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Mrs C Graham
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Graham

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 29 and 30 March 2011 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, governors and students; scrutiny of relevant documentation; analysis of students' work; observation of four lessons and an assembly.

The overall effectiveness of RE is satisfactory but the school recognises that there are significant issues of weakness in departmental leadership to address.

Achievement in RE

Achievement in RE is satisfactory.

- The standards attained by students taking GCE A levels in Philosophy and Ethics are variable but broadly average. School assessments show that current students are on track to meet their targets and are making satisfactory progress. Strengths include students' ability to evaluate source material and to develop coherent arguments.
- Standards at Key Stage 4 are broadly average but the pattern of attainment over a three-year period is inconsistent. Results in 2010 were

below the national average and represented underachievement for all groups of students. However, current Year 11 students are making satisfactory progress. They are able to use key vocabulary effectively and link moral issues to religious teachings.

- Year 9 school assessments indicate that attainment at Key Stage 3 is average. Students are currently making satisfactory progress. They can demonstrate knowledge of religious concepts and reflect on their own experiences. However, they do not demonstrate the skills of enquiry, analysis or creative, independent thinking.
- Students' attitudes to RE are variable. They enjoy the opportunity that RE gives to debate a range of contemporary issues and consider their own feelings and beliefs. They are less enthusiastic when lessons are dominated by writing and there is too much emphasis on the use of textbooks. Students can see the value of RE in terms of respecting diversity although they are aware that they are given little opportunity to meet people from different faith communities.

Quality of teaching of RE

The quality of teaching of RE is satisfactory.

- Lessons are orderly and teaching generally proceeds at a good pace. Relationships with students are good. Where teaching is most effective, a variety of activities and resources is used to motivate students. In some lessons, students are given the opportunity to ask questions.
- Where teaching is less effective, activities are disjointed and teachers do not check students' knowledge and understanding. Little opportunity is given for the sharing of ideas, enquiry and the development of RE concepts. Teachers do not ensure that activities are matched to students' differing abilities. As a result, some students are not sufficiently challenged. Self- and peer-assessment are used regularly in lessons but they focus on generic skills, such as teambuilding, rather than RE skills.
- Work is marked regularly and in detail. Students at Key Stage 4 are reasonably clear about how to improve their work. Assessment at Key Stage 3 is weak. Level criteria for setting tasks and marking work are applied inaccurately and marking is overgenerous. Comments generally focus on students' attitudes rather than specific ways in which work can be improved. As a result, they have little understanding of what levels mean or how they can make progress.

Quality of the curriculum in RE

The quality of the curriculum in RE is satisfactory but statutory requirements are not met in full in the sixth form.

- The subject meets the broad statutory requirements of the locally agreed syllabus at Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4. A strength of the provision is the opportunity for all students to accredit their learning in RE at the end of

Key Stage 4 through short course GCSE. There is little provision for RE in the sixth form. Students meet some faith members in the tutorial guidance programme. This has not been identified as RE by the school and is not based on the requirements of the locally agreed syllabus.

- Year 9 students are given some opportunity to develop appropriate knowledge and understanding of practices and beliefs through the study of Buddhism. The introductory unit on philosophical and ethical ideas ensures continuity and progression for Key Stage 4 learning. However, no links are made to Years 7 and 8 learning in the partner school. This lack of coherence and continuity is having an impact on students' progress.
- The opportunity to develop learning through fieldwork and the use of visitors is very limited, especially at Key Stages 3 and 4. As a result, students have little scope to explore diversity of religions and beliefs in a local and national context.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE

The effectiveness of leadership and management in RE is satisfactory but significant weaknesses exist around specialist leadership of the department.

- You have monitored RE in the school and accurately evaluated current provision. You are very committed to bringing about improvement through supporting and challenging staff. The governing body is aware of weaknesses in the provision and wants to bring about change. Actions for improvement are being identified. For example, changes to the school leadership structure will ensure that RE will be led by an experienced head of faculty. As a result, there is capacity for improvement.
- One specialist RE teacher leads the department. She has produced planning for all year groups and supported non-specialist teachers. She has analysed students' attainment but has not used this information to identify interventions to raise standards. Improvement planning is weak. For example, students' negative attitudes towards the subject are identified as an issue by the head of RE but few strategies are in place to raise the profile of RE across the school. Understanding of national and local documentation and developments in RE is very limited. As a consequence, leadership and management of the department have lacked direction.
- Opportunities for staff training and continued professional development have been very limited. The accommodation and resources for the subject are satisfactory although little use is made of information and communication technology.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- improving the expertise of the specialist RE leader, in particular by developing an understanding of the statutory requirements and locally agreed syllabus

- developing a stronger focus on an enquiry approach to learning in RE
- developing improvement strategies which are regularly evaluated for impact, for example, identifying specific ways to positively raise the profile of RE for all students
- ensuring that statutory requirements are met in the sixth form.

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

Isobel Short
Additional Inspector