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Christine Gilbert
Her Majesty's Chief Inspector

Dear Chris,

Annual report on the quality of the inspections and reports by the Independent Schools Inspectorate 2009/2010

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 efficiently. I should also be grateful if you would extend my thanks to those schools we have visited. Further to Ofsted's monitoring, I have pleasure in sending you this report of our findings of the quality of inspections and reports by the Independent Schools Inspectorate in 2009/2010. A copy of this letter will also be sent to the Department for Education and published on our 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. Ofsted monitors the work of the Independent Schools Inspectorate at the request of the Department for Education. Monitoring is carried out by HMI who visit up to 10% of the inspections and review up to 15% of the reports published. This is Ofsted's eleventh annual report on the work of the Independent Schools Inspectorate.

All the inspections monitored were carried out during the autumn, spring and early summer terms 2009/2010. Those conducted in the autumn term were among the last inspections to be conducted under the inspection framework operational in the Independent Schools Inspectorate's second cycle. A new framework was introduced

in January 2010, following pilot inspections that had taken place in the autumn term 2009. The sample of inspections and reports therefore covers both the 'old' and 'new' frameworks. Her Majesty's Inspectors monitored inspection evidence from various types of schools including, preparatory, senior and boarding schools. The inspection of a special school was also monitored.

The new framework and inspection arrangements

The Independent Schools Inspectorate's new framework for inspection is working well. It has enabled the inspectorate to adopt a proportionate approach to inspection and to move towards a three-year interval between inspections, with shorter notice for schools. Where a school met all the regulations for independent schools in its previous inspection, it now receives a short 'interim inspection' comprising regulatory checks. Those schools which did not meet all the regulations at their last inspection receive a 'standard' inspection made up of an initial visit focusing on regulatory checks followed four weeks later by a team visit.

Where relevant, the Early Years Foundation Stage is inspected at the same time as the regulatory check. In registered settings, a specialist Early Years inspector leads this inspection. A specialist inspector is also assigned to inspect the provision in non-registered settings, with the reporting inspector taking overall responsibility for the judgements. This has enabled the inspection of the Early Years Foundation Stage to be fully integrated with the inspection of the school as a whole.

The introduction of a detailed self-evaluation form for schools, together with online questionnaires for parents and pupils, has enabled the inspectorate to shorten its notice period for inspection. The move to short-notice inspection from January 2010 has been effective in bringing the inspectorate's practice into line with that of the other inspectorates. Ofsted welcomes these developments.

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

Quality of inspections

During the academic year Ofsted monitored 13 inspections, just over half of which were conducted under the new framework. This is a similar number to last year. The outcome of our monitoring reveals a very good picture: all but one of the inspections was judged to be good, the other was satisfactory. All met the required standard.

In monitoring the new framework, HMI observed a sample of interim and standard inspections, focussing on how effectively the new methodology is operating, and how well both parts of a standard inspection link together.

Inspections were very well planned. Pre-inspection commentaries were thorough, and drew well on all the evidence available before the inspection, including the views of parents and pupils. This ensured that inspection teams were very well prepared for their roles and that suitable inspection trails and activities were set up.

The expertise, experience and skills of the reporting inspectors remain real strengths of the inspectorate. Teams were deployed effectively and a good range of evidence was collected. Team inspectors brought strong, relevant expertise to the inspections. Judgements were reliable and securely founded on evidence. Specialist inspectors for the Early Years Foundation Stage had a very secure knowledge of the learning and development requirements of the framework for inspection.

On one monitoring visit, to the initial part of an inspection of a special school, it was noted that, while the reporting inspector had considerable relevant experience in that sector, they had not received any additional, enhanced training for leading inspections of special schools. The inspectorate has undertaken to provide such a programme.

Inspectors are supported by good, updated documentation, guidance and instruments for inspection. For example, inspectors appreciated the various prompt sheets for discussions, which helped them to retain a clear focus. The inspectorate's website provides further helpful information and support.

Inspectors spoke highly of the initial training provided by the inspectorate and of the recent updated training on the new-style inspections. Inspectors received particularly good support and advice from reporting inspectors, who take their responsibility for quality assurance very seriously. Reporting inspectors led training at the beginning of the inspection and rigorously checked the quality of the evidence base throughout.

