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Dear Ms Lee

Ofsted 2010-11 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 26 and 27 April 2010 to look at work 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 five lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE is satisfactory with good features and good capacity for improvement.

Achievement in RE

Achievement in RE is satisfactory with good features.

- There are no recent RE examination results but there is now a full course GCSE group in Year 10. Current assessments indicate students are broadly on track to meet their targets. Their work indicates that they are making good progress.
- Assessment data for the core RE programme at the end of Year 11 in 2009 indicated significant levels of underachievement, particularly by boys. Action was taken to review the arrangements and evidence for current students indicates they are broadly on track to meet their targets with a

much narrower gap in the performance of boys and girls. There is some variability in achievement across different teaching groups.

- A key strength at Key Stage 4 is the students' ability to analyse and discuss a range of philosophical, social and ethical issues. However, their understanding and insight into different religious and belief perspectives on those issues are less well-developed and relatively superficial.
- Year 9 assessment data for 2009 indicate that attainment was well below the expected target, with underachievement particularly noticeable among boys. Results for the current Year 9 cohort have improved, although data for Year 8 indicate significant levels of underachievement.
- Key Stage 3 students in some groups achieve very well. Some higher ability students in Year 9 have produced very high-quality extended evaluative written work on the theme of sanctity of life.
- The pattern of achievement at Key Stage 3 is uneven, both across the programme and between different teaching groups. Progress in Year 7 is limited because of shortcomings in the curriculum and the variable pattern of provision and quality of teaching. The rate of progress improves in Years 8 and 9 but is still very uneven. Students do well in relation to the study of ethical and social issues but make less progress in developing a depth of understanding of specific religions and beliefs.
- Students' attitudes to learning and behaviour in RE are generally good. This is an improvement from a previous picture where students' evaluations had indicated some levels of dissatisfaction with RE. They can see the value of the subject, although some are less enthusiastic when the quality of teaching is less effective. RE makes a very good contribution to students' moral and social development but their spiritual and cultural development is more modest. There is some good practice in promoting students' wider personal learning and thinking skills, a focus of the school, although there is scope to embed these more systematically in the process of learning.

Quality of teaching of RE

The quality of teaching of RE is satisfactory with some good practice.

- The quality of teaching is uneven. There is some impressive practice but other provision is less effective. RE is delivered by the humanities teachers in Key Stage 3 and, apart from the GCSE group, by the English team in Key Stage 4. Securing consistency of practice is a challenge. Most lessons are orderly; students and tasks are managed efficiently. Relationships with students are generally good.
- In the best practice, learning is well structured and enables students to make good progress. Teaching proceeds at a good pace and secures the active involvement of students in their learning. Activities and resources are varied and appropriate, ensuring that students are interested and engaged. Good use is made of group and pair work to encourage discussion, collaboration and independence. Teaching models an open and investigative approach to learning and values students' insights and

contributions. In the best practice, very effective use is made of questioning to check students' progress and learning is skilfully adapted where necessary.

- Where teaching is less effective, activities do not ensure students' active involvement in learning. There is limited opportunity for lively discussion and too much reliance on low-level textbook-driven written tasks. Some teachers do not have enough confidence in the subject to enable them to adjust the lessons to extend students' learning.
- The quality of marking in RE has improved as a result of a recent drive to secure greater consistency of practice. Some good use is made of self- and peer-assessment strategies. There are good systems in place to set targets and monitor students' progress. However, there is some inconsistency in the accuracy of assessment across the teaching team which limits the value of some marking.

Quality of the curriculum in RE

The quality of the curriculum in RE is satisfactory, with some good features.

- The subject meets the broad statutory requirements of the locally agreed syllabus. Provision in the sixth form offers students some valued opportunities to consider a range of philosophical, ethical and religious themes through citizenship days and the general studies programme.
- The teaching and assessment of the core Key Stage 4 RE are provided through an enhanced English programme which includes patterns of learning related to meeting the speaking and listening components of the English GCSE. While this arrangement has a number of strengths, there is inconsistency in the quality of delivery across different classes with, for example, some teaching relying too heavily on low-level note-taking. The provision broadly follows the pattern of a short course GCSE in RE. However, the strong focus on exploring a range of ethical and philosophical issues is not always balanced by an effective extension of students' understanding of different religions and beliefs. Some more creative possibilities linking RE to themes within the literature being studied in English are underdeveloped.
- RE is currently taught as part of an integrated humanities programme in Year 7. In Years 8 and 9 it is delivered as a separate subject by humanities teachers, alongside history and geography. In Year 7, this provides some creative possibilities to link RE to wider themes, such as work on the local community. However, the overall pattern of the provision lacks coherence and continuity. For example, work on religious responses to environmental issues is attempted before students have a clear enough understanding of the religions themselves. There is also inconsistency in the degree to which students receive their full RE entitlement. This depends on which teacher they have.
- The subject has clearer definition in Years 8 and 9, but the balance and sequencing of work leads to some inconsistency in progress across different aspects of the RE curriculum. For example, students have insufficient opportunity to develop their understanding of religions and

beliefs before they are asked to apply these to a range of issues. The provision for learning about the key beliefs of Christianity is not strong enough.

- While there are opportunities for fieldwork in RE through visits to local churches and the Gurdwara in Warrington, there is scope to extend this provision to make a more sustained contribution to the promotion of cultural awareness and community cohesion.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE

The effectiveness of leadership and management in RE is good and has secured recent improvement in the quality of the provision.

- RE benefits from enthusiastic and committed leadership from the head of subject. Good progress has been made in putting a detailed scheme of work and range of assessment tasks in place to support the non-specialist teaching team. The pattern of delivery, using the humanities team in Key Stage 3 and English team in Key Stage 4, and the use of some split classes, adds to the challenge of managing the provision.
- Full course GCSE provision has been established recently, with a good number opting to study the subject next year. Resources and use of information and communication technology (ICT) in RE are limited. Some rooms do not have good access to ICT.
- Some effective use is made of data and monitoring to support the process of self-assessment. However, monitoring requires improvement to ensure that patterns of inconsistency in entitlement, teaching and progress are identified and tackled more effectively.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- improving monitoring, support and training to ensure greater consistency in the teaching and assessment of RE
- developing greater continuity and progression in the RE curriculum across the school, especially in relation to developing students' understanding of different religions and beliefs
- extending opportunities for students to have first-hand contact with a wider range of religious and belief traditions.

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 under the URN for your school. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Alan Brine
Her Majesty's Inspector