinking about appropriate ways of engaging students in the study of religion and belief. However, planning does not yet always succeed in providing a fully balanced and progressive RE programme. In particular, planning does not secure a deep enough understanding of the nature and diversity of religion or the core beliefs of Christianity. Also, on occasions, students do not have enough prior knowledge to handle the enquiries they are asked to undertake. The notion of a clear enquiry process is not, as yet, fully embedded in all the planning.
- The opportunities to enrich the students' experience of RE through the use of fieldwork and visitors are improving. Visits to Amsterdam and Belgium incorporate a focus on RE. The humanities programme has enabled visits to local churches and there are plans to extend this to engage first hand with a wider diversity of faith communities.

## Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE

The effectiveness of leadership and management is satisfactory with some good features.

- The subject is undergoing a process of renewal within a strong vision for the development of humanities, the school's specialist status. The head of RE benefits from the good support and leadership of the faculty team. Working within the humanities team provides positive opportunities for staff development in the context of a focus on transforming teaching and learning.
- Very good use is made of examination data to analyse student performance and evaluate the effectiveness of the subject. There are good arrangements to monitor teaching. The faculty leadership has rightly identified the need to secure a stronger subject focus in the process of reviewing, evaluating and improving the curriculum.
- Arrangements for staffing RE have stabilised in recent years and all lessons are now taught by humanities specialists. Time has been provided for planning the new curriculum but there are still variable levels of RE expertise across the team and more time is needed for subject-specialist training.
- Statutory requirements for RE are met although some difficulties have been experienced in aligning the new thinking in the humanities curriculum with some of the specific content requirements of the agreed syllabus.
- The subject is making a positive contribution to community cohesion. However, the department is aware that more progress needs to be made in forging links with religious groups in the wider local community to help students develop their awareness and respect for diversity.

## How well students are becoming effective learners in RE

There are some very good opportunities for students to use a range of more challenging learning skills in RE and students are actively encouraged to review the way they have been learning. There is some variability in the effectiveness of these opportunities because their integration into the subject work is not always secure. There are some missed opportunities to engage students more actively in the process of determining the pattern of the learning.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- monitoring closely the impact of recent changes to the pattern of delivery of RE on students' progress in the subject and taking action as appropriate
- providing more opportunities for staff training in RE across the humanities team to extend subject expertise
- improving the accuracy and consistency of assessment by establishing a clear shared understanding of the RE levels of attainment

- ensuring the life studies course makes the expectations in relation to the distinctive demands of citizenship and RE clear to students
- developing further opportunities to use fieldwork and visitors to enrich students' understanding of religious diversity in the wider local community.

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