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Mr R O'Regan
Headteacher
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Dear Mr O'Regan

Ofsted 2012–13 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 13 and 14 June 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 six lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE is good.

Achievement in RE

Achievement in RE is good.

- Students' progress at Key Stage 4 is good and improving. While the cohort taking the full GCSE course is small, results in 2011 were above the national average reflecting good progress. Current Year 11 students are also on track to do well. Results in the short course GCSE, taken by the majority of students, are also improving and are in line with the national average.
- The pattern of progress at Key Stage 4, while good overall, varies across different groups of students. Girls perform significantly better than boys, and, while the more able do well, some underachievement exists among lower attaining students.

- Achievement at Key Stage 3 is satisfactory but uneven across different aspects of attainment in the subject. Across the school, students do better in those aspects of attainment related to exploring philosophical, ethical and social issues. However, their progress in developing knowledge and understanding of religions and beliefs is much less secure at both key stages. As a result, for example, while students at Key Stage 4 can write with confidence about a range of issues, their ability to apply religious perspectives to those issues is limited and often relatively superficial.
- Learning in RE is generally good but uneven. For example, while students develop the ability to express their own views a range of topics, their use of more challenging skills of independent enquiry when studying religions and beliefs is more restricted.
- Attitudes are good overall although occasionally some students struggle to see the relevance of the subject particularly when they feel they do not have enough opportunity to shape their own learning. Behaviour is usually good and most students see the value of RE. As one student said, 'I would be a lot more narrow-minded if I hadn't done RE'.

Quality of teaching in RE

The quality of teaching in RE is good overall although there is some inconsistency in its effectiveness.

- Lessons are generally very well structured and carefully prepared. Strong emphasis is placed on making the purpose and direction of the learning clear to students and on incorporating an explicit literacy focus within the activities in line with a key whole-school priority.
- In the best lessons, high expectations are set; teachers' explanations are clear and engaging; a range of imaginative resources is used to stimulate interest; and, questioning effectively promotes learning and checks on progress. For example, good use was made of practical activities to help students understand some of the key arguments for the existence of God.
- Generally, students have too few opportunities to take the initiative in developing and carrying out their own lines of enquiry. Occasionally, when the scheme of work is insufficiently focused, the management of learning can become convoluted and lose direction.
- In the occasional less effective lessons, teachers' subject knowledge is limited, explanations are unclear, the pace of learning is too slow, and questioning is not used effectively to check on progress and understanding.
- Well-developed arrangements are in place to assess students' progress. Clear tasks are identified with detailed level criteria to help secure consistency. At Key Stage 4, students are given very clear guidance about their progress in relation to examination requirements and how to improve. However, the range of aspects of subject attainment being addressed at Key Stage 3 is too limited and, as a result, the judgements on students' overall performance across all aspects of the subject are not secure.

Quality of the curriculum in RE

The quality of the curriculum in RE is satisfactory.

- The provision ensures that all students receive their full entitlement to RE in line with the expectations of the locally agreed syllabus. The allocation of time to the subject is good. A major strength is the range of accredited pathways at Key Stage 4 ensuring that all students can leave with a qualification in RE and the number of students opting for full course GCSE is rising.
- A comprehensive, detailed and carefully resourced scheme of work is in place. Individual units of work incorporate explicit and differentiated outcomes linked to the levels in the agreed syllabus and the examination specifications. The RE provision makes a strong and carefully defined contribution to the development of students' literacy skills.
- Careful thought has been given to ways of ensuring that the curriculum is relevant to students' interests. As a result, there is a strong focus on philosophical, ethical and social issues. However, the balance of the curriculum needs further refinement. Students have insufficient opportunities to develop their knowledge and understanding of religions and beliefs, their understanding of the nature of religious language and expression, and their skills of enquiry and investigation into religion. This is the key factor leading to the unevenness in the pattern of students' otherwise good achievement.
- The contribution of RE to students' social and moral development is good. Its support for the promotion of their spiritual and cultural development is more constrained both by the pattern of the curriculum and by the relatively limited opportunities for students to gain first-hand experience of the religious and cultural diversity within the local area.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in RE

The effectiveness of leadership and management in RE is good.

- RE benefits from its position within the wider humanities faculty, the positive support of the senior leadership of the school, the very dedicated and hardworking commitment of the subject leader, and the recently strengthened team of subject specialists. The capacity for further improvement is also good.
- The day-to-day management of the subject is exemplary. Planning, resources and assessment arrangements are good. The overall learning environment for the subject is of high quality.
- Arrangements for monitoring, self-evaluation and improvement planning are generally sound and are stronger at Key Stage 4 than Key Stage 3. Extensive data about student examination performance are analysed well to identify areas for improvement. The quality of teaching is carefully evaluated with strategies in place to promote improvement. The monitoring of students' performance and the quality of provision at Key Stage 3 is less rigorous. The current improvement plan covers the whole

of the humanities faculty and is very carefully aligned with whole-school priorities. It does not incorporate a specific enough focus on subject priorities. There are plans in place to enhance the quality assurance arrangements in the near future.

- The subject leader has found it difficult to access support and training from the local authority with the process of implementing the recently introduced agreed syllabus.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- revising the Key Stage 3 curriculum to ensure:
 - a stronger focus on developing students’ understanding of religions and beliefs and their ability to make sense of the language of religion
 - more opportunities for students to develop the skills of independent enquiry and to have greater ownership of their learning
 - assessments reflect the whole range of attainment in RE
- ensuring that all teaching is of the quality of the best
- developing the arrangements for monitoring and improving RE to ensure a sharp focus on the quality of the Key Stage 3 provision and a clearer subject-specific dimension.

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 and sent to SACRE. It may be used to inform decisions about any future inspection. A copy of this letter is also being sent to your local authority.

Yours sincerely

Alan Brine
Her Majesty’s Inspector