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Dear Christine

Annual report on the quality of the inspections and reports by the Independent Schools Inspectorate 2008/09

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 to monitor the inspections and reports of the Independent Schools Inspectorate efficiently. I would 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 2008–09. In addition I have covered other issues that have arisen during the year. A copy of this letter will also be sent to the Department for Children, Schools and Families 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 September 2005) to inspect schools in membership of the associations which make up the Independent Schools Council (ISC). Ofsted monitors the work of the Independent Schools Inspectorate at the request of the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF).

This is Ofsted's tenth 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 2008/9 under the Independent Schools Inspectorate's second cycle inspection framework, which has been agreed with the DCSF. The inspection teams are led by reporting inspectors who are experienced inspectors, former HMI or retired or current headteachers from association schools. The Independent Schools Inspectorate also uses trained 'peer' inspectors, who are serving or retired independent school senior staff, as members of the inspection team. The schools currently have at least six months notice of inspection, and during this period they receive two pre-inspection visits from the reporting inspector and are asked to complete a detailed self-evaluation form. However, the notification period is due to change to five days for all schools from January 2010.

In September 2008 the DCSF approved the Independent Schools Inspectorate to inspect the provision for children in the Early Years Foundation Stage in the ISC schools. This includes the inspection of the registered provision for children aged 0–3 where it occurs in these schools. This year Ofsted has given priority to monitoring the Independent Schools Inspectorate's inspection and reporting of the Early Years Foundation Stage in the context of the school inspection.

Monitoring is carried out by HMI who visit up to 10% of the inspections and review up to 15% of the reports.

Quality of inspections

During the academic year Ofsted monitored 16 inspections. The outcome of our monitoring of inspections reveals a very positive picture: all but one of the inspections were judged to be good, the other was satisfactory.

The quality of the Independent Schools Inspectorate's inspections is characterised by the strength of leadership and management provided by the reporting inspectors. Often of high quality, these inspectors provide the secure foundations for inspection. In the inspections monitored, HMI observed that inspection planning was thorough and teams were deployed appropriately to cover all aspects and subjects well and to maximise inspectors' expertise. Team inspectors commented favourably on the training session provided by the reporting inspector for the team at the start of the inspection. This is planned to ensure that all inspectors, many of whom inspect infrequently, share a common understanding of inspection procedures and methodology. Frequent, purposeful discussions further ensured that inspectors raised appropriate inspection issues and pursued them rigorously, so that emerging issues were identified promptly and effectively. Inspectors also checked the school's compliance with the regulations carefully. This attention to detail ensured that evidence was regularly scrutinised, inconsistencies resolved, and that judgements overall were effectively substantiated.

It is clear to HMI that inspectors have good knowledge and expertise which is used to good effect on inspections. This judgement is supported by most schools who commented positively on the composition of the inspection teams as well as on inspectors' expertise and knowledge. However, during one monitoring visit, the headteacher commented that, while he was pleased with the administration of the inspection, many changes had been made to the inspection team quite close to the start of the inspection.

Within a generally very positive picture, a few shortcomings emerged which related to team inspectors' recorded evidence which varied in quality and sometimes had a tendency to be overly descriptive. On a few occasions there was insufficient evidence to substantiate the judgements recorded. However, the inspectorate has robust monitoring procedures. It was evident during inspections that reporting inspectors use rigorous procedures to assure the quality of the evidence base. In addition, it was clear that the inspectorate's quality assurance monitor provided effective guidance and strong support. A clear focus on certain aspects of inspections each term by the monitoring inspector is a strong feature of this process.

In the first year of inspection of the Early Years Foundation Stage, the Independent Schools Inspectorate has established much good practice. It has appointed specialist inspectors to lead the inspection of the Early Years Foundation Stage, including the inspection of registered provision for children under three years of age. These inspectors are knowledgeable and well-trained and this has had a positive impact on the inspection of provision for young children. Where monitoring of the Early Years Foundation Stage inspections by Ofsted took place, it was clear that the lead inspectors had a very secure knowledge of the learning and development requirements of the new framework for the inspection of the Early Years Foundation Stage. Inspectors ensured that the Early Years Foundation Stage evidence notebook was adapted successfully to reflect the most important inspection trails. This was seen to provide useful prompts and helped the lead inspectors to quality assure their work and check the strength of the evidence base, a vital factor when working alone. Similarly lead inspectors frequently identified if a potential or emerging issue needed to be followed up, or where practice was of high quality or needed improvement. In one inspection, the lead inspector noted the attitudes and behaviour of the children and was able to identify those with particular needs. The inspector spoke to children as they worked on independent tasks and was able to move around the room freely. The children were not distracted by the inspector and evidence was recorded immediately after the observation in order to ensure that the evidence base was accurate. The Early Years Foundation Stage lead inspectors, who were monitored, were very effective in their work and their expertise was valued by the schools.

