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Mr T Langston
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Dear Mr Langston

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 8 and 9 July 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 without their consent.

The evidence used to inform the judgements included: interviews with staff, the Chair of Governors and students; scrutiny of relevant documentation; analysis of students' work and observation of lessons in RE and citizenship.

The overall effectiveness of RE is inadequate, although provision has recently improved significantly. The school recognises that weaknesses remain which need to be tackled, particularly in the curriculum at Key Stage 3.

Achievement in RE

Achievement in RE is inadequate.

- Short course GCSE results for RE in 2009 were well below the national average and represented inadequate achievement. The school is predicting that this year's results for both Year 10 and 11 students, almost all of whom have been entered for the short course GCSE, will be much better. The proportion expected to gain an A* to C grade is above the national average and close to the targets set. However, the number expected to gain the higher A* to B grades is well below target, indicating a pattern of underachievement among the more able students. While students have a reasonable understanding of a range of moral, philosophical and social issues, their ability to apply the perspective of

Christianity to those issues is limited because they lack the necessary background knowledge and understanding of the religion. This restricts the students' ability to move beyond standard coached answers to examination questions, capping their ability to reach the higher grades. The progress of students in Years 10 and 11 is good, albeit across a relatively narrow range of attainment. Their progress is from a low base of prior knowledge and understanding because the quality of their RE experience in Key Stage 3 was inadequate.

- The pattern of weak provision and underachievement at Key Stage 3 remains because students do not have enough time to pursue their studies in RE. The standards gained are well below the expectations of the locally agreed syllabus. Students do not acquire a clear framework of knowledge, understanding and skills in the subject. Their grasp of the key features of different religions and beliefs is very weak and many cannot identify correctly very basic factual information.
- Students' attitudes towards learning in RE are good and this is reflected in their behaviour in lessons. They enjoy the subject and value the opportunities that it provides to discuss issues and explore different ways of life. The subject enriches students' social and moral awareness but its contribution to their spiritual and cultural development is weak because they have insufficient opportunity to explore the diversity and meaning of religious life.

Quality of teaching of RE

The quality of teaching of RE is good, but severe limitations in the curriculum mean that this is not being translated into good achievement.

- RE lessons are characterised by lively and engaging teaching which successfully involves students in their learning. A wide range of well-managed active teaching strategies is used, including group work and discussion, to encourage students to sustain concentration and talk about their work. Students often take a lead in explaining the lessons.
- Activities and resources are well-differentiated to meet the varying needs of different students and in-class support is managed effectively. Good questioning by the teacher ensures that students' progress is checked and, when necessary, the direction of the learning is adjusted appropriately.
- However, often the pattern of the teaching does not recognise students' limited prior learning consequent of weaknesses in the structure of the curriculum. While students have good opportunities to take responsibility for their learning through project work, the pattern of these is not always clear enough to ensure that students focus on clear, subject-related outcomes.
- A variety of effective assessment strategies is used to support students' progress at Key Stage 4. However, the pattern of the curriculum limits the quality of assessment at Key Stage 3 where students do not have meaningful opportunities to understand their progress or identify targets for improvement. Regular opportunities occur for peer- and self-

assessment, but at Key Stage 3 these are not always focused successfully on clear subject-related criteria.

Quality of the curriculum in RE

The quality of the curriculum in RE is inadequate.

- The allocation of one hour a fortnight for RE in Key Stage 3 limits the quality of the provision. It fragments students' learning and makes it very difficult to secure an appropriate breadth and depth of study. The curriculum cannot match the expectations set out in the locally agreed syllabus. For example, students do not have enough opportunity to develop the knowledge and understanding of religion which is required to underpin the short course GCSE.
- The allocation of time at Key Stage 4 has been increased to one period a week with students completing their study at the end of Year 10 before moving on to take a short course GCSE in Citizenship in Year 11. This year will see the first results from the new pattern of examination provision and the school recognises that it will be important to evaluate the impact of the new arrangements on students' attainment in RE.
- The GCSE specifications provide a clear structure for the Key Stage 4 curriculum, but the provision at Key Stage 3 lacks continuity and progression. While individual lessons and activities are delivered effectively, they do not provide a coherent overall curriculum for RE. For example, students are often being asked to explore the impact of religious beliefs on individual lives before they have understood the nature of those beliefs.
- RE benefits from some enrichment through the use of off-timetable days and additional activities linked, for example, to the school's fair trade work. These enable the subject to contribute to the school's commitment to promoting community cohesion. However, the school has recognised the need for students to engage more directly with the diversity of culture and religion in contemporary Britain through the use of visits and visitors.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE

The effectiveness of leadership and management in RE is satisfactory.

- A major achievement of the past year has been the re-establishment of the place of RE within the school after a period of significant instability. The new leadership of the subject has raised its status with students who now enjoy RE and benefit from some engaging, pacy teaching. The senior leaders and Chair of Governors are aware of the current issues facing the subject and are committed to seeking solutions.
- The head of RE faced some significant challenges and, rightly, focused immediate attention on securing the provision at Key Stage 4 and on creating a positive ethos for learning within the department.
- An action plan has been established which has identified some of the key priorities for improvement, including the need to tackle the very limited

access to information and communication technology (ICT) within the main RE accommodation. However, the plan has yet to capture the need to tackle major weaknesses in the curriculum and assessment arrangements. The school recognises that additional specialist staffing will be required to secure the future of the subject.

- Arrangements for systematically monitoring the subject are not fully in place although good use is being made of examination data to analyse students' performance. Recently, access to RE training to support development in the subject has been limited.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- improving attainment in RE at Key Stage 3 by establishing more effective curriculum provision with an appropriate pattern of continuity and progression in students' learning
- reviewing the time allocation for RE at Key Stage 3 to ensure that more opportunities are provided for sustained learning and better coverage of the breadth of study outlined in the agreed syllabus
- improving the access to, and use of, ICT within the RE provision
- extending opportunities for students to have more first-hand experience of religious diversity through use of visits and visitors in RE.

I hope that 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