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Dear Mr Martin

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 22 and 23 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.

- Achievement in Key Stage 3 is good. Students develop a broad understanding of the diversity of religion within their local community and in Britain. They also have a growing appreciation of the impact that religion has on the life of individuals and communities. However, students are less secure in their understanding when comparing aspects of beliefs and practices between and within religions. Nonetheless, many students make good progress in demonstrating the ability to interpret, evaluate and apply

their understanding of key features of a religion to their own life experiences.

- Results in the short GCSE course are well above average reflecting good achievement. In lessons, many students are handling complex concepts well and can use a range of examples to justify their own ideas while providing an appropriate evaluation of other's perspectives.
- Achievement at GCE advanced level has been more modest, particularly in 2009. Current data and students' work in lessons show that most are on track to attain their target grades. In one lesson observed, students offered some very thoughtful personal responses to the issue of whether the theory of situational ethics provides a reliable basis for making moral decisions.
- The contribution of RE to the personal development of students is good. Most show a lively interest in religion and a keen respect for the beliefs and practices of others. They value the subject and recognise the contribution it makes to the development of understanding, respect and tolerance.

Quality of teaching of RE

The quality of teaching of RE is good.

- Lessons are well structured and orderly; classes are managed well and relationships with students are good. Teachers have good subject knowledge that lends confidence to their teaching styles. Effective linking of topics and themes to contemporary issues contributes well to students', particularly boys', enjoyment of learning.
- Lessons proceed at a good pace with effective use of discussion, exposition and questioning. Students work well together. Many concentrate for sustained periods, engaging in group work in a mature and sensible manner. Occasionally, however, there is a tendency to try to cover too much in lessons, which prevents students from consolidating their learning before moving on, and this sometimes impedes their progress.
- Students' attainment is regularly assessed. Emphasis is placed on using a range of assessment strategies to ensure that all students can make progress and to reflect their preferred learning style. Tasks set are generally purposeful and varied. However, some tasks are not defined well enough to be a basis for reliable judgements against levels.
- Marking is completed regularly and is particularly effective at Key Stage 4 and 5 where students are given a very clear understanding of the progress they are making and how to improve.

Quality of the curriculum in RE

The quality of the curriculum in RE is satisfactory.

- RE is a popular, high profile and successful subject in the school, as seen in the very high take-up of the subject in the sixth form.

- RE makes a sound contribution to the school's promotion of community cohesion. The department places appropriate emphasis on enabling the students to understand the significance of religion and its forms of expression in people's lives. However, the opportunities for them to engage directly with representatives from local religious and cultural communities are limited.
- The schemes of work are comprehensive and provide a good basis for all staff to work well together as a team, particularly in Key Stages 4 and 5. Nonetheless, a priority for the department is the establishment of a curriculum in Key Stage 3 that systematically teaches and develops the skills of investigation and enquiry. The school is also aware more needs to be done to ensure that even greater challenge, progression and continuity are built into students' learning. Limited use is made of levels in planning learning outcomes. Individual units do not always ensure there is a clear process of enquiry running through the work or provide for the structured development of skills.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE

The effectiveness of leadership and management in RE is good.

- Leadership of RE is well established with a drive for improvement and a strong sense of direction. The subject has received strong support from the senior leadership team. All aspects of the work of the department are driven by a shared commitment to high standards and the enrichment of students' wider personal development. Based on the successful impact of actions so far, the subject has a good capacity to improve.
- Effective strategies are in place to monitor and evaluate the quality of provision. A well-focused improvement plan for the subject is in place with a set of clear and appropriate priorities targeted on improving provision and raising standards.
- The arrangements for professional development are good. A range of well-conceived strategies is used to develop generic teaching skills and an understanding of effective learning in RE.
- The main RE room provides a stimulating and exciting environment for learning but not all benefit from this as many lessons are taught in non-specialist accommodation.
- The arrangements for assessing students' progress are satisfactory. The analysis of assessment data is used appropriately to evaluate their achievement. Less effective use is made of the information gained from assessments to plan increasingly challenging work.

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

Opportunities for students to develop as critical thinkers in the subject are currently underdeveloped. There are opportunities for students to think creatively about RE, particularly in Key Stage 4 and 5 and in the context of

'learning from' religion where students are encouraged to think for themselves and come to personal judgements. The commitment of the department to embrace whole-school initiatives in the design of schemes of work is an important step in embedding thinking skills in Key Stage 3. However, these skills are not taught systematically across year groups or classes.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- reviewing the Key Stage 3 scheme of work to ensure it embeds greater continuity and progression into students' learning
- developing further the use of assessment opportunities to inform students' of progress and to plan subsequent work
- exploring opportunities to extend the opportunities for first-hand contact with religious communities through, for example, use of more fieldwork and visitors in RE.

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