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Mr A Williams  
Principal  
John Cabot Academy  
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Dear Mr Williams

**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 16 and 17 February 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 and students; scrutiny of relevant documentation; analysis of students' work; observation of two lessons and observation of a tutor period.

The overall effectiveness of RE is good.

**Achievement in RE**

Achievement in RE is good.

- The standards reached by students in RE are about average reflecting good achievement overall. Most students choose to take the GCSE full course and the remainder takes the short course. Results are generally in line with the national average, representing good achievement given the pattern of entry. The percentage of students achieving A and A\* grades is below average and girls achieve better than boys.
- Standards by the end of Key Stage 3 are broadly in line with school expectations, which are roughly equivalent to the standards expected nationally.

- At Key Stage 3, students achieve consistently across all the religions studied and across all strands of the two attainment targets. However, students' understanding is sometimes superficial and the opportunities for them to demonstrate more independent and extending thinking are constrained when assessment tasks are too narrow.
- Students preparing for the GCSE examinations generally produce work of a good standard but, as at Key Stage 3, they sometimes demonstrate these standards by performing short, single tasks rather than completing enquiries in depth. This contributes in part to the shortfall in A and A\* grades.
- Students are able to work independently and, when given the opportunity, apply a range of higher level skills to their work and demonstrate some originality, imagination and creativity. However, there are not enough opportunities, particularly for the most able students, to demonstrate skills and understanding in a sustained way across a range of contexts and over time.
- Most students enjoy the subject and can explain its value to a certain extent. But there is disaffection among some boys who are not convinced of the subject's personal value to them. Students regularly link their study of religion and belief to their exploration of more personal reflections on issues of meaning and purpose. Students' spiritual, moral and social development is good. Their cultural development in the context of RE is satisfactory because they lack opportunities to gain first-hand experiences of a wide diversity of religious and belief communities.

### **Quality of teaching of RE**

The quality of teaching of RE is good.

- Teachers have good specialist subject knowledge and a clear understanding of the value of their subject which they communicate effectively to students.
- Lessons are systematically planned to demonstrate the school criteria for an outstanding lesson. However, teachers do not always have the expertise to meet all these criteria. For example, in both lessons seen the learning objectives, although clearly presented and shared with students, did not reflect the different levels of attainment within the class.
- Assessment arrangements in RE are of high quality. Teachers apply the school's high-quality formative and summative assessment arrangements to monitor students' progress. Marking is of a consistently high standard and feedback is constructive and often detailed, although occasionally it is not made clear to students exactly how they may improve, particularly in relation to achieving the highest levels.
- Progress is checked constantly during lessons to the point where on occasions it can interfere with the flow of the work and students' enjoyment of, and involvement in, their learning.

- Teachers generally use a range of resources and teaching strategies to promote good learning. But students aiming for highest grades in particular need more challenging resources to help them form their judgements and conclusions.
- When given the scope, students respond positively to opportunities to develop high-level skills of enquiry and reflection. For example, Year 8 students analysed works of art in relation to the relevant Biblical texts.
- Teachers usually give students opportunities to reflect on links between their study of religion and belief and their exploration of more personal reflections on issues of meaning and purpose.

### **Quality of the curriculum in RE**

The quality of the curriculum in RE is satisfactory with several good features.

- The curriculum combines elements of the South Gloucestershire agreed syllabus with selected elements of national guidance to provide a curriculum which incorporates appropriate breadth, balance and level of challenge.
- The blocking of RE into termly sessions of several lessons a week at Key Stage 3 is preferred by staff and many students to the single weekly lesson. It is too soon to judge the impact of this change on standards.
- The department is to be commended for the increasing numbers of students choosing to take the GCSE full course.
- The areas of study identified within the agreed syllabus give coherence and continuity to the curriculum while the increasing sophistication of the subject content and level of challenge across the school contribute to progression in students' learning.
- However, the medium-term planning, on which lesson plans are based, does not include learning objectives or clarity about what students are expected to learn, focusing instead on what and how teachers should teach. Consequently, the differentiated expectations and needs of different ability groups are not spelt out.
- The weakest aspect of the curriculum is the absence of links with other agencies and the wider community to provide a range of enrichment activities. Students have little first-hand experience of the religious communities they are studying although they abound in the local area.

### **Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE**

Leadership and management in RE are good.

- Leadership is well informed by current developments in the subject and the curriculum has drawn on local and national initiatives.

- Subject reviews, self-evaluation and improvement planning are properly focused on school priorities, particularly on raising standards and improving the provision.
- The department regularly seeks the views of students on teaching and the curriculum and, as a result, has introduced an element of choice in Key Stage 3.
- Those involved in teaching the subject share a common purpose and have good opportunities to share practice and access training through the school's in-house training programme.
- The department reflects wider whole-school priorities and has a prominent profile in the school in its charity work; in particular in leading on international aid initiatives.

**Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:**

- continuing to improve the proportion of A and A\* grades at GCSE
- raising the achievement of boys and making RE exciting and relevant for all students
- creating opportunities for students to engage more directly with the faith communities they study.

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

**Barbara Wintersgill**  
**Additional Inspector**