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Dear Mr Airey

Ofsted survey inspection programme: information and communication technology (ICT) and religious education (RE)

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit with Dilip Kadodwala HMI on 24–25 February 2009 to look at work in information and communication technology (ICT) and religious education (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

ICT

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

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 six part lessons.

The overall effectiveness of ICT was judged to be outstanding.

Achievement and standards in ICT

Achievement is outstanding. Standards are above average.

- Charles Read is a very small secondary school with around 250 students on roll. The ability profile of its student intake is skewed because more able students from the surrounding area go to neighbouring grammar schools. The school uses a combination of commercial assessment packages and information from primary schools to establish students' capabilities in ICT when they join the

school. Attainment on entry varies between below average and well below average. Around 40% of students have learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

- Students relish the many opportunities they have to work with ICT at Charles Read and make rapid progress in developing their capabilities. By the end of Key Stage 3 in 2008 96% of students had reached the nationally expected Level 5. This is substantially better than in an average full ability range school for this age group. All students take a vocational qualification in ICT during Key Stage 4. Results are above average with 58% of students in 2008 attaining a distinction which is deemed equivalent to the top GCSE A* and A grades. Standards in ICT are above average. Considering students join the school with below average standards their achievement is outstanding.

- Year 7 students have limited awareness of the need to keep themselves safe when online. However students in Year 11 talked confidently about the potential dangers indicating that students acquire an understanding of how to stay safe as they move up the school.

- Behaviour and attitudes to learning are excellent. Students work extremely well independently and were often seen helping each other by sharing technical expertise.

- A small group of very low attaining students are extremely well supported by the staff who teach them a course devised specifically for their needs. ICT helps these students to improve the presentation of their work of which they are proud and helps to boost their self esteem.

Quality of teaching and learning of ICT

Teaching and learning are outstanding.

- Teachers have excellent subject knowledge which enables them to help students learn how to use a range of applications including desk top publishing, spreadsheets, databases and web page creation.

- Assessment information is used extremely well to plan lessons with a range of activities suitable for students' differing starting points. Teachers have high expectations and classroom management is excellent. Three ICT lessons seen were outstanding. Students are able to work on different activities at their own pace with teachers providing excellent guidance and support to individuals as they require it. Students are highly motivated by this approach and work hard.

- Students say they use ICT frequently when working in other subjects and typically they say they use ICT every day. The excellent access to ICT in all curriculum areas means students have plentiful opportunities elsewhere to utilise the skills they have learnt in ICT lessons. Consequently learning is improved in other subjects as well as students enhancing their ICT capabilities. This is a major factor in students' outstanding achievement in ICT.

- The care of vulnerable students is outstanding with the school sometimes going to unusual lengths to ensure individuals get the support they need. For instance one Year 11 girl whose parents moved away was able to continue with the ICT vocational course at the school

from a distance. From home she used an instant messaging application to connect to her teacher's laptop during ICT lessons. He was able to explain the lesson to her by 'texting' and the dialogue between them was projected up onto the interactive whiteboard for the class to see so she could retain some social contact with her classmates. In this way the girl was able to complete the coursework assignments, email them to her teacher to be assessed and successfully completed the course.

Quality of the curriculum for ICT

The curriculum is good.

- The school provides a good balance of ICT provision adapted for the needs of its students. There are good opportunities for students to learn to use spreadsheets and databases as well as to use ICT to communicate and present their ideas.
- Provision for programming is less well developed although it still meets statutory requirements. Students learn to programme the operation of model traffic lights in Year 8 and in Years 10 and 11 students edit simple HTML code to control the layout of elements on web pages.
- Students have good opportunities to use ICT to improve their learning in other subjects. Temperature probes are used to record environmental changes in geography and to monitor chemical reactions in science. In art lessons a paint application is used to explore the concept of pop art. Products are costed using spreadsheets in food technology and the internet is widely used by many subjects for research.

Leadership and management of ICT

The leadership and management of the ICT department are outstanding.

- Developing ICT provision has been a high priority for you in recent years. Substantial investment in ICT resources has been made with there now being about one computer for every two students. This is a much more favourable ratio than is seen nationally and means students have easy access to ICT in most lessons. All classrooms have networked desktop computers and teachers can also use laptops connected to the wireless network.
- The management of ICT is extremely rigorous and the department is well organised. Planning is well rooted in effective self-evaluation and the department is clear about what its next priorities are and why. The department have already identified the need for students to learn the more challenging aspects of programming.
- ICT teachers and teaching assistants have access to good training to ensure they are competent users of a range of applications and are aware of the latest course assessment requirements. Although teachers of other subjects have received some general training in for example the use of interactive whiteboards, their individual ICT training needs have not been formally audited.

