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Christine Ryan  
Chief Inspector  
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Dear Christine

## **Annual report on the quality of ISI inspections and reports 2007/08**

I have pleasure in sending you this summary of Ofsted's monitoring of the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) inspections and reports this year. In so doing, I would like to take the opportunity to thank you and your inspectors for their openness and professionalism. A copy of this letter will also be sent to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and published on Ofsted's website.

### **Introduction**

The ISI is approved under section 163 of the Education Act 2002 (as amended September 2005) to inspect schools whose headteachers are members of the associations which make up the Independent Schools Council. Ofsted monitors the work of the ISI at the request of the DCSF.

This is Ofsted's ninth annual report on the work of the ISI. All the inspections monitored were carried out during the autumn, spring and early summer terms of 2007/8 under the ISI's second cycle inspection framework, which has been agreed with the DCSF. The ISI operates a peer inspection system using trained inspectors who are serving or retired independent school senior staff. These teams are led by reporting inspectors who are experienced inspectors, former HMI or retired or current headteachers from association schools. The schools have at least six months' notice of inspection, and during this period they receive two visits from the reporting inspector and are asked to complete a detailed self-evaluation form.

Monitoring is carried out by Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools (HMI) who visit up to 10% of the inspections and review up to 15% of the reports.



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## Quality of inspections

During the reporting period Ofsted monitored 18 inspections. Most were judged to be of good quality; two were satisfactory and one inspection had some shortcomings.

Planning is a strong feature of the inspections. The two pre-visits to the school enable reporting inspectors to undertake initial planning activities, conduct some interviews with pupils and key staff, and begin the process of checking compliance with the regulations for independent schools. This enables the inspectors and the schools to be well prepared for the inspection. Reporting inspectors use the information from these visits as well as other documentation, including an analysis of the responses from pupils and parents to questionnaires, to brief their teams and raise clear hypotheses for exploration. The inspectors draw up careful plans for the inspection to ensure a comprehensive and balanced coverage of the school's work.

ISI inspections last for four days. An important feature of the first day is the training session offered by reporting inspectors to their teams. Team inspectors, who tend to inspect infrequently, value this training session highly, particularly new team inspectors whose initial training may have taken place some time ago. One such training session was attended by HMI and found to be well structured and useful, especially as it enabled engagement with the social care inspector from Ofsted who was inspecting the boarders' welfare at the same time, and thereby ensured that pre-inspection hypotheses were shared. Many team inspectors reported that the training given by the reporting inspector helped them to understand the importance of using the criteria for making judgements when completing the lesson observation forms. It also made them aware of any changes in inspection methodology or in the regulations.

A distinctive element of the ISI inspection methodology is that, although separate subject reports are no longer produced, team inspectors inspect lessons within their area of subject expertise, and this provides schools with an additional focus on improvement in specific subjects. The inspection teams observed gathered a comprehensive range of evidence. The recording of judgements from lessons was generally good, although on occasions evidence forms were too descriptive at the expense of evaluation, or made insufficient reference to the progress made by certain groups of pupils. This was the case in particular where there were weaknesses in the inspection of provision for pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

The 'inspector file' provided a method for recording comprehensive evidence and collating judgements, although inspectors varied considerably in how they used this document. Reporting inspectors were usually skilful in ensuring that team inspectors evaluated their evidence objectively and used it to reach fair and accurate judgements. Team meetings generally ensured that full consideration was given to



regulatory matters and to resolving any inconsistencies in the evidence in order to reach clear and corporate overall judgements. However, such meetings were less effective on the relatively few occasions when inspectors were not well prepared, where the evidence for judgements was limited or where emerging weaknesses were not fully investigated.

In general, the reporting inspectors provided good direction for the team, managed the inspection successfully and highlighted key points for further investigation. They took their role in quality assurance seriously, and their scrutiny of the team's evidence often secured improvements in clarity and consistency in judgements, while also providing valuable support for the team members.

Virtually all the schools reported good or very good communication with inspectors. All the reporting inspectors maintained good dialogue with senior managers and ensured that emerging findings were shared and discussed so that a full range of evidence could be considered. This is a notably positive aspect of ISI and ensures that the inspections generally run smoothly and efficiently: only one inspection this year had problems arising from the conduct of an inspector which were not handled well.

### **Quality of reports**

HMI monitored 21 reports during the reporting period. All of them met the standard required and the vast majority of them were judged to be of good quality. In addition to the reports, accompanying materials were also considered which related to regulatory requirements and the Every Child Matters outcomes.

The reports are written to a common format and provide a comprehensive picture of the schools. They include a high level of detail, for example on aspects such as literacy, numeracy, study skills and independent learning, and convey clear judgements about educational provision and performance. In providing a clear and informative picture of the school, they also frequently include lively examples drawn from the inspection, and comments made by the pupils. This brings the school to life and enables the reader to identify its unique features. The reports are accessible to a wide readership, and highlight clearly the main strengths as well as areas for improvement. The latter are phrased clearly to help schools focus on immediate priorities. All reports make clear whether the regulations for independent schools are met and identify those which are not.

The three reports which were judged satisfactory (rather than good) lacked the clarity and precision of the rest, for example weaknesses were identified but not fully explained, or key issues for improvement were imprecise.



## Support provided by the inspectorate

The ISI provides good support to its inspectors. It aims to build inspection teams whose professional experience is well matched to the phase and type of school being inspected and has effective contingency arrangements in the event of unavoidable change. Team inspectors speak highly of the quality of training they receive both on inspection and through the initial training, while the reporting inspectors appreciated the annual update conference.

A comprehensive framework and handbook underpin the inspection regime. These contain clear and helpful guidance to inspectors. Documents and instruments for inspectors are kept up-to-date with regulatory requirements, and the website provides further information and support for inspectors and schools. The ISI was swift to amend its website in the early part of the academic year when an out-of-date form caused confusion.

The ISI has good systems for monitoring the quality of its inspections and reports. Detailed records on all aspects of the ISI's quality assurance work demonstrate that the processes are comprehensive and clear. Feedback is sought from reporting inspectors, team inspectors and headteachers after the inspection. The responses are carefully analysed and findings are used constructively to inform training and improve the quality of inspection. The ISI monitors a representative sample of inspections with a small team of experienced inspectors, led by the senior editor, and also employs a small team of editors to ensure consistency in report writing. The editing process is comprehensive and is highly effective in improving the quality of the published report.

I hope that these observations are useful to you and your staff in your work to generate further improvement 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 positioned above a horizontal line.

**Christine Gilbert**