The inspection of the Early Years Foundation Stage is scheduled alongside the main school inspection except where registered provision for 0–3 year olds is concerned. This is because the inspection of the registered provision for 0–3 year olds requires only five days notice whereas the notification period for schools is much longer, and was intended as a pragmatic approach to scheduling in a transitional phase. HMI noted that the best practice occurred when the Early Years Foundation Stage inspection was fully integrated as part of the whole school inspection and was much appreciated by the schools. This was particularly strong when reporting inspectors themselves had effective knowledge of the requirements of the Early Years Foundation Stage. When the registered 0–3 provision was inspected at a different time, inspectors of the main school did not have the opportunity to discuss issues about the 0–3 provision with the Early Years Foundation Stage lead inspector and how they might impact upon a whole school judgement. Some reporting inspectors stated that they would value the opportunity to receive training in the Early Years Foundation Stage even though they were not identified to lead the Early Years Foundation Stage inspections. All inspectors are, however, supported by relevant and updated documentation and instruments for inspection that add to the Independent Schools Inspectorate's comprehensive framework and handbook for inspection. The website provides further information and support for inspectors and schools.

In all inspections, relationships with the schools were seen to be consistently effective and professional. From the outset, reporting inspectors, and the lead inspectors of the Early Years Foundation Stage inspections, established positive dialogue and communication with the schools. In one example, a reporting inspector took extra care to find out about the distinct characteristics of a faith school and to

ensure that the team was well briefed on these characteristics to better understand their implications for the school's provision; the team found this very helpful and the school was most appreciative.

Effective dialogue with schools was a key feature of the success of all the inspections monitored. Feedback was clear and calmly delivered. Even when difficult messages were given, for example on the provision for the Early Years Foundation Stage, senior leaders were allowed time and the opportunity to respond and to ask questions. The response from schools on their inspection was very positive overall: they valued the professional dialogue with inspectors and in particular commented on their courtesy.

Quality of reports

HMI monitored 20 reports that were published during 2008–09; all met the required standard and were clear about regulatory matters. Of those reviewed, 18 were judged to be good and two to be satisfactory.

The vast majority of reports are very well written. They are accessible to a range of readers and provide a very clear picture of the schools that have been inspected and what the schools need to do to improve further. Where there is any non-compliance with regulations, the text clearly explains why and the actions that must be taken. Judgements made are supported well by evaluative information on outcomes, for example, standards attained by pupils. A particular strength of the reports is the effective link that is made between outcomes for pupils and aspects of provision such as curriculum and teaching so that cause and effect are clearly established. Reports contain lively and effective examples drawn from the inspection which encapsulate the essence of the school. Reporting on the Early Years Foundation Stage is also effective. A strong feature of reports is the way in which strengths and weaknesses of provision from the section on the Early Years Foundation Stage paragraph are threaded through the full report. This results in recommendations for further development being clear and well supported by evidence so that the school's improvement can be based around strategic priorities. Where reports are satisfactory, they would benefit from further explanation about the impact of the weaker elements of provision on pupils' progress or on the quality of leadership and management overall. In particular, reports need to ensure that overall judgements reflect the evidence from all parts of the school.

Issues for the inspectorate's consideration and action

Planning for the Independent Schools Inspectorate's inspections currently includes two pre-inspection visits. This system enables reporting inspectors to begin key preparatory work for the inspection well in advance, for example, by making an analysis of pupils' and parents' questionnaires. It also provides schools with time to prepare for inspection and to learn from the on-going feedback from their reporting inspector. While this practice is generally helpful to schools' development, it could bring potential difficulties for drawing a clear line between advice and inspection and provide association schools with an advantage over others, making it more difficult for members of the public to compare reports produced by different inspectorates.

The leadership of the Independent Schools Inspectorate has recognised this issue and Ofsted welcomes its stated intention to move to short notice inspection in line with the other inspectorates from 2010.

The Independent Schools Inspectorate takes safeguarding matters seriously and has given good training and clear guidance to inspectors. However, Ofsted is aware, through a parallel welfare inspection, of one occasion where safeguarding issues were handled poorly. The Independent Schools Inspectorate reacted appropriately to ensure that there will be no reoccurrence of this situation.

Finally, while the inspection of the Early Years Foundation Stage is a positive feature of all relevant inspections, it is important that significant issues from this phase influence the overall judgements of the school's inspection. This is particularly important where these relate to safeguarding, health and safety or leadership and management. Thus Ofsted recommended that ISI considers guidance for inspectors so that reports which cover all parts of a school are coherent and that reporting is consistent across all inspectorates operating in schools. We note that these matters have been included in training for inspectors and in the documentation for inspections from September 2009.

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

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Christine Gilbert". The signature is written in a cursive style and is underlined with a single horizontal line.

Christine Gilbert
Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools