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Mrs J Kirby  
Headteacher  
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Dear Mrs Kirby

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 16 and 17 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 lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE is inadequate.

Achievement in RE

Achievement in RE is inadequate.

- The results in the GCSE full course in 2009 were above the national average and presented good overall achievement by the students who took the course. Results in the GCSE short course, taken by most of the other students, were broadly in line with the national average and were above the targets set for the subject, again reflecting good achievement in the examination. This pattern of achievement has been sustained over recent years and is consistent across all groups of students.

- Evidence from lessons and students' work indicates that the success at GCSE is largely due to the progress students make in developing skills to meet the course requirements in the latter part of their course. In practice, while students develop a good understanding of a range of moral and social issues and the ability to structure examination answers, their understanding of the religious perspectives which they apply to these issues is often superficial and formulaic. This, in part, reflects weaknesses in the provision for RE at Key Stage 3. Students' knowledge, understanding and skills in relation to their study of religions and beliefs are below expectations and their progress is limited.
- Students complete Key Stage 3 at the end of year 8, starting GCSE in Year 9. Lower attaining students in Years 7 and 8 follow a humanities curriculum strongly focused on developing their literacy and personal learning and thinking skills. Where specific RE lessons are planned well, students make good progress. However, the overall provision for RE in this programme is not well coordinated and the opportunities to integrate the emphasis on skills within RE work are not planned systematically enough. As a result, students do not make enough progress in acquiring a breadth of understanding of religion and belief to match the expectations of the locally agreed syllabus.
- The majority of students take RE as a separate subject in Years 7 and 8, but too much of the work lacks challenge and students, particularly the more able, do not make adequate progress.
- The quality of the personal development of students in RE is variable. Many enjoy the subject and participate well. However, where teaching fails to capture their imagination, students are disenchanted and do not engage well in their learning. The subject makes a good contribution to students' moral and social development, but their spiritual development within RE is very limited and not enough opportunity is provided for students to extend their understanding of religious and cultural diversity.

#### Quality of teaching of RE

The quality of teaching is satisfactory.

- The teaching of RE varies from good to inadequate but is, on balance, satisfactory. In the best lessons, relationships are good, effective resources are used to engage interest, and teachers use a range of strategies to challenge students and promote good learning. This is particularly, but not exclusively, evident in some lower ability classes. For example, a Year 8 lesson on the Muslim pilgrimage was planned well and delivered effectively with good use of humour and lively activities. Teaching in the examination classes is generally satisfactory. Teachers provide the basic knowledge and understanding to meet the examination requirements; there are also some good opportunities for students to discuss issues.
- In the less effective lessons, work is not well-structured and students do not engage actively in their learning. The opportunities to develop the

skills of enquiry and produce independent original writing are very limited. Discussion and paired activities are not managed effectively.

- In classes with lower ability students, work is usually matched well to their needs. However, in other classes very little adjustment is made to the learning and the needs of the more able are not met with an appropriate level of challenge.
- The quality of assessment and marking is very variable. In many Year 10 classes, students' work is marked carefully and clear targets for improvement are set. Elsewhere, however, practice is inconsistent both in terms of the frequency and quality of marking. Some students' work has not been properly marked all year. Teachers are unclear about the department's policy for assessment.

### Quality of the curriculum in RE

The curriculum in RE is inadequate.

- While good provision is made for all students to accredit their learning in Key Stage 4, the overall curriculum is unbalanced, lacks coherence and progression, and is not well coordinated.
- The school has been innovative in its approach to the provision of RE by offering different pathways for students at Key Stage 3, and full and short GCSE courses starting in Year 9. However, the detailed planning for this pattern of provision is not effective. The school has recognised and is acting on the need to provide clearer leadership for the humanities course in Years 7 and 8 in order to make the links between subject teaching, and particularly RE, and the focus on skills more explicit and effective.
- The school does make provision for all sixth-form students to develop their appreciation of issues related to religion through various enrichment activities, including a recent day focused on whether religion is dangerous with a range of high-profile speakers drawn from the local community. An opportunity for students to take an A Level in religious studies is provided through a city consortium arrangement.
- Care has been taken in RE to ensure students' faith backgrounds are reflected in the choice of religions studied. The school has a very high profile and an impressive programme of work related to community cohesion and the prevention of violent extremism. However, the scope for the subject to take full advantage of these wider school initiatives has not been exploited enough. Most students have had no significant enrichment of their learning in RE through use of fieldwork or visitors.

### Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE

The effectiveness of leadership and management in RE is inadequate.

- The overall provision for RE across the school is not led, managed or coordinated effectively.

- The subject benefits from a strong team of specialists and is well-resourced. In addition, the non-specialists teaching the subject in Key Stage 3 are dedicated and keen to promote good learning. However, there are no clear policies in place and no overall coherent scheme of work and assessment arrangements. As a result, practice is inconsistent, day-to-day management of the provision is weak and teachers are often unclear what is expected of them.
- Arrangements for monitoring and improvement planning are in place. The issues raised during the inspection have been identified by the senior leadership. However, the current RE development plan focuses on Key Stage 4 and does not tackle the significant pattern of underachievement and the gaps in the leadership of the subject at Key Stage 3.

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

The scope of the subject to promote effective learning is not exploited sufficiently. Too much of the learning is narrowly controlled by the teacher with insufficient use being made of higher level skills of enquiry and reflection. As a result, for example, the potential of the subject to make a strong contribution to the development of literacy and personal learning and thinking skills in the Key Stage 3 humanities programme is not realised.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- improving, as a matter of urgency, the overall leadership and management of RE across the school
- establishing a clearer, more coherent and progressive overall curriculum for RE
- developing more opportunities for independent learning and extending the level of challenge for the more able
- ensuring students' knowledge, understanding and skills in relation to their learning about religions and beliefs are improved.

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