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26 March 2012

Ms T Luke
Principal
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Dear Ms Luke

Ofsted 2011–12 subject survey inspection programme: religious education (RE)

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 5 and 6 March 2012 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 eight lessons or parts of lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE is satisfactory.

Achievement in RE

Achievement in RE is satisfactory.

- Students in Key Stage 4 continue to make satisfactory progress. The whole cohort of students is entered for the short course GCSE. While attainment has risen in recent years, results remain below the national average. The progress of the current students reflects the improving picture. Students are able to discuss basic religious ideas associated with Christianity and at least one other religious tradition, and become familiar with different interpretations of religious beliefs and values, such as those associated with fundamentalism and liberalism. However, the students' insight into the issues and religious perspectives being considered is limited.
- RE helps to strengthen students' self confidence and their ability to engage with and discuss spiritual and moral issues. Their progress reflects the

priority given to students' personal development. They are able to give a clear account of how and why RE supports this aspect of their development, challenges their own assumptions, and enables them to express their own ideas, supported by evidence and argument.

Quality of teaching in RE

The quality of teaching in RE is satisfactory.

- Lessons are well-planned and carefully structured. They are based on thorough planning with a focus on differentiated learning outcomes. Lessons are usually characterised by lively starter activities linking with previous work, and plenaries in which learning is summarised. Activities provide different ways of approaching learning and questioning is sometimes used developmentally to encourage discussion and reflection. Lessons keep to a brisk and lively pace, students are well motivated and their behaviour is good, ensuring that all are able to work well at their tasks.
- In some lessons weaknesses lie in the lack of challenge and depth of some of the content being explored. Occasionally, this is because the RE focus is not fully developed. Sometimes weaknesses lie in the lack of clear exploration of the key concepts and objectives of the subject. Consequently, students are not able to engage fully or in sufficient depth with some of the spiritual and moral issues raised by religious belief and practice. Teachers are familiar with some basic religious ideas and values, as in the GCSE short course, but sometimes lack confidence in responding to questions and issues that appear controversial or contentious. The potential of the subject matter for deepening understanding of religion and belief is often not realised.
- In line with academy practice, students' extensive written work is marked thoroughly and in their assessments they receive helpful guidance and feedback. Their engagement is clear when they respond to comments and questions raised by their teachers. Their progress is carefully monitored and students understand in broad terms what they need to do to take their learning to a deeper level.

Quality of the curriculum in RE

The quality of the curriculum in RE is satisfactory.

- The RE element in the curriculum takes account of the principles and guidance in the locally agreed syllabus, which the academy has chosen to follow. RE is organised under the umbrella of humanities.
- In Key Stage 3, the subject is explored through broad themes within a project-based learning framework. In most cases this provides opportunities for students to explore religious teaching and issues. Sometimes, themes not directly related to RE open up opportunities for them to extend their knowledge of particular aspects of religion, as, for example, when a study of Syria led to some detailed learning about the differences between Sunni and Shi'a Islam. Additionally, students study

particular religious traditions, as with the 'transition' unit on Sikhism, which enables them to explore the teachings and practices of a specific tradition.

- The GCSE RE short course provides a basis for exploring contemporary issues and questions in the broad areas of philosophy and ethics. This accords with the school's emphasis on helping students, through the humanities, to develop their personal qualities and understanding of beliefs and values, to enable them to combat prejudice and discrimination and extend their appreciation of the importance of community cohesion. It also strongly supports the school's drive to improve literacy. Sometimes, however, in terms of RE, this is at the expense of a more thorough examination of specific religious teachings and their potential impact on the issues they are studying. Currently, the GCSE RE short course ends in Year 10, but the school is looking at ways of extending the provision for RE into Year 11.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE

The effectiveness of leadership and management in RE is satisfactory.

- RE benefits from its position within the wider humanities faculty, and is supported well by a senior manager with subject-specific expertise. Students' progress is carefully monitored and strong links are forged with other subject areas.
- However, RE lacks the leadership of a subject specialist. Although the humanities department functions well and staff collaborate in producing interesting lessons and stimulating resources, the lack of focused subject understanding, expertise and support means that RE's potential is only partially exploited. This is most evident in the way in which issues dealt with in the GCSE short course, for example, lack the insight and conceptual understanding which usually underpin effective teaching of the subject at this level.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- considering how to enhance subject expertise to support the effective teaching of RE
- providing further opportunities for students to develop their understanding of the key ideas and concepts associated with religious traditions.

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

As 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.

Yours sincerely

John Rudge
Additional Inspector