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Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Savage

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 2 and 3 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 four lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE is good.

Achievement in RE

Achievement in RE is good.

- The standards reached by the students at the end of Key Stage 3 meet the expectations of the agreed syllabus, while those at the end of Key Stage 4 are in line with standards in similar schools.
- Achievement at Key Stage 4 is good. Students have a clear grasp of religious and spiritual issues and discuss them with interest. They have a good understanding of religion as a world-wide phenomenon and its close association with culture and international affairs. Students realise the importance of using evidence and argument in forming opinions.

- Achievement at Key Stage 3 is also good. Students make effective use of technical terminology and progress well in acquiring and using skills, knowledge and understanding across the subject. Their understanding of the reasons for religious diversity is particularly advanced but their awareness of the significance of different forms of religious, spiritual and moral expression is less well developed.
- The personal development of students in the context of RE is good. They enjoy RE, as is clear from their enthusiasm in lessons. The increasing numbers selecting religious studies as a GCSE and AS subject also testify to the rising popularity of the subject. RE makes a good contribution to all aspects of students' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.

Quality of teaching of RE

The quality of teaching is good with outstanding features.

- Most teachers have good subject expertise and teaching skills which enable students to progress well. The consistently high quality of teaching from subject specialists and non-specialists alike is a key feature of the provision.
- Lessons are planned carefully with the focus on learning. Relationships are excellent and classes are managed well. Teachers are skilled at encouraging students to challenge each other's statements and at probing to challenge their thinking. Occasionally, where teachers lack specialist background, they are unaware of detailed religious implications of the resources they are using.
- A positive outcome of the diverse provision of RE is students' access to a rich variety of resources, contributed by teachers with differing areas of expertise. The creative use of case studies and scenarios promotes students' interest and sense of enquiry.
- Students have opportunities to work independently and collaboratively, particularly through immersion days and challenging GCSE coursework. Well-managed class discussion also contributes to an enquiry-based approach to learning.
- Work is tailored closely to students' different needs. In all lessons seen, the work was accessible to all. Provision is particularly effective for the most and least able when taught separately. In these lessons, resources, activities and the focus of study are combined to help students to reach their full potential.
- Good assessment structures are in place, including opportunities for self- and peer-assessment. However, at Key Stage 3, assessments are not always derived from the level descriptions in the agreed syllabus. Good systems are in place to inform students about their progress and how to improve.

Quality of the curriculum in RE

The quality of the curriculum in RE is good.

- The curriculum is designed well with some innovative and imaginative elements, notably the provision of different pathways at Key Stage 4 and the inclusion of challenging and interesting immersion days. These give students opportunities to study religious and spiritual issues in some depth and in a range of contexts. Curriculum planning ensures provision includes cross-curricular links with a range of subjects and enrichment experiences, including the use of visits and visitors. These are generally appreciated by students.
- The curriculum meets the interests and needs of a wide range of students and provides well for all abilities. Progression in the curriculum is good as the level of challenge increases across the year groups.
- There is a good balance between the themes and attainment targets across the different aspects of the subject, although this balance is not always demonstrable in planning.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE

The effectiveness of leadership and management in RE is good.

- RE is led effectively by the head of humanities who, although not a subject specialist, gives strong support to developing the quality of provision in the subject, to raising standards and to promoting the students' personal development. He has led the innovative solutions to previous weaknesses in provision and instilled a common sense of purpose among the teachers who are responsible for delivering the RE curriculum.
- Rigorous quality assurance procedures are in place and those who lead RE have a well-grounded understanding of students' performance. This is due, in part, to the wide evidence base on which judgements are founded. Monitoring of students' learning in cross-curricular provision is not yet as thorough as that of examination entrants.
- The inclusion of all students is taken seriously and provision for the least and most able is particularly effective.
- Resources and staffing are strengths. By creating an inter-faculty team of staff with a wide range of knowledge and expertise, the school provides students with a rich diversity of expertise and resources drawn from science, literature, music, art and poetry.
- The faculty has established links with the religious and cultural groups around Bristol and students appreciate the opportunity to talk to faith community members about their beliefs and practices.

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

Students have several planned opportunities to be involved in a clear process of enquiry using a range of challenging skills. For example, as a result of General Studies coursework on an RE theme, Year 11 students have developed very good study and research skills and excellent practices for presenting their work in a thoughtful and systematic way. Students often take the initiative in planning and assessing their work, particularly during

immersion days, and throughout the RE programme they regularly assess their own and their peers' work. RE makes a good contribution to students' ability to reflect on their own lives in the light of their learning about religion and belief. Overall, the subject also makes a good contribution to the development of students' wider personal learning and thinking skills.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- ensuring that RE specialists are involved in planning where RE is taught through English and science
- monitoring the outcomes of students' learning, across the several possible routes provided, against the programmes of study and attainment levels in the locally agreed syllabus.

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

Barbara Wintersgill
Additional Inspector