

09 March 2007

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Dear Mrs Martinson

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Religious Education

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 7 and 8 March 2007 to look at work in religious education (RE).

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had a particular focus on the implementation of the locally agreed syllabus.

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. All feedback letters will be published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half-term.

The evidence used to inform the judgements made included: interviews with staff and students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work and observation of lessons.

Religious education

The overall effectiveness of RE was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

Pupils' achievement in RE is satisfactory and improving.

- GCSE results in both the short and full GCSE course in 2006 were well below the national average. These results represented under-achievement in RE at Key Stage 4. The school has taken steps to

identify and address many of the factors which had a negative impact on these results.

- Current assessment data indicates that most pupils are on track to meet their target grades. Some of the work produced by Year 11 pupils taking the GCSE full and short course is of high quality and demonstrates good achievement.
- The emphasis on encouraging pupils to deploy higher levels of thinking in their analysis and evaluation of religious and philosophical issues is having a positive impact on raising standards. It also secures learning which goes beyond the specific requirements of the syllabus and makes a wider contribution to pupils' personal development.
- The pattern of standards and achievement at Key Stage 3 is uneven. The proportion of pupils achieving level 5 in RE in 2006 indicated that achievement was satisfactory. A new curriculum has been developed which includes the introduction of GCSE short course in Year 9.
- The department has set itself ambitious targets for Year 9 performance and current assessment data indicate that standards will rise significantly. However, the pattern of work produced by the pupils is very variable. Some more able and well-motivated pupils in Year 9 are responding very positively to the challenge of GCSE and sometimes producing work of outstanding quality. However, a significant number of middle and lower ability pupils are not demonstrating a determined attitude towards their learning and are rarely completing written work of an appropriate standard.
- Pupils with learning difficulties or disabilities are being well-supported and make good progress although some with lower prior attainment struggle to access the more abstract philosophical dimension of the short course GCSE syllabus.
- Achievement in Years 7 and 8 is good in relation to pupils' ability to explore important philosophical and personal aspects of human experience but is more limited in relation to their ability to investigate and interpret the major religious traditions.
- Many aspects of the personal development of pupils are very good. Pupils value the opportunity to explore the religious and cultural diversity. Some are very enthusiastic about the subject and engagement positively with the depth of thinking the teaching demands. Some produce impressive extended reflective and analytical written work. While behaviour is often good, the weak social and listening skills of some pupils and patterns of absence impact negatively on learning in some lessons.

Quality of teaching and learning

The overall quality of teaching and learning in RE is good.

- The best teaching has a number of outstanding features. Teachers have impressive subject knowledge which they combine with very high expectations about the importance of challenging pupils to think.
- Some very good use is made of exposition, and teaching models positive attitudes towards learning. Very good use is made of a wide range of stimulating resources and activities. Skilful use is made of strategies to engage pupils' feelings and deeper levels of thinking. Pupils are often encouraged to think through the process of their learning and to have a voice in determining the pattern of their work.
- In some lessons, there are issues with the management of those pupils who lack appropriate learning skills and have a less positive attitude towards learning. In these cases the timing and phasing of lessons is not always effective. Teaching strategies do not always ensure that pupils consolidate their learning before moving on and there is sometimes a tendency to try to cover too much in lessons. As a result pupils do not always make satisfactory progress or bring enough work to completion.
- There are clear and effective arrangements in place to assess pupils' progress. Work marked regularly and guidance given on how to improve. Care is taken to develop pupils' understanding of levels. On occasions some very impressive feedback is given. Good emphasis is placed on using a range of assessment strategies to ensure all pupils can reach their highest level. Just occasionally assessed tasks are not reliable enough as a basis for rigorous judgements against levels.

Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in RE is good.

- The provision of a range of accredited courses in Year 9 and Key Stage 4 is very good. Pupils have a range of choices and efforts are made to match the options to the range of their needs and interests. This provision will need to be kept under review to ensure it is manageable and meets the full range of pupils' abilities.
- The curriculum in Years 7 and 8 is imaginative and thoughtful. It meets the requirements of the agreed syllabus in broad terms. Effective use has been made of levels to ensure there is progression and challenge in pupils' learning. A good contribution is made to the development of pupils' overall thinking and learning skills.
- There is some imbalance of work between the two attainment targets in the agreed syllabus with limited attention being paid to the systematic development of pupils' knowledge and understanding of religions. There is scope to develop further elements of the medium term planning to provide a clearer overview of the units matched to levels.
- There is some very good enrichment of the curriculum through a range of additional activities and fieldwork. Strong links are forged with

citizenship and personal, social and health education. There is also good provision for literacy development with opportunities for independent writing built into planning.

Leadership and management

Leadership and management of RE are good.

- The subject is driven by high expectations about learning and behaviour. There is a very strong appreciation of the importance of the subject to pupils' personal development and the potential for RE to make a significant impact on pupils' lives.
- The subject leader, with the support of her colleagues has ensured RE has good standing in school. Most pupils are positive about the subject and value the high level of challenge it offers.
- The department is very well organised and resourced. The RE staff work well together and the subject leader provides good support within the team. The management of staffing is effective.
- Some very effective use of data to target issues, and support self-evaluation and improvement planning. The monitoring arrangements are clear with good moderation of assessment judgements. The improvement planning is closely linked to overall school priorities.

Implementation of the agreed syllabus

The department has used the revised agreed syllabus as a basis for its planning. The curriculum at Key Stage 3 is broadly aligned with the levels in the syllabus. Overall while the department has tracked its curriculum against the programmes of study it has found these too inflexible as a basis for planning.

Inclusion

The arrangements to secure the inclusion of all pupils are good. The progress made by the most able and pupils with learning difficulties or disabilities is often very good. The issue for the subject is how to secure good progress for those pupils with less positive attitudes towards learning. The provision of a wide range of different qualifications to match different learning needs is also very positive although care will need to be taken to ensure that all pupils can access the more abstract nature of the selected short course.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- developing teaching strategies for some groups to ensure the attitudes and limited social skills of some pupils do not impact negatively on learning and to make sure work is consolidated and completed

- monitoring the GCSE short course provision to ensure it matches the learning needs of all pupils
- considering further development of the medium term planning in Years 7 and 8 to secure a more explicit match to the levels and a more even balance of work across the two attainment targets
- making sure all major assessment tasks are robust in terms of generating reliable data.

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

As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and SACRE and will be published on Ofsted's website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Alan Brine
Her Majesty's Inspector