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Mrs P Kenning  
Headteacher  
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Dear Mrs Kenning

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 9 and 10 December 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 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 staff and students, scrutiny of relevant documentation and observation of four lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE is satisfactory.

Achievement in RE

Achievement in RE is satisfactory.

- Standards at Key Stage 3 are broadly in line with the Hertfordshire agreed syllabus expectations. Most students acquire a broad understanding of the key features of religions they have studied. However, students are less secure in their knowledge when comparing aspects of beliefs and practices between and within religions. Attainment at Key Stage 4 is above the national average, as indicated by the short-course GCSE results over recent years. Students make sound progress in their learning and enjoy exploring and responding to religious and ethical issues in an informed

way. Within this positive picture, there is a significant weakness in that not all students make the expected progress. This is largely because of the variability in the quality of the curriculum and the teaching.

- The contribution of RE to students' personal development is satisfactory and improving. Students value the part RE plays in engendering respect for diversity.
- Behaviour in lessons observed was satisfactory and sometimes good. From discussions held with students, it is evident that RE is enjoyed when there is variety and challenge for them. However, these features are inconsistent and reflect the mixed views expressed by students.

### Quality of teaching of RE

The quality of teaching is variable but satisfactory overall.

- The most successful teaching takes place when students are active participants in their learning. This is facilitated by tasks and activities which consist of small group discussions as well as independent learning.
- Recent improvements to the quality of planning mean this is now much more structured and indicates how students' different learning needs are to be met. Learning outcomes are also clearly identified. This helps teachers and students to measure the progress made in lessons.
- Some aspects of teaching restrict students from making faster and better progress. The learning is too teacher-led where they do much of the talking, leaving little scope for students to take responsibility and work at their own pace. While careful attention is paid to helping students to understand the GCSE mark scheme and requirements, sometimes this leads to mechanical learning which does not extend thinking or enable students to practise the principles of effective argument. Students do not always understand fully the ways in which religious beliefs impact on personal lives.
- There is now a drive to improve assessment. Recently introduced half-termly assessments are helping to identify how well students are achieving and this is informing careful intervention. Assessed tasks are moderated to enable rigour and consistency to be demonstrated.
- The quality of marking is weak, ranging from helpful comments to cursory ticks. Students do not always get a clear view of how they can improve their work.

### Quality of the RE curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is satisfactory.

- The schemes of work have been adjusted in Years 7 and 8 to take account of the agreed syllabus requirements. The department is implementing the GCSE short course in Year 9, having established its success in Key Stage 4. There are also plans in place to enrich and personalise the curriculum further in Years 10 and 11, including the possibility of offering the GCSE full course which would provide greater challenge.

- Students have no opportunities for fieldwork to gain first-hand experience of religious communities. The potential of information and communication technology is not exploited fully to enhance students' experiences.
- A good effort has been made to improve the provision in the sixth form, which includes a day conference which students greatly appreciate and enjoy. A critical-thinking course and contributions during tutorials also help students to appreciate the impact of religion in society and to develop their own knowledge and skills of analysis, interpretation and evaluation.

#### Effectiveness of leadership and management of RE

The leadership and management of RE are inadequate but there is a clear capacity to improve.

- Senior leaders are acutely aware of the department's performance and have already taken action to help improve the provision. Support has been sought from an advanced skills teacher and a local authority specialist adviser. Staff, particularly the non-specialists, value this support and the practical help given to raise teachers' ambition and to accelerate students' achievement. A new subject leader has been appointed from January 2010.

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

There are some opportunities for students to reflect thoughtfully on their learning, for example through self- and peer-assessments. However, there are fewer opportunities for students to be involved in a process of enquiry using a range of skills to make sense of their learning in RE or to reflect on their own lives in the light of their learning about religion and belief.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- improving the quality of teaching and assessment so that all students make the progress expected of them
- providing opportunities for students to have first-hand experience of religious communities through fieldwork or visitors as part of their learning in RE
- ensuring that the drive for providing leadership in the subject is sustained.

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

Dilip Kadodwala  
Her Majesty's Inspector