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Dear Mr Fell

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Religious Education (RE)

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 30 and 31 January 2008 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. All feedback letters will be published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half-term.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of RE, the visit had a particular focus on the subject's contribution to the promotion of community cohesion.

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

The overall effectiveness of RE was judged to be good.

Achievement and Standards

The achievement of pupils in RE is good overall.

- Attainment at the end of Key Stage 3 is average. The progress made by Year 9 pupils varies between teaching groups but is satisfactory overall.
- Standards at Key Stage 4 are above average. The proportion of pupils gaining grades A*-C in the GCSE short course is much higher than the national average, although boys perform less well than girls and the proportion getting A*-A is relatively low. Results compare well with

other subjects in the school. Those taking AS and A2 perform well. Most pupils taking examinations in RE make at least good progress and some make excellent progress.

- Pupils' attitudes towards RE are positive. Behaviour in lessons is generally good. Pupils value RE as an interesting subject which makes a good contribution to their personal development. They value the opportunities the subject offers to discuss issues of personal and social significance and to hone their personal opinions and beliefs.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in RE is good.

- Teaching overall in RE is good. Most lessons are well-structured and well-managed and most teachers form good relationships with pupils.
- The RE department deserves its reputation in the school for its innovative and lively teaching styles involving a wide variety of strategies, such as discussion, debate, investigative work and the dramatic re-creation of Christian and Muslim weddings. Pupils are encouraged to work both independently and cooperatively.
- Teachers have good knowledge of the parts of the curriculum they teach and the subject specialists have excellent subject knowledge. Pupils in Years 10-13 are given very good advice on how to prepare for examinations. The best lessons are characterised by engaging activities and focused questioning which are well matched to the learning objectives. Some teachers need to make more effective use of paired and group work, and extend the learning of the most able.
- Assessment and target setting are thorough, particularly in Key Stage 4 and the sixth form and, as a result of clear target setting, most pupils understand how well they are doing and what they have to do to improve. At Key Stage 3, modifications to assessment procedures based on the new Bedfordshire Agreed Syllabus have not been fully implemented.

Quality of the curriculum

The quality of the curriculum is good overall.

- Subject provision meets all statutory requirements with the exception of the sixth form, where only examination classes are taught.
- Planning is excellent. A good range of carefully chosen resources and imaginative activities accompany each unit of work, so that non-specialist and temporary staff know what is required. The Muslim trainees currently based in the school make a valuable contribution to pupils' understanding and appreciation of Islam.
- The provision of the GCSE short course for all pupils is a strength of the subject. The focus on social and ethical issues makes a very positive contribution to pupils' learning and wider personal development.
- The curriculum at Key Stage 3 is an imaginative interpretation of the agreed syllabus, although not all aspects of the syllabus are covered.

There is very good continuity and progression between the Year 9 and GCSE courses. Pupils come to Year 10 armed with many of the skills they will need to succeed at GCSE.

- Assessment arrangements at Key Stage 4 are good. Assessment data is carefully recorded and used as basis of target setting. GCSE and A Level results are analysed carefully and any underachievement is noted and made a focus for action in the following year. Assessment at Key Stage 3 is less robust and there is uncertainty which of the three versions of the level descriptions in the agreed syllabus should be used for assessment purposes.

Leadership and Management

Leadership and management in RE are good overall.

- The subject is led and managed by an enthusiastic and experienced subject leader. She has worked to improve standards to their present high level by providing good quality schemes of work and guidance for teachers. However, although there is a positive working atmosphere in the department, team building is hindered by the rapid turnover of staff. This hinders the subject's capacity to improve rapidly because rather than extend subject expertise in the team the head of department has to induct new staff every year.
- As a result of the head of department's inventive planning and insistence on the use of stimulating teaching methods and engaging learning activities, the subject is well-regarded by pupils.
- Effective quality assurance procedures are in place. Monitoring procedures are effective and result in the identification of training priorities for individual staff. Self-evaluation is accurate and identifies correctly raising the achievement of boys and gifted pupils as priorities.

Community cohesion

Pupils demonstrate a lively interest in exploring issues related to diversity in religion. The contribution of Muslim trainees to RE lessons is a great asset in breaking down stereotypes and gaining pupils' genuine respect for their religion. Pupils have many opportunities to express their own views about religion and feel that their opinions are valued. They recognise that RE has contributed to shaping their beliefs and opinions.

Inclusion

Most groups of pupils make at least good progress in RE. The department successfully enters nearly all pupils for short course GCSE. There is good support for pupils with learning difficulties. Standards reached are very high but some boys and high ability pupils do not achieve as well as the rest of the cohort.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- improving the achievement of boys and higher ability pupils

- matching assessments in Year 9 more carefully against the level descriptions in the agreed syllabus and seeking clarification regarding the status of the three variant sets of levels
- making every effort to secure a more permanent staff arrangements in the subject.

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

Yours sincerely

Barbara Wintersgill
Additional Inspector