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Mr P Dover
Acting Principal
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Dear Mr Dover

Ofsted 2008-09 subject survey inspection programme: religious education (RE).

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 18 - 19 November 2008 to look at work in RE.

As outlined in the initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had particular focus on 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, discussions with students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work, and observation of lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE was judged to be satisfactory with good features.

Achievement and standards

The achievement of students in RE is good overall.

- A small number of students sat the full course GCSE examination in 2008. All students attained A* or A grades. The short course GCSE results in 2008 improved from the previous year. 55.1% of students attained A* to C grades which is just above the national average. The results represented good achievement for these students, as well as the positive impact of intervention strategies taken to improve students' results.

- Achievement at Key Stage 3 is satisfactory. Most students acquire a reasonable grasp of the key features of different religions they have studied. However, students are less secure in their knowledge when comparing aspects of beliefs and practices between religions. Although students are able to think critically about the content covered, they show less confidence in expressing their own viewpoints in extended writing.
- The personal development of students in the context of RE is good. Their attitudes to RE are positive. Students comment positively on the subject's promotion for respect for different opinions and the value of diversity. This also reflects the contribution that the department makes towards community cohesion.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in RE is satisfactory with good features.

- The most successful teaching in RE is when students are active participants in their learning. This is facilitated by some imaginative tasks and activities which consist of small group discussions as well as independent learning. Students are encouraged to record their findings in a variety of ways and evaluate their work against clear, shared criteria.
- A reasonably broad range of resources is used to enliven learning and to ensure that the different needs of students are catered for. Close attention is paid to those students who have specific learning needs so that they make the expected progress. Less use is made of information and communication technology (ICT) and this is recognised as a priority for improvement.
- Lessons are well-organised to ensure that learning starts promptly and students usually have a clear view about learning objectives and outcomes. However, these are not always used effectively at the end of lessons to check students' gains in learning.
- Assessment procedures are satisfactory overall. There is an established tracking system which records results from termly assessments throughout Key Stage 3 and regular assessments in Years 10 and 11. Teachers' feedback through marking and verbal discussion gives clear guidance for improvement. However, at Key Stage 3, the assessment of students' progress is geared more towards assessing students' knowledge and understanding and less on their progress in learning from religion.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in RE is satisfactory overall.

- The Key Stage 4 curriculum for RE is well planned and all students have good opportunities to accredit their learning through the short course GCSE. A small, but growing, number of students study for the full GCSE course, mostly in their own time where they are well supported by the subject leader.

- A good start has been made to adjusting the Key Stage 3 schemes of work for RE to take account of the new secondary curriculum. Although it is too early to judge the impact of this in Year 7, enquiry and skills based approaches used in Year 8 during the last academic year have been effective.
- Progression into Year 9 is less effective because there is an over-reliance on teaching about religious beliefs and practices and less emphasis on developing students' ability to make their own informed responses to what they study.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of RE are good.

- RE benefits from a well-run department. The subject leader is enthusiastic and has established success at GCSE level. A good effort has been made to develop schemes of work to fulfil the requirements of the Derby City locally agreed syllabus and take account of national initiatives.
- Strengths and weaknesses in the subject are accurately identified through careful evaluation, reflecting the impact of monitoring the quality of teaching and learning. There is a drive for improvement, the impact of which is seen in the GCSE results over recent years.
- The subject is taught in part by non-specialists but supported well by the subject leader. The teaching team have a high professional approach towards their work.
- The subject leader has accessed a range of local and national professional development opportunities and is keeping abreast of current initiatives in the subject. Other members of the department have had fewer external opportunities to participate in professional development.

Creative thinking in RE

There are examples in some lessons and some parts of the curriculum where students encounter challenging questions and use strategies to enable them to think about how and what they are learning. Students investigate and interpret concepts specific to religious enquiry and respond in creative ways. However, students lack opportunities routinely to express their personal feelings about the beliefs and practices they study. The department has played its part in the school's implementation of the new secondary curriculum but it is too early to evaluate the impact of the learning initiative.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- improving the quality of provision, particularly in Year 9, so that students make better progress in learning from religion
- extending opportunities for the use of ICT in the subject
- ensuring that professional development opportunities are accessed by all staff in the department.

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

As explained in our previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and SACRE. The letter will be published on Ofsted's website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Dilip Kadodwala
Her Majesty's Inspector