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13 September 2011

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Miriam Rosen
Her Majesty's Chief Inspector

Dear Christine

Annual report on the quality of the inspections and reports by the Independent Schools Inspectorate 2010/2011

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you and your inspectors for their courtesy, cooperation and professionalism during the year. This has enabled Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) to monitor the inspections and reports of the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) efficiently. I should also be grateful if you would extend my thanks to those schools which we have visited. Further to Ofsted's monitoring, I have pleasure in sending you this summary of our findings of the quality of inspections and reports by the Independent Schools Inspectorate in 2010/2011. A copy of this letter will also be sent to the Department for Education and published on Ofsted's website.

Introduction

The Independent Schools Inspectorate is approved under section 162A (1)(b) of the Education Act 2002, as amended, to inspect schools in membership of the associations which make up the Independent Schools Council (ISC), of which there are over 1,000. Ofsted monitors the work of the Independent Schools Inspectorate at the request of the Department for Education. Monitoring is carried out by Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) who visit up to 10% of the inspections and review up to 15% of the reports published. This is Ofsted's 12th annual report on the work of the Independent Schools Inspectorate.

All the inspections monitored in this sample were carried out during the autumn, spring and early summer terms 2010–2011. HMI monitored inspection evidence from various types of schools, including preparatory, senior and boarding schools.

A formal meeting took place each term between the ISI and Ofsted.

In the spring term this meeting was held at the ISI office and included preliminary discussion on the inspectorate's policies for quality assurance and for the recruitment and training of inspectors. With this in mind, the sample of inspections monitored by HMI included a small number of visits to the first day of an inspection to see how lead inspectors prepare, train and organise their inspection teams.

The arrangements for school inspection

ISI's current framework for inspection was introduced in January 2010. This is based on a proportionate approach to inspection, with a three-year interval between inspections and five days' notice of inspection to schools. The information provided for inspectors includes a detailed self-evaluation form completed by the school and online questionnaires completed by parents and pupils.

A school which met all the regulations for independent schools in its previous inspection receives a short 'interim' inspection where the focus is on regulatory checks. Schools which did not meet all the regulations at their previous inspection receive a 'standard' inspection made up of an initial visit focusing on regulatory checks, followed four weeks later by a team visit. The inspection report is written after the second part of the inspection.

Where relevant, the Early Years Foundation Stage is inspected at the same time as the interim inspection or the initial visit when regulatory checks are made. The inspection of the Early Years Foundation Stage is integrated with the inspection of the school as a whole.

Inspection teams are led by reporting inspectors who are experienced inspectors, former HMI or retired or current headteachers from schools that are members of the associations. In a standard inspection, the same reporting inspector leads both parts of a school's inspection, and this provides continuity for the schools concerned. Team inspectors are trained 'peer' inspectors who are mainly serving or, occasionally, retired independent school senior staff. Increasingly, they are also being deployed to both parts of a standard inspection, which promotes further continuity.

The inspectorate states that it conducts the required recruitment checks on its inspectors and that it has a written policy whereby inspectors are asked to state in writing for each inspection whether they have any previous connections with a school that might affect their impartiality to inspect it.

From January 2012, standard inspections will be conducted as a single event only, comprising both a check on regulations and judgements related to the quality of education.

Quality of inspections

The Independent Schools Inspectorate's new framework for inspection has run smoothly and been implemented effectively over the academic year 2010–2011.

During the academic year, Ofsted monitored 21 inspections. This figure is higher than last year because of the introduction of the new framework, and to ensure that HMI were able to see examples of both interim and standard inspections. The outcome of our monitoring is that ISI continues to deliver high-quality inspections: all but two of the inspections sampled were judged to be good, the other two were satisfactory. All met the required standard. Inspections thoroughly checked the school's compliance with the regulations for independent schools, including those related to safeguarding, and reported back clearly to the schools' leaders on which regulations had and had not been met.

The expertise of the reporting inspectors continues to be a real strength of the inspectorate's work. The reporting inspectors' strong leadership ensured that team inspectors were very well prepared, supported and appropriately challenged to fulfil their roles. Inspections were planned thoroughly. Reporting inspectors made good use of team inspectors' subject knowledge or management expertise when deciding how to deploy them. Planning included appropriate consideration of the school's self-evaluation and the views of its parents and pupils. Detailed, incisive pre-inspection commentaries provided good direction to team members enabling them to follow appropriate inspection trails. The reporting inspector's electronic notebook of evidence provided a good link between both parts of the standard inspection.

Accurate and reliable inspection judgements were made, founded on a good range of evidence that included direct observation of lessons and discussions, and scrutiny of pupils' work and the school's records. Occasionally, a minority of the evidence forms completed by team inspectors were insufficiently evaluative to show what pupils had learnt, or did not make clear why a particular grade had been awarded for an aspect of the lesson. This did not detract from the inspection's good quality overall.

One inspection was judged satisfactory rather than good because the evidence base collected by inspectors for the Early Years Foundation Stage was of inconsistent quality and had not been checked as thoroughly as the evidence on other aspects of the school's work.