Use of Assessment

The use of assessment is outstanding.

- There are excellent systems in place for accurately assessing the standard of students' work. In ICT lessons teachers put considerable effort into providing students with detailed written guidance on what they have achieved and what they need to do to improve. For Key Stage 4 students in particular the clarity and explicit detail of the feedback they get about how to meet the coursework requirements make a significant contribution to the high pass rates in the vocational qualification.
- Once a term ICT teachers enter assessment information into a sophisticated database. Teachers of other subjects regularly contribute additional assessment information about how well students have used ICT in their lessons. This enables the school to track students' progress against overall National Curriculum levels as well as by the individual strands of the National Curriculum. Hence the school has an unusually comprehensive and detailed picture of the progress students are making and is aware for example that standards in the control strand currently lag behind those of other areas. Tracking enables the school to identify any individuals who are in danger of falling behind and strategies are put in place to help them catch up.
- Parents receive detailed reports about the capabilities of their child in each strand of the National Curriculum for ICT. The use of assessment makes an outstanding contribution to students' achievement.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- extending the provision for students to learn and apply the main principles of programming.

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

Religious education

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 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 two lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE was judged to be inadequate but with a clear capacity for improvement.

Achievement and standards

The achievement of students in RE is inadequate.

- Until more recently, GCSE results for the short course have been broadly average. However, results have dipped over the last two years and in 2008 were well below average and this represents significant underachievement by pupils at Key Stage 4.
- Achievement at Key Stage 3 is broadly 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. Students' ability to think critically about the content covered is underdeveloped.
- The personal development of students in the context of RE is good. Their attitudes to RE are generally positive. They like learning about different religions and value the importance of understanding and appreciating diversity that the subject and the school promotes.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning is variable but satisfactory overall.

- 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 enjoy learning most when their study is linked to the role of religion in contemporary society. A reasonably broad range of resources is used to enliven learning and to ensure that the different needs of students are catered for.
- However, there is also an over-reliance on text book material and insufficient opportunities for students to demonstrate their thinking skills through investigations.
- Some use is made of assessment tasks to help inform reporting to parents but the use of assessment to inform planning or to identify the next steps in learning is insufficiently developed. Students are not always clear about how well they are performing in the subject.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in RE is satisfactory overall but with some major shortcomings.

- The Key Stage 4 curriculum for RE is generally well planned and all students have an opportunity to accredit their learning through the short course GCSE.
- The Key Stage 3 schemes of work are variable in quality. Although the content is broadly identified, there is no clear indication of how the 'learning from religion and responding to human experience' attainment target, specified in the Lincolnshire agreed syllabus, is to be implemented. The schemes of work also take little account of the opportunities for more cross-curricular work provided by the revised Key Stage 3 curriculum.
- Progression into Year 10 is less effective because there is an over-reliance on teaching about religious beliefs and practices and less

emphasis on developing students' ability to explore issues and make their own informed responses to what they study.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of RE are inadequate but there is a clear capacity to improve.

- The department has not had a subject leader since January 2009 and has experienced some turnover of staff over the last two years which has resulted in inconsistency of learning for students and their underachievement.
- Senior leaders are acutely aware of the department's performance and are seeking to address the weaknesses actively. A new subject leader has been appointed who will take up the post from April 2009. In the meantime, they have made sure that there is greater stability in teaching, especially for students in Year 10 following the GCSE course.
- Non-specialist members of staff teaching RE have had few opportunities to participate in professional development opportunities. Senior leaders show a commitment to ensure that staff keep abreast of current initiatives in the subject.

Creative thinking in RE

The use of creative thinking in RE is limited. Tasks do not always challenge students to use higher order and more demanding thinking skills or to express their personal feelings about the beliefs and practices they study. However, there are some examples of imaginative activities which require students to respond using more creative forms of expression, including the good use of information and communication technology.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- improving the quality of teaching, assessment and the curriculum so that students attain higher standards and make the progress expected of them
- capitalising on the more stable staffing and leadership in the subject by ensuring that the teaching staff have access to suitable support and professional development.

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 will be published on the Ofsted website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

David Anstead
Her Majesty's Inspector