There were good arrangements for inspecting safeguarding. Reporting inspectors had overall responsibility for inspecting safeguarding and had received specific additional training for this role. Team inspectors had received basic training in inspecting safeguarding, to enhance their awareness as serving headteachers or senior staff. Their role in standard inspections, in judging how well safeguarding policies were being implemented by the schools, was discharged effectively.

Relationships with schools were excellent. Reporting inspectors established excellent dialogue and communication with school leaders. Feedback at the end of inspections was clear and authoritative. Schools were very positive about their inspections. They valued highly inspectors' courtesy and professionalism.

Ofsted's impressions of the first two terms of the new inspection arrangements are positive. Reporting inspectors had a good overview of both parts of the inspection. Where initial inspections were monitored, it was clear to the monitoring HMI that the reporting inspector's notebook was being usefully annotated to provide a direct link to the second part of the inspection. Team meetings at the end of the initial inspection were helpful in identifying areas of focus for the second part, for example by suggesting inspection trails or where further evidence might be needed to support emerging views.

On one inspection that was monitored, a parallel inspection of boarding provision conducted by Ofsted was taking place. The monitoring HMI noted effective cooperation between the two inspection teams.

The inspections provided a rigorous check of the school's compliance with the regulations for independent schools. The inspection of the Early Years Foundation Stage was usually thorough. In just one school the inspection of this stage was not carried out with the same degree of professionalism as the other parts of the inspection. However, the reporting inspector ensured that shortcomings were decisively tackled and that the integrity of the inspection overall was not compromised. The inspectorate does not provide guidance for inspectors on procedures for inspecting and reporting on a school which makes provision for the Early Years Foundation Stage but where there are no pupils of that age on roll at the time of the inspection.

Quality of reports

Virtually all of the reports that were monitored in 2008/2009 were judged to be good. Accordingly, a smaller sample of reports was monitored this year. The high standard of writing has been maintained.

Her Majesty's Inspectors monitored eight reports that were published during 2009/2010. All but one of these were good, the other was satisfactory. All met the required standard, and nearly all were clear about regulatory matters.

Reports were almost always very well written and free from jargon. They provided a very clear and often engaging picture of the schools and explained what they needed to do to improve further. Judgements were unambiguous and well explained. The text was clear about non-compliance with regulations and the actions that the school had to take. Very good use was made of examples to illustrate inspectors' points. These illustrated aspects of outstanding practice particularly effectively, and so helped good schools know how to improve further.

Reporting on the Early Years Foundation Stage was usually, but not always, woven effectively through the reports, in addition to being described in a discrete section. In

this respect, in linking clearly the provision and outcomes in the Early Years Foundation Stage to the picture for the school as whole, the inspectorate has acted decisively on a recommendation from the previous year's annual monitoring report.

Findings from the inspection of the Early Years Foundation Stage are beginning to influence the overall judgements made in a school's inspection more obviously than at the time of the previous annual monitoring report and this is a helpful step forward. Consequently, those reports which covered all parts of a school had improved coherence. Moving oversight of the Early Years Foundation Stage from the early years specialist team inspector to the reporting inspector has improved links between aspects of provision. The impact of early years' provision is now considered more when arriving at judgements about the school as a whole.

Reports helpfully indicated how far a school has improved since its previous inspection. The views of parents and pupils were reflected at appropriate points. Summary sections of the report were usually well written so that the reader obtained a balanced overview of the school's strengths and weaknesses.

The satisfactory report was clearly written overall, however the summary of findings was not wholly accurate as some weaknesses had been omitted. The regulatory checklist was accurately completed but as the school had not registered the boarding provision for international students with the DfE as required, the inspection team's remit could not include this aspect of the school's work. As a result, the reader did not get the full picture as it applied to that group of students and so was left a little confused as this was not explained in the report. In describing the Early Years Foundation Stage the link between what the school provides and the outcomes for the children was not as convincingly explained as other judgements in the report.

Issues for the inspectorate's consideration and action

As the inspectorate takes on the inspection of association schools, catering wholly or mainly for pupils with a statement of special educational needs or disability and which were formerly designated 'approved', thought might be given to training and development for inspectors working in these schools. It is for the inspectorate to determine how it will meet this challenge.

The inspectorate might also wish to provide guidance for inspectors about how to deal with the inspection of the early years' provision when there are no children of that age on roll at the time of the inspection. It would be helpful for parents seeking to place a child at a school to have up-to-date information about the quality of provision to guide their choice.

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
Christine

Christine Gilbert