Headteachers and their staff were particularly complimentary about the conduct of the inspectors. They spoke highly of their professionalism, frequently commenting that inspectors approached their task in a 'firm but fair way' which helped to put the school staff at ease.

Headteachers appreciated the good communication from the inspection team and from the ISI administrative team, in setting up the inspection.

Inspectors continue to be supported well by good documentation, guidance and instruments for inspection. Inspectors spoke highly of the initial training provided by the inspectorate and of updated training on the new framework. Reporting inspectors conduct additional training for their teams at the beginning of the second part of a standard inspection. The sessions observed were conducted to a high standard, effectively refreshing the inspection skills of the team inspectors and successfully promoting consistent approaches to gathering evidence and making judgements.

The training session and inspectors' meeting got the inspections off to a good start, with all team members briefed well and clear about their role in the inspection team. Reporting inspectors guided new or relatively inexperienced team members particularly well during inspections, ensuring that their judgements were based on secure evidence.

ISI provides headteachers with outline guidance as to what inspectors may consider when making quality judgements about aspects of a school's work. This guidance is useful for schools as they prepare for inspection, as it helps to clarify aspects of the inspection process. The guidance also contains some grade descriptors which are helpful for headteachers evaluating the performance of their schools. However, although inspectors' judgements are accurate and well-founded on evidence, they do not always draw on these grade descriptors; consistently doing so could enhance coherent inspection practice.

Quality of reports

HMI monitored more reports than in 2009–2010 to ensure that they had reviewed a good spread of formats of inspection and types of school. The high standard of writing in reports has been maintained.

HMI monitored 22 reports that were published during 2010–2011. Eighteen of these were good; the remaining four reports were satisfactory. All met the required standard and all were clear about regulatory matters. Regulatory failures, including those related to safeguarding, were listed at the end of the summary section.

Reports were very well written and had many strong features. Reporting on the Early Years Foundation Stage has gone from strength to strength, reflecting the improvements ISI has made to inspecting and reporting on the requirements for this age range. As a result, the findings about this age group were particularly well expressed, allowing parents to easily compare the quality of provision across different types of schools.

Reports were clear about how the school could improve further. In the vast majority of reports, inspectors' judgements were explained well in the text and often provided a vivid and interesting picture of the school for the reader. Reporting inspectors

made very good use of examples to illustrate a school's outstanding features and avoided using jargon that might obscure meaning. Overall, reports effectively linked the school's provision to the outcomes for its pupils, so that parents could see clearly the impact of what the school was providing.

Reports were usually coherent and consistent throughout. In a small minority of reports, there was some lack of clarity. Occasionally, statements were contradictory or the report did not convincingly explain why a particular judgement had been made for an aspect of the school's work. For example, in two reports it was not clear why the contribution made to pupils' personal development by the school's arrangements for welfare, health and safety had been judged to be 'excellent' or 'good' when inspectors had uncovered regulatory failures relating to safeguarding at the first visit only a few weeks earlier, even if these had since been put right. Notwithstanding, in such cases it was clear that the first part of the inspection had a positive impact in effecting rapid improvement.

Where relevant, reports mentioned the progress made by different groups of pupils in the school, such as those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, or who have English as an additional language. However, reference to the progress of these various groups of pupils was sometimes scant and did not reveal in any depth the factors that lay behind their good progress.

Reports helpfully indicated how far a school had improved since its previous inspection. The views of parents and pupils were reflected at appropriate points. Summary sections of the report gave the reader a balanced overview of the school's strengths and weaknesses.

Issues for the inspectorate's consideration and action

The work of the Independent Schools Inspectorate continues to be of good quality. The inspectorate has acted appropriately on the recommendations of the previous year's annual report from Ofsted. It acts promptly on any points that arise as a result of Ofsted's monitoring activity, and continues to build on its good inspection and reporting practice. We welcome the introduction of an enhanced training programme this year for inspectors who lead inspections of special schools or schools where a considerable number of pupils have special educational needs.

In an overall good performance, the inspectorate may like to consider reinforcing with team inspectors the importance of writing evidence forms that focus more closely on evaluating the impact of the provision they have observed, and what could have been improved, rather than on describing it.

To promote consistency in judgements across schools and transparency in how inspectors arrive at their judgements, the inspectorate may wish to consider

developing further the ways in which the guidance headteachers receive could be used by inspectors.

Summary sections of reports give a balanced overall picture of strengths and weaknesses. However, where there are several regulatory failures, the inspectorate might wish to ensure that lead inspectors highlight these more prominently with an evaluative comment in the text of the summary section itself, to reflect and reinforce the priority the inspectorate rightly accords to safeguarding pupils' welfare. Some further guidance or training would help inspectors explain convincingly why aspects of a school's work have been judged 'excellent' or 'good' despite the presence of regulatory failures which have the potential for significant impact on pupils' welfare and well-being.

I hope that these observations are useful to you and your staff in your work to generate further improvement, both in your inspection service and in the independent schools you inspect.

*Yours sincerely,
Miriam Rosen*

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