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Mr D Ennis
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Ennis

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 1 and 2 March 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 and students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of three lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE is satisfactory.

Achievement in RE

Achievement in RE is satisfactory.

- Results in the short GCSE course are improving from well below average because students are beginning to transfer their understanding of philosophical, religious and moral argument into their thinking about specific issues. Current assessment data indicate that an increasing proportion of students is on track to meet their target grades and attain average standards.

- By the end of Key Stage 3, students attain standards that are broadly in line with the expectations of the locally agreed syllabus. Students forge ahead in lessons where the work is challenging and the pace is brisk. Their learning slows to satisfactory when they continue with an activity long after they have gained all they can from it and are ready to move on to more difficult work. In particular, some activities related to 'learning about' religion, lack depth and students do not extend their skills of investigating, analysing and evaluating religious ideas. Where specific units of work or teaching approaches in lessons challenge students to think for themselves, achievement is much better.
- Most students enjoy their RE lessons. Their motivation and attitudes to learning have improved because of changes in the curriculum. This has led to a marked improvement in the achievement of boys; consequently, the gap in attainment between boys and girls is gradually reducing. Students sustain concentration and work well in groups. Behaviour in lessons is generally good.
- Students' moral and social awareness are important strengths. They acquire a range of social skills that helps them to develop into well-rounded individuals. Most students show an interest in religion and have an appropriate respect for the beliefs and practices of others. Students report that they value opportunities for discussion and debate. However, they are less enthusiastic about the way in which they learn when finding out about religions because some of the activities lack challenge.

Quality of teaching of RE

The quality of teaching of RE is satisfactory.

- Lessons are typified by good relationships, mutual respect, humour and warmth. Good quality displays related to RE also help to secure students' interest and enthusiasm for the subject. Teachers have good subject knowledge and use information and communication technology well in their teaching. Increasing use is made of strategies, such as group activities, role-play and paired work, to ensure learning is both fun and purposeful. Books are generally well marked with an explanation of how students can improve their work. Students also have a good understanding of their target grades. Targets are realistic, based on sound analysis and provide good goals for some individual students.
- Where RE is less effective, the use of questioning is not always planned in sufficient detail to ensure all students can participate fully. Additionally, the use of assessment to support learning is not as good as it should be in ensuring activities meet the needs of different ability groups, particularly the most able. As a result, on occasions, students become passive learners and opportunities to develop higher order thinking skills are missed.

Quality of the curriculum in RE

The curriculum in RE is satisfactory.

- The curriculum is broad with students engaging with religious, moral, social and global issues from a variety of standpoints. Schemes of work are detailed with a consistent format in line with the requirements of the locally agreed syllabus. Careful thought is given to matching the curriculum to the students' interests, particularly boys. However, less attention is paid to the systematic development of the skills of the subject. In addition, the inclusion of faiths other than Christianity is sometimes missing from several of the themed topics.
- While some units challenge students' thinking, others over-emphasise low-level collection of information about religion. Curriculum planning does not always consolidate learning or make the links between different units of work explicit enough. As a result, there is a lack of clear progression and continuity in students' learning because insufficient use is made of levels in planning.
- The post-16 provision does not meet statutory requirements because insufficient curriculum time is devoted to enable students to study all of the areas required by the locally agreed syllabus.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE

The effectiveness of leadership and management in RE is satisfactory.

- The director of learning, who is supported well by the senior leadership team, is experienced, enthusiastic and dedicated to RE.
- Self-evaluation is satisfactory. The school has identified accurately the key areas for improvement and has appropriate strategies to tackle them. There is evidence of positive impact, for example, where the school has worked to enhance the motivation, enjoyment and achievement of boys.

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

Through the introduction of personal learning and thinking skills, the school has recognised and is tackling the need to develop the students' critical thinking skills in RE. It has rightly identified this as a development need, both in terms of curriculum planning and in terms of students' learning. As a result, challenging questions and structured thinking strategies are being applied in some RE lessons to good effect. The school is also beginning to explore more flexible and creative approaches to the RE curriculum, building on its skills-based approach in other areas.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- using levels of attainment more effectively to inform planning and to provide greater challenge for students, particularly the most able
- establishing a clearer focus on the key skills and concepts of the subject in planning the curriculum.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop RE in the school.

As I explained previously, 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

Jacqueline Wordsworth
Her Majesty's Inspector