

11 March 2009

Mr R Bell
Headteacher
Brannel School
Rectory Road
St. Stephen
St. Austell
Cornwall
PL26 7RN

Dear Mr Bell

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Religious Education

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 03-04 March 2009 to look at work in religious education (RE). On a personal note I would like to thank you all for your assistance in making areas of the school so accessible, and would ask you to pass my particular thanks to Louise, Pierre and Sarah.

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of RE, the visit had a particular focus on the use of creative thinking 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.

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 four lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE was judged to be satisfactory with several good features.

Achievement and standards

Achievement in RE is satisfactory.

- Students arrive at the school with below average levels of attainment overall and they make good progress in RE in Years 7 and 8. Their overall progress from Year 7 to Year 10 when they take the GCSE examination is satisfactory.
- Results in the short course GCSE are below the national average and below the school's overall standards. Students' evaluative skills are well developed but their ability to analyse text and ideas is less well developed.
- The standards reached by the students in RE at the end of Key Stage 3 generally meet the expectations of the agreed syllabus. Students are developing their use of the technical vocabulary of the subject. They show

understanding of the origin of sources, notably the Bible, and how its message inspires Christians to action. They have basic knowledge of Christian denominations and higher ability students understand that there is considerable diversity of opinion among Christians over, for example, the literal accuracy of the Bible. Students can identify parallels between the lives of well-known Christians and teachings of Jesus or events in his life but this falls short of understanding the impact of religion on peoples' lives. Similarly they can add a brief Biblical example to a discussion of an ultimate question; but find difficulty explaining how religious sources are used to provide answers to ultimate questions. Students show limited ability to make comparisons between religions and have too few opportunities to develop their deeper understanding of non-Christian traditions.

- The personal development of students in the context of RE is outstanding and the subject makes an exceptional contribution to their spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Students have positive attitudes to RE, illustrated by the high numbers completing the GCSE course. They value the many opportunities to share their ideas and beliefs with teachers and peers.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in RE is satisfactory with many good features.

- The subject is taught by one specialist teacher and a few non-specialists, one of whom is very experienced. Teachers' subject knowledge is generally good and, with rare exceptions, concepts underpinning the subject of the lesson are carefully identified enabling students to make links between curriculum content and their own experiences, values and beliefs.
- A great strength of the department is the variety of strategies used for teaching and learning. The department has developed in recent years from a low base and its current popularity is due largely to the attention given to engaging students through carefully planned activities that invite collaborative learning through problem solving and discussion. The use of experiential methods is also popular and circle time has been used beneficially to encourage students to express their beliefs, feelings and fears confidently and openly. Because students enjoy lessons and have positive relationships with teachers, behaviour is excellent. In a few cases, where teachers are less confident with the subject matter, some boys lose concentration and drift off task.
- The interaction between teachers and students is often excellent. One exceptional lesson with a very low ability group was a model of how a subject specialist, working closely with teaching assistants, can engage these students and enable them to achieve above expectations.
- Planning is generally thorough but the learning outcomes are not always tightly related to the expectations of attainment set out in the level descriptions in the agreed syllabus.
- Although assessment procedures are rigorous, a serious weakness in teaching is the inaccuracy of teachers' evaluations of students' standards and progress due to an over-simplification of the level descriptions in the agreed syllabus. This has an impact across the work of the department. For example, although teachers write lengthy and constructive comments on students' assessments, this feedback and the targets set are based on over-generous judgements.

The use of these levels for assessing GCSE work is unhelpful and a factor in the disappointing GCSE results.

- The weakest part of lessons is the plenaries, which are too short and not used consistently to re-visit the main learning objectives. Consequently in more than one lesson students completed activities successfully but did not bring together the elements of their learning to come to a conclusion about the lesson.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in RE is satisfactory.

- The provision of a certificated course for all students, including GCSE short course and entry level qualifications and full course for those who want it, is a strength of the subject.
- The curriculum meets statutory requirements in a distinctive way. The truncation of Key Stage 3 to two years allows students to take GCSE early in Year 10.
- The RE 'immersion day' in Year 11 was very well received by students, and a strength of this innovative provision was the department's careful evaluation of its success. The day gave students good opportunities to understand RE issues through the lens of various media such as dance and music.
- The curriculum for Years 7 and 8 is not yet fully developed. There is good coverage of ethics and relationships, rights and responsibilities, and global issues. But other themes are barely touched; for example different attitudes to authority, religion and science, expressions of spirituality and interfaith dialogue. These are demanding themes which would make a significant contribution to students reaching the higher levels.
- The treatment of world religions in the Year 7-8 curriculum also hinders progress. Buddhism and Islam are covered in one term each, and the study of Islam continues throughout GCSE. Otherwise there is very little cross reference between religions and this makes it difficult for students to make comparisons and see connections between different religions. This limits their progress; for example the unit on 'belief in God' would be enriched from reference to Muslim and Buddhist beliefs as well as Christianity.
- The department provides valuable enrichment activities, such as a visit to St Michael's Mount.

Leadership and Management

Leadership and management in RE are good overall.

- Religious education in the school is led and managed by a specialist head of department who has been effective in raising the status and popularity of the subject from a very low starting point and improving examination results in recent years.
- In 2004 RE was judged to be unsatisfactory and was unpopular with parents and students. Since her appointment, the head of department, with strong support from senior management, has rightly focused on 'winning hearts and minds' as a necessary foundation for raising standards. She has achieved this by transforming teaching and learning to the extent that the department is now well-regarded by students, parents and staff alike.

- The head of department has a realistic understanding of the strengths of the subject and what still has to be done. In response to rigorous targets, standards have been raised for all groups of students and development planning correctly identifies several of those areas which are still in need of improvement. As a result the capacity for improvement is excellent.

Creative thinking in RE

Creative thinking is at the heart of the department's priority to engage students. In response to the subject priorities, students engage in creative thinking every lesson, encouraged by well structured exercises; for example those designed to encourage hypothesising and speculating. Writing is encouraged in all lessons and even reluctant writers put their ideas down on paper 'graffiti' board. The interesting and creative curriculum developments enable students to take a wider view of RE in relation to the arts, relationships, rights and responsibilities, and citizenship.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- continuing to raise GCSE standards by assessing students' work and setting targets with reference to criteria provided by the examining board
- achieving greater accuracy in Key Stage 3 assessments through improved use of the full range of strands in the longer version of the level descriptions in the agreed syllabus
- allowing more time for the plenary at the end of lessons in order to evaluate the extent to which students have achieved the learning outcomes
- revising the curriculum for Key Stage 3 to enrich learning and provide more opportunities for students to attain higher levels.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop religious education 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

Barbara Wintersgill
Additional Inspector