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Ms T Nickson
Headteacher
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Dear Ms Nickson

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

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 19 and 20 January 2010 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 far 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 learners, scrutiny of relevant documentation and observation of four lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE is good.

Achievement in RE

The achievement of students in RE is good.

- Standards at Key Stage 3 are generally above the Hertfordshire agreed syllabus expectations and students' achievement is good. The great majority of students are able to explain the key aspects of the religions they have studied and can express their own insights thoughtfully.
- Attainment at Key Stage 4 is well above the national average and reflects a rising trend over recent years. In 2009, the proportion of students attaining A* to A GCSE grades was particularly impressive. Overall, GCSE

results in the subject represent good achievement. Staff recognise that the progress made by the most able students could be even better and further teaching strategies are being implemented to secure higher achievement for these students.

- Few students are entered for public examinations in the sixth form. Attainment at A level is above the national average.
- The contribution of RE to students' personal development is very good. Students' attitudes to RE are very positive, enhanced by the use of visitors from local religious communities and visits to places of worship. Students enjoy RE when there is variety and challenge for them. They comment very positively on how RE promotes respect for different opinions and the value of religious and cultural diversity. Behaviour in lessons is very good.

Quality of teaching of RE

The quality of teaching is good.

- Teachers have very good subject knowledge which they use skilfully to develop students' knowledge and understanding and generate enthusiasm for learning.
- Teaching ensures that students are engaged and motivated through the use of a wide range of tasks and activities such as drama, debates and structured discussions. Students are able to record their work in a variety of ways and share their learning with others which also helps to build positive relationships in lessons. Good use is made of information and communication technology to enable students to develop their literacy and technology skills, as well as their ability to develop as independent learners.
- Lessons are organised well through detailed plans. Students have a clear view of learning objectives. Checks on learning during lessons ensure that the great majority of students make the expected gains.
- There are many strengths in the use of assessment to promote learning. These include peer-assessment, particularly in Years 10 and 11, which students value as an aid to learning. Formal assessments are made using level descriptors and examination criteria. In the most effective examples seen, the assessments lead to individual targets that are matched closely to students' different abilities and this helps them to attain high standards at GCSE. However, there is some inconsistency in the use of the level descriptors for the assessment tasks at Key Stage 3. Teachers do not have sufficient opportunities to moderate their judgements to ensure that these are accurate and rigorous.

Quality of the curriculum in RE

The quality of the curriculum in RE is good.

- The scheme of work has been adjusted in Year 7 to link it more closely to developing students' personal, learning and thinking skills. Provision in

Years 8 and 9 builds progressively on prior learning and establishes a good foundation for the GCSE short-course study in Years 10 and 11.

- A range of enrichment activities, such as visits to a wide range of places of worship, enhances students' enjoyment and learning. The school's link with a local inter-faith group also makes a very positive contribution to students' personal development.
- Provision in the sixth form is somewhat limited but the school is actively collaborating with other schools to widen the provision, as well as to enhance what is offered to students on site, for example through a planned day conference devoted to RE.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE

The leadership and management in RE are good.

- RE is a well-organised subject in a larger humanities faculty. The subject leader is enthusiastic and keen to innovate teaching to sustain students' good attitudes and motivation. There is an established track record of success and the subject is supported and managed effectively by the school's senior leaders.
- The drive for improvement is based on a secure monitoring of the quality of teaching and learning. Analysis of data by the subject leader is a growing strength and the gifted and talented students are being challenged suitably to raise their achievement even further. Plans to extend provision to include access for students to a GCSE full course are well judged.
- Non-specialist teachers receive good guidance from the subject leader which they value but there have been limited opportunities for the leader to access professional development.

Subject issue: how well students becoming effective learners in RE

Overall, students are effective learners in RE because they are able to carry out investigations and record their findings in some imaginative and creative ways. However, their skills of analysis, interpretation and evaluation are not as well developed. Students have opportunities to plan their work and peer-assessment is well established, especially at Key Stage 4. The subject makes a good contribution to the ability of students to reflect on their own lives in the light of their learning about religion and belief. However, some of the students' written work is too narrowly focused on 'learning about' rather than 'learning from' religion.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- improving the quality of assessment and teachers' moderation procedures at Key Stage 3
- maximising opportunities for students to enhance their skills of interpretation, analysis and evaluation.

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