

11 May 2009

Mrs L Spedding  
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Dear Mrs Spedding

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Religious Education

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 16 – 17 March 2009 to look at work in religious education (RE).

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject the visit had a particular focus on the 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 lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE was judged to be good.

#### Achievement and standards

The standards reached by students in RE are well above average reflecting good achievement.

- Over the school as a whole, the achievement of students is good with most progress made at Key Stage 4.
- Standards in the full GCSE course taken by all students are well above average, reflecting good achievement. The proportion of students reaching the highest A\*/A grades is particularly impressive.
- In Years 10 and 11 many students are handling complex concepts well and can use a range of examples to justify their own ideas while providing some evaluation of the perspective of others. The most able students critically evaluate various interpretations of religion with careful reference to ethical and philosophical ideas.
- By the end of Key Stage 3 most attain standards which are in line with the expectations of the locally agreed syllabus, reflecting good progress. Where specific units of work or teaching approaches challenge students to think for

themselves, achievement and attainment is particularly good. For example, while their understanding and evaluation of ideas about life after death or the existence of God is impressive, their grasp of the meaning and significance of the key beliefs of religions other than Christianity is more modest.

- The contribution of RE to the personal development of students is good. Most show an interest in religion and appropriate respect for the beliefs and practices of others. They value the subject and recognise the contribution it makes to the development of understanding and tolerance.

## Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in RE is good.

- Most lessons are well structured and orderly; classes are usually effectively managed and relationships with students are good. Teachers have good subject knowledge and make appropriate use of information and communication technology (ICT) in their teaching. At its best, teaching is imaginative and lively.
- Lessons are underpinned by accurate assessment which enables the school to support and extend the learning of individuals. The RE department sets challenging targets for the students and monitors their progress towards them closely. Although marking is regular, it does not consistently give precise advice to the students on how to improve their work.
- At Key Stage 3 the quality of teaching and learning is more variable. There are a small minority lessons when teachers adopt a more didactic style, or where all students complete the same work regardless of their ability or prior learning. This can promote passive learning and does not always stimulate student interest. Very occasionally, some of the tasks set are not challenging enough to ensure that students are fully engaged, although the planning usually indicates how the learning should be adjusted to accommodate the varying ability levels in the classes.

## Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in RE is satisfactory.

- Overall, schemes of work are detailed with a consistent format in line with the provision of the agreed syllabus. The department is, however, aware of the need to consider whether the planning and delivery of some aspects of the Key Stage 3 curriculum are sufficiently differentiated to ensure the most able students are suitably challenged. Some units offering high levels of challenge are followed by others which are much less demanding. Also, the links between topics are not made explicit enough.
- The emphasis on oral work is carefully balanced with the effective use of writing. Written activities are purposeful and varied including, for example, mind-mapping, extended and independent work with some more open-ended creative writing. Nevertheless, while careful thought is given to matching the curriculum to the needs and interests of the students, less attention is paid to the systematic development of the higher order skills of the subject.
- Good use is made of visitors to the classroom and fieldwork opportunities. For example, students in Year 10 are visiting Poland as part of their RE studies.

## Leadership and management

The leadership and management of RE are good.

- Leadership of RE is well established with a drive for improvement and a strong sense of direction. The subject is well organised on a day-to-day basis. The schemes of work are comprehensive providing a sound basis for all the staff to work well together as a team.
- All aspects of the work of the department are driven by a shared commitment to high standards and the enrichment of students' wider personal development.
- Rigorous and regular monitoring of standards and achievement lead to an accurate evaluation of provision which is the foundation for good strategic planning.
- The arrangements for assessing students' progress are strong with excellent use made of the analysis of assessment data to evaluate their achievement. The school monitors the progress of students carefully and regularly, making sure that support is tailored well to individual needs. Consequently, students of all abilities make good progress in their learning.

## Creative thinking in RE

The use of creative thinking in the subject is currently under-developed. There are opportunities for students to think creatively about RE particularly in Key Stage 4, where students critically evaluate the various interpretations of religion with careful reference to historical, ethical and philosophical ideas. As yet thinking skills are not systematically taught in Key Stage 3 but there have been developments in more cross curricular approaches to the subject in Years 7 and 8 in the form of specific theme days.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- establishing a clearer focus on the key skills and concepts of the subject that builds upon students' prior knowledge when planning the Key Stage 3 curriculum
- ensuring that marking consistently provides precise information and advice to students about how to improve their work.

I hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop RE 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

Jacqueline Wordsworth  
Her Majesty's Inspector

