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Mrs J Brown
Principal
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Dear Mrs Brown

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 22 and 23 November 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 and students; scrutiny of relevant documentation; analysis of students' work; and observation of five lessons and two assemblies.

The overall effectiveness of RE is satisfactory and there is a good capacity for improvement.

Achievement in RE

Achievement in RE is satisfactory.

- The pattern of attainment in RE is uneven across the school. Key Stage 4 has a legacy of weak provision in previous years. In 2010, GCSE Short Course results were well below the national average reflecting inadequate achievement. However, students' responses to the recent introduction of Key Stage 4 RE Viewpoint Days have been positive.
- By the end of Year 9, students' attainment is below the expectations of the locally agreed syllabus. Developments to the provision in Key Stage 3 are seeing standards rise and achievement overall is now satisfactory and

improving. In Year 7, standards are now in line with the expectations of the agreed syllabus reflecting good progress by this year group.

- This pattern of progress at Key Stage 3 is uneven across different elements of the subject. Students' knowledge and understanding of religions is limited but their willingness to discuss religious ideas and to express personal viewpoints is often good. Year 7 pupils could, for example, discuss their ideas about prayer and religious issues within the media with confidence and enthusiasm. However, these discussions are not always informed by a strong enough knowledge and understanding of specific religious beliefs and practices and they are less confident in their ability to apply the skills of enquiry when investigating religious material.
- There is some variability in attitudes towards RE. In some classes, particularly those with lower attaining older students, concentration levels are weak and they struggle to maintain attention and engage in their learning. Elsewhere, particularly with younger and higher ability students, attitudes to RE are positive. The contribution to students' wider learning and literacy is variable. There is scope to extend the range of writing which currently tends to focus on recount or open reflective writing rather than more challenging persuasive or discursive work.
- Overall, RE makes a sound and improving contribution to students' wider personal development. A representative of the local church who contributed to the recent Year 10 Viewpoint Day reported: 'I was very impressed.....by the students, who were courteous and interested in the topic and were not afraid to ask very searching questions'. The subject promotes a positive attitude towards diversity. There is also a strong emphasis on promoting awareness of moral and social issues in RE. While students do have opportunities to reflect on their learning, there is scope to extend the more evocative aspects of RE to enable them to understand the deeper impact which religion and belief can have on people's lives.

Quality of teaching of RE

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

- The strengths of teaching lie in the detailed planning, well-organised lessons, and positive relationships with students. In all, but the most challenging classes, there is a positive ethos for learning and clear expectations are set about behaviour and attitudes to learning. Teachers use a range of lively and engaging activities and resources to stimulate interest and promote learning. Students are often invited to identify the questions they want to explore and are provided with opportunities to express their opinions and views.
- Where the curriculum planning is strong, the structure of lessons and topics is clear and purposeful. Learning objectives are clear and differentiated to match a range of abilities. Some good use is made of pair and group activities helping to build wider social and learning skills

although this use is sometimes limited because of students' limited listening and group working abilities.

- However, in some lessons, the management of the learning is less secure and students are being asked to offer personal responses before they have had a chance to develop their knowledge and understanding of religious material. Sometimes teachers' subject knowledge is limited and this restricts their ability to ask more probing questions or draw learning together to highlight key ideas. In the most difficult classes, some teachers struggle to find the strategies and approaches to ensure that students work well together and maintain their concentration; where this happens, learning is limited.
- Books are marked regularly. Students are usually informed of their levels and set clear targets. Although assessment systems are in place, there is some uncertainty around the use and application of levels in the subject.

Quality of the curriculum in RE

The quality of the curriculum in RE is satisfactory and improving.

- The provision for RE is being developed carefully following a period of instability. The introduction of RE Viewpoint Days in Year 10, with plans to extend this into Year 11, will ensure all students have an opportunity for some high-quality work on a series of RE-related topics based on one of the GCSE short courses. While this, together with the arrangements for RE in the sixth form, does not technically meet the full requirements of the locally agreed syllabus, they represent a sensible pattern of provision reflecting the wider priorities of the school.
- The Key Stage 3 curriculum is a careful blend of agreed syllabus requirements and guidance material together with the thematic whole school programme. Although a full scheme of work is in place to support the humanities team it is variable in quality. There are some good examples of strongly planned coherent units of work building on the key question approach of the agreed syllabus. Other units are less well-structured. In some cases, the integration of the two attainment targets of the subject is not fully secure. Generally, there is not enough high-quality and challenging 'learning about' religion. Similarly, there is an imbalance between thematic work and the more systematic study of specific religion with insufficient focus on the latter.
- The Key Stage 4 Viewpoint Days provide a very good opportunity to use the local religious communities to enrich RE. However, there are limited opportunities to use a diversity of visits and visitors in RE at Key Stage 3.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE

The effectiveness of leadership and management in RE is good.

- The subject is recovering from a period of instability in its staffing and leadership. It is now part of an improving humanities faculty which is well-

led and receives strong support from the senior leadership team. The recent appointment of an RE specialist has strengthened the subject expertise within the faculty. The capacity for further improvement is good.

- The position of RE has been secured within the school and there are plans to extend this further through the introduction of a GCSE option. The integration within humanities in Years 7 and 8 means these students have good opportunities for sustained learning in RE. While there is some variability in the pattern of delivery across the teaching team, the developing schemes of work are providing a sound basis for lesson planning and assessment.
- The subject benefits from strong monitoring and action planning within the wider Raising Achievement Plan and there is a clear vision for the future of the subject. Good use is made of students' evaluations in reviewing and developing the subject. Data are used routinely to track students' progress and evaluate the work of the department. However, the accuracy of this information is not yet secure enough.
- The humanities team works well together but access to subject-specific training for both specialist and non-specialist staff has been limited.
- An important strength of the subject is the positive contribution it makes to raising pupils' self-esteem and integrating the wider school ambition to create good citizens and promote community cohesion.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- improving the Key Stage 3 curriculum to build in:
 - stronger continuity and progression in students' learning
 - clarity about the core focus and purpose of each unit
 - a clearer enquiry-based approach to learning
 - a better balance of work across the two areas of attainment
 - a more straightforward approach to assessment focusing on developing skills of enquiry and providing a clearer view of progress in RE
- consolidating the Key Stage 4 curriculum and continuing to monitor its impact
- extending opportunities for activities to enrich students' learning and their first-hand experience of religious and cultural diversity
- providing further professional development opportunities for the humanities team RE to plan together and develop subject expertise.

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. It may be used to inform decisions about any future inspection.

Yours sincerely

Alan Brine
Her Majesty's Inspector