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Mrs D Spence  
Headteacher  
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Dear Mrs Spence

**Ofsted 2011–12 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 7 and 8 June 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; and observation of five lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE is good.

**Achievement in RE**

Achievement in RE is good.

- Student performance in the RE GCSE short course in 2010 was just below the national average. In 2011, almost all Year 10 students have been entered for the examination and the school estimates that results will significantly exceed the national average. There were some variations in the performance of different groups of students in 2010, with a pattern of underachievement among White boys while those with a Bangladeshi background generally performed well. The predicted results for this year indicate that these gaps have narrowed.
- The evidence from the inspection confirms that students in the current Year 10 have made good progress in developing the knowledge and skills

required to address the requirements of the examination. They understand and can discuss a range of moral, social and philosophical issues with confidence. While they can identify and explain religious responses to these issues, their grasp of the key beliefs of these traditions is, in some cases, less secure.

- Attainment at the end of Year 9 varies across different aspects of the subject but is broadly average overall; this represents satisfactory progress across Key Stage 3. In some of the units of work, where students are challenged and extended, progress is good. They have, for example, developed some well-considered insights into aspects of the Muslim and Buddhist faiths. This pattern of achievement is not, however, consistent. While less able students are well supported and make good progress, more able students are not always challenged enough. Students do not develop a sufficiently secure understanding of the core beliefs of Christianity. In addition, their wider understanding of the nature of religious expression and the place and significance of religion in the modern world is relatively limited.
- Students' attitudes towards RE are generally good; behaviour in lessons is excellent. They appreciate the importance of exploring religious and cultural diversity. They enjoy the chance to discuss some of the controversial issues raised by religion although they recognise that there could be more opportunity for this. The subject supports the development of literacy and the promotion of a range of learning skills although there is scope to extend the use of more structured oral work.
- The subject makes a positive contribution to students' social, moral and cultural development. While there are opportunities for students to explore more spiritual aspects of their experience, this is a less prominent aspect of their learning.

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

The quality of teaching in RE is good.

- Lessons are very well-organised. Behaviour and activities are well managed. There is strong consistency of practice across the teaching team and an emphasis on clarifying expectations and challenging students to strive to achieve their best. A wide range of teaching and learning strategies is used to promote understanding, encourage collaborative learning, maintain the pace of lessons and secure interest. Regular use is made of questioning and plenaries to check students' progress.
- The department recognises that, in order to raise the profile of the subject and secure a baseline of effective provision, the emphasis to date has been on highly structured teaching. The opportunities for more sustained independent enquiry and for teachers to adjust the pattern of work to address students' needs have been more constrained. While elements of these characteristics of learning do exist, they are not as yet firmly embedded in practice. On occasions, students are not provided with a clear enough overview of their learning.

- Considerable attention has been paid recently to developing assessment practice in RE. As a result, students get regular feedback on their work and targets are set. Levels of attainment are built into every lesson encouraging students to identify and track their progress. Overall, however, the developments sometimes distort the pattern of learning and can be applied too mechanistically. At GCSE, for example, there is a tendency to focus too much on what they need to do to succeed in the examination rather than on helping them to understand how to become better students of religion and belief. On occasions, feedback to students does not focus enough on helping them to evaluate critically the quality of their arguments and thinking.

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

The quality of the curriculum in RE is satisfactory.

- There are some significant strengths in the curriculum. All students follow the GCSE short course in Year 10 and, from next year, all will extend this study to full course level. A secure scheme of work is in place covering all year groups and ensuring consistency of practice across the teaching team. These strengths represent major improvements on the previous provision for RE within the school.
- All students receive one hour of RE each week. The curriculum at Key Stage 3 follows requirements of the locally agreed syllabus very closely. The subject team has recognised that it needs to use the flexible emphasis on enquiry and concept-based learning within the new locally agreed syllabus as a context to ensure that the overall pattern of the RE curriculum is broader and more progressive and coherent. For example, there is a need to extend the opportunities for students to study Christianity and develop the skills of more independent enquiry at Key Stage 3 to support learning at Key Stage 4. There is also scope to differentiate the curriculum more to ensure that it better matches the needs of all the students.
- The department has been seeking ways to enrich students' learning by making links across the wider curriculum. To date, however, the opportunities for students to visit places or worship or meet representatives of different religions have been very limited.

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

The effectiveness of leadership and management in RE is good.

- RE benefits from strong subject coordination. The team of three well-qualified specialists is well led and there is very effective line management within the humanities faculty and the senior leadership team. Provision for the subject has improved considerably in recent years and the capacity for further improvement is very good. A clear scheme of work is now in place; arrangements for accrediting students' performance are good; and, extended assessment arrangements have been established. As a result, the profile of the subject across the school, and in the eyes of students, has risen significantly.

- The arrangements for evaluation and improvement planning are very effective. Performance data are analysed carefully and there is a strong programme of monitoring activities. As a result, the department has a clear grasp of the subject's effectiveness and the priorities for further development.
- The arrangements for professional development within the team are effective. The faculty provides a strong context for developing and sharing good practice. More recently, the department has accessed support within the local authority.
- While RE makes a positive contribution to the schools' wider drive to promote community cohesion, there is scope to extend this further by enabling the subject to become a stronger context for links with the diversity of faiths in the local community.

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

- developing the curriculum further to ensure that it:
  - incorporates a stronger emphasis on independent enquiry-based learning
  - extends the opportunities for students to develop a more coherent understanding of Christianity
  - secures greater continuity and progression between the two key stages
- reviewing the assessment arrangements to ensure that they provide the most effective basis to support learning
- extending opportunities for students to gain first-hand experience of religion and beliefs through fieldwork in, and visitors from, the local community.

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 published on the Ofsted website. It may be used to inform decisions about any future inspection. Except in the case of academies, a copy of this letter is also being sent to your local authority and SACRE.

Yours sincerely

**Alan Brine**  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**