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Dear Dr Wright

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

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and students, during my visit on 26 and 27 January 2010 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 staff, external visitors and learners, scrutiny of relevant documentation and observation of lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE is satisfactory. However, there are a number of areas which require significant improvement.

Achievement in RE

Achievement in RE is satisfactory.

- Results in the full course GCSE in 2009, taken by just over half the Year 11 cohort, were well above the national average reflecting good progress by the students. Over 86% gained an A* to C grade with nearly 53% getting an A* or A grade. The progress of the current students taking the GCSE full course option is satisfactory with most on track to achieve their target grades. There is no evidence available about the achievement of the other students in RE at Key Stage 4.

- A strength of the students' performance in the GCSE full course relates to their ability to write effectively to the examination requirements. They have a sound grasp of the ethical and philosophical issues under consideration, and a good understanding of the importance of faith and diversity of viewpoint within the Christian tradition.
- Standards reached by students at the end of Year 9 are below the expectations of the locally agreed syllabus and this represents inadequate progress across Key Stage 3. The students' understanding of the religions studied tends to be superficial. Their skills of enquiry, evaluation and reflection are also underdeveloped.
- RE makes a satisfactory contribution to personal development. Students' attitudes towards the subject have improved in recent years and many show a lively interest in asking questions and expressing their ideas about matters of religion and belief. However, the subject does not contribute enough to the development of students' independence and collaborative skills or their higher order thinking.
- The subject supports the development of students' positive attitudes towards religious and cultural diversity as well as their appreciation of a range of moral and social issues. However, the contribution to their spiritual development is less effective because of the limited focus on the area of attainment linked to 'learning from' religion and belief.

Quality of teaching of RE

The quality of teaching of RE is satisfactory overall, although there are significant aspects which require improvement.

- Teaching varies in quality between good and inadequate. Generally, the management of classes and relationships with students are positive. Some good use is made of a range of engaging resources to stimulate students' interest and encourage their responses. In Year 7, there are some well-structured opportunities for students to work more independently. Work is usually marked regularly. In the GCSE classes, students are supported to focus clearly on the examination requirements and they get clear feedback on how to improve. Good use is made of external visitors in lessons to enrich learning and help students understand the significance of religious belief.
- In other lessons, however, the management of students' learning is less effective. The purpose and direction of the work are unclear and the organisation of discussion is weak. The range of teaching strategies being deployed is very narrow and not always matched well to the needs and abilities of the students. Questioning is not used well to check students' learning and activities are not adjusted to take account of their lack of progress. In some lessons taken by non-specialist teachers, there are issues linked to gaps in subject expertise which impact on learning. At Key Stage 3, students are not aware of the meaning of the levels used to mark assessments and, as a result, cannot explain what they need to do to improve.

Quality of the curriculum in RE

The curriculum in RE is satisfactory but, again, there are significant areas requiring improvement.

- The strengths of the curriculum include the good use made of visits and visitors from the local religious and belief communities. This includes a range of well-received and challenging off timetable 'ethics days' which often have a strong focus of issues related to religion and belief. The arrangements for supporting and guiding the students taking the full course GCSE are also good and this helped secure the positive results in 2009.
- The school is exploring a range of pathways and approaches to the delivery of RE to help ensure a good match to the students' needs and interests. In particular, the provision for short course GCSE RE at Key Stage 4 has been linked to the short course GCSE in Citizenship with the scope to allow some more able students to extend into a full course. At present, however, students are not always clear about these arrangements and are uncertain about the place of the study of religious topics within the programme.
- RE is now being delivered through the new 'Smart Kids' curriculum in Year 7. While this is a development with potential to raise the level of challenge of RE at Key Stage 3, the RE element is not as yet fully integrated within the programme and requires a stronger enquiry-based approach to be effective.
- Overall, the Key Stage 3 curriculum, while meeting basic statutory requirements, is not planned well. Too many religions are being included, leading to superficial learning. Insufficient attention is paid to the development of enquiry skills and the exploration of the key concepts of the subject. No use is made of the attainment targets or levels to help structure and differentiate the schemes of work. Much of the mid-term planning lacks clear focus, continuity and progression.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE

The effectiveness of leadership and management in RE is satisfactory.

- RE is supported well by the senior leadership team and the line manager for the subject has a clear commitment to securing improvement. The arrangements for monitoring the subject and developing action plans are clear and focus on the core priorities. The senior leadership team have been innovative in their thinking about the development of new patterns of subject delivery and ways around the constraints on staffing the subject. A key strength of the subject is the important contribution made to the promotion of community cohesion.
- However, subject leadership is a challenge and the capacity for improvement is limited. The range of non-specialists teaching the subject is proving difficult to manage. The overall coordination of the provision is weak and the head of subject is not playing a clear enough strategic role

in developing the provision across the school. The statutory requirements for RE in the sixth form are not met.

- The provision of professional development for both the head of subject and the non-specialist team is inadequate. Although some protected time is provided for the head of subject to work with other colleagues on planning RE, this is not proving sufficient to secure improvement. The school has found it difficult to access any support with the process of implementing the locally agreed syllabus.

Subject issue: how well students are becoming effective learners in RE

RE makes a weak contribution overall to the development of the students' ability to become effective learners. The opportunities to develop their learning skills are limited and are not built effectively into the planning of the subject. The arrangements for RE in Year 7 are beginning to support a more effective approach to the development of personal learning and thinking skills but further work is required to integrate these into the subject.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- improving the quality of teaching by ensuring learning is structured and managed more effectively and by developing a more enquiry-based approach to the subject
- developing the Key Stage 3 curriculum to ensure it incorporates greater challenge, continuity and progression into students' learning
- improving the leadership of RE by ensuring better coordination of the overall provision for the subject
- ensuring students in Key Stage 4 have a clearer understanding of the place of the subject within the new citizenship/RE programme
- developing training opportunities to extend the subject expertise of the non-specialists involved in teaching RE, particularly in Year 7
- securing, as resources allow, more specialist staffing for RE.

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