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Mr S Penney
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Penney

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 8 and 9 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 an assembly and seven lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE is good.

Achievement in RE

Achievement in RE is good.

- The attainment of students entered for full course GCSE in RE is high. The pattern of above-average results has been sustained over recent years. In 2009, nearly 84% of students gained the higher A* to C grades. The attainment of the rest of the students, all of whom are entered for the GCSE short course, while below the national average, represents good achievement with the majority reaching their challenging targets.
- At Key Stage 4, students show a good grasp of the issues they are studying and often write confidently when analysing and evaluating them.

While they can offer sensible personal viewpoints, their grasp of religious perspectives on the issues tends to be slightly formulaic.

- By the end of Key Stage 3, standards in RE are broadly in line with expectations but attainment is uneven across the three years and across different aspects of the subject. Where students have opportunities to investigate issues about religion, as in Year 7 where they study questions related to religion and science, they make good progress. When they study specific religions, their progress is sometimes more constrained because they cover too much content in insufficient depth. In Year 9, students develop a good understanding of a range of ethical issues in preparation for their GCSE course. Overall, the development of their knowledge, understanding and skills in relation to the attainment target related to 'learning about' religion is fairly limited.
- The progress of students with special educational needs and/or disabilities is particularly good because of the careful adaptation of the pattern of work to meet their needs. The achievement of the more able is also good overall although it is this group whose progress is most affected by the limited challenge in some of the learning about specific religions.
- Students' personal development in the context of RE is good and, in some respects, outstanding. Attitudes to the subject are generally good. However, occasionally, students are less willing to take a positive lead in initiating their learning. Behaviour is of a consistently high standard. The subject reflects and reinforces the wider school ethos which promotes tolerance and respect and encourages students to explore a range of important global issues. An impressive contribution is made to students' moral and social development. The contribution to their spiritual and cultural development, while good in some respects, is limited because the majority have too little opportunity to explore and deepen their understanding of the wide diversity of religions beyond Year 8.

Quality of teaching of RE

The quality of teaching of RE is good.

- Lessons are planned carefully and relationships with students are good. Behaviour and learning are managed well. Humour is often used effectively to maintain enthusiasm and promote positive attitudes. Teachers adapt the learning well to ensure the range of students' needs are met, although occasionally there are missed opportunities to extend the most able.
- Teaching is active and ensures lessons progress at a good pace. Teachers have good subject knowledge and questions are used well to prompt learning and check students have understood their work. A good range of resources and teaching strategies is used to maintain interest and promote good learning. While the specific purpose of lessons is shared with students, occasionally the wider context and direction of the work are not made clear enough.
- Where the scheme of work is seeking to cover too much in too short a time, the opportunities to extend students' skills of enquiry and promote

more challenge are limited. Students do not always have sufficient time to consolidate their understanding before moving on.

- Teachers mark work regularly, providing good feedback and setting targets for improvement. Assessment at Key Stage 4 is very good and helps to secure the positive results. Underachievement is quickly identified and strategies are in place to support students. Some of the grading of students' attainment at Key Stage 3 is too generous and not always securely related to the full range of performance in the level descriptors of the agreed syllabus.

Quality of the curriculum in RE

The curriculum in RE is good.

- A major strength is the provision of two pathways at Key Stage 4, enabling all students to gain an appropriate level of accreditation for their studies. The Key Stage 3 curriculum follows the locally agreed syllabus carefully. Statutory requirements are met, including in the sixth form where a range of enrichment opportunities provides good opportunities for students to continue to develop their awareness of a range of ethical and religious themes. The curriculum is successfully adapted to meet the needs of all students, particularly the least able.
- The study of some religions is handled well, such as the teaching of Buddhism in Year 7. However, the process of seeking to cover all the suggested content in the agreed syllabus at Key Stage 3 means the quality of the students' learning is sometimes limited. Currently, the integration of work across the two areas of attainment, 'learning about' and 'learning from' religion, is not always achieved successfully. Specifically, students do not have enough opportunity to consolidate their understanding of the core beliefs of Christianity while undertaking the study of ethical and social issues from a Christian perspective in Year 9 and Key Stage 4.
- Good progress has been made in monitoring and extending the scope to support students' personal learning and thinking skills and to promote their awareness of cross-curricular dimensions. There are some very impressive opportunities to enrich students' learning through, for example, the off-timetable curriculum days, work related to National Holocaust Day and links to Sierra Leone. While a good contribution is made to aspects of community cohesion, such as global awareness, opportunities are missed for students to engage with representatives of religious communities in the local region.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE

The effectiveness of leadership and management in RE is good.

- RE benefits from an experienced subject leader who is supported well by the appropriately qualified teaching team and clearly defined, effective line-management arrangements. The day-to-day management of the subject is thorough with a clear focus on improvement and raising

attainment. The ethos of the subject reflects the wider commitment of the school to inclusion and the promotion of equality and respect for diversity.

- Good monitoring arrangements are underpinned by strong data about students' achievement. Effective use is made of surveys of students' opinion to help the process of self-review. While some aspects of the self-evaluation lack a clear critical edge, overall the priorities for action are clearly identified and embedded in the departmental improvement plan.
- Resources for the subject are generally good. The two main teaching rooms are attractive and provide a very positive environment for learning. The subject benefits from wider involvement in a network group formed within a federation of local schools. However, high-quality subject training to support the interpretation and implementation of the locally agreed syllabus has been difficult to access.

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

There are a number of very positive opportunities for students to develop their skills as learners in RE. Effective use is made of discussion and group work with some examples of independent research evident. Students review their learning regularly, using both peer- and self-assessment. However, the need to cover a significant amount of content and the tightly planned schemes of work sometimes limit the opportunity for students to develop the full range of skills of enquiry and play a role in setting the agenda for their learning.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- developing the Key Stage 3 curriculum to raise the level of challenge and extend students' knowledge, understanding and enquiry skills in relation to their study of world religions
- ensuring students' understanding of religious perspectives on issues at GCSE are more firmly grounded in their learning about religion
- improving the opportunities for fieldwork and enrichment activities to extend students' first-hand experiences of religious diversity.

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

Alan Brine
Her Majesty's Inspector