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Mr R Ayling
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Ayling

Ofsted 2011–12 subject survey inspection programme: religious education (RE)

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 10 and 11 January 2012 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 six lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE is good.

Achievement in RE

Achievement in RE is good.

- Entry for the GCSE short and full courses is very high. In 2011, significantly increased numbers were entered for the full course, reflecting the department's ambition to be more challenging. The pattern of attainment over recent years is well above the national average. In 2011, the proportion of students who attained the highest A* and A grades was very high.
- By the end of Year 11, the majority of students make at least good progress and some make outstanding progress, having attained standards that are broadly in line with the Essex agreed syllabus expectations by the end of Year 9. The great majority of students are able to express the key

elements of religions and beliefs they have studied and can express their own insights into social and moral issues thoughtfully.

- A growing number of students opt into GCE AS and A level courses in philosophy and ethics in the sixth form. In 2011, results at A level were well above the national average, reflecting students' good progress. Students are particularly good at demonstrating evaluative skills and enjoy working independently.
- Students are able to work well in pairs and groups and when required to work independently, they do so diligently. Year 10 and 11 students are particularly capable of applying a range of skills to their studies such as analysis and evaluation. Across both key stages students 'learn about' and 'learn from' religion in a balanced way. In the lessons observed and in their work, students show that they are able to link their study of religion and belief to issues of meaning and purpose. However, students' ability to show creativity, originality or imagination is underdeveloped, partly because they have fewer opportunities to carry out their own investigations in their work.
- Students' personal development in the context of RE is good. They have positive attitudes to learning and readily identify the importance of learning about religious and cultural diversity in modern Britain. The subject makes a very good contribution to the promotion of students' spiritual and moral development. Students' impressive contribution and commitment to charitable work are one example of the impact the department makes to students' personal development.

Quality of teaching in RE

The quality of teaching in RE is good.

- Teachers have very good subject knowledge which they use effectively to extend students' knowledge and understanding. Teaching is confident and results in students' good overall progress. Teachers use their knowledge of students' prior attainment well in their planning. This ensures that tasks and activities are engaging and suitable for the students' different needs. Classrooms have a very good variety of displays, including students' work, which help to promote effective learning.
- The best teaching uses a wide variety of methods and resources, including information and communication technology and religious artefacts. Use of structured discussions and debates also helps to develop students' oracy and thinking skills.
- Students have a clear view of learning objectives and outcomes. Checks on learning during and at the end of lessons help students and teachers to assess the rate of progress. Students' progress over a longer period of time is tracked and suitable interventions are made to ensure that underachievement is tackled robustly. Formal assessments are undertaken routinely using the Essex agreed syllabus level descriptors and criteria for public examinations. Moderation in assessments ensures consistency in the application of the criteria. Teachers' marking of students' work, as well as detailed verbal feedback to students, leads to improvement.

Quality of the curriculum in RE

The quality of the curriculum in RE is good.

- The schemes of work take good account of the Essex agreed syllabus. The provision for accredited courses in Years 9, 10 and 11 is suitable and matched to students' needs and interests. Although much of the planning in Key Stage 4 is underpinned by the GCSE syllabus, teaching ensures that students' knowledge and understanding about religion and belief are coherent.
- The provision for GCE AS and A level study is increasingly popular with the students who speak very highly of it, including the personal impact the study makes on their lives.
- Students have some opportunities to visit local churches and the mosque in Regent's Park. Visiting speakers, including talks at sixth form conferences, supplement curricular provision. However, opportunities for students to experience a wider range of diversity in religion and belief are not extensive.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE

The effectiveness of leadership and management in RE is good.

- RE benefits from a department that is run conscientiously. The subject leader is passionate, enthusiastic and keen to innovate to keep students interested and challenged. A strong direction is given to sustaining high attainment and ensuring that achievement improves from being good to outstanding.
- A team of subject specialists is nurtured and developed through in-school training in improving pedagogy. The subject leader keeps abreast of current initiatives in developing GCSE through her professional role as a principal examiner. The department's staff and students benefit from this role and experience.
- Staff are committed to improvement. The appointment of two newly qualified teachers is positive and seen as an opportunity for developing and sharing teaching approaches and resources.
- Good leadership and management ensure that the subject makes a notable impact on students' personal development and their wider contribution to the school.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- increasing opportunities for students to carry out more frequent investigations so that they can demonstrate their skills of independence, imagination and creativity
- extending opportunities for students to have more first-hand experience of a wider range of different religious and belief communities through, for example, contact with visiting speakers and visits.

I hope that these observations are useful as you continue to develop RE in the school.

As explained previously, a copy of this letter will be published on the Ofsted website. It may be used to inform decisions about any future inspection.

Yours sincerely

Dilip Kadodwala
Her Majesty's Inspector