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Christine Ryan
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Independent Schools Inspectorate
CAP House
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Christine Gilbert
Her Majesty's Chief Inspector

Dear Christine,

Annual report on the quality of Independent Schools Inspectorate inspections and reports 2006/07

As you know, we have agreed to send you a summary of Ofsted's monitoring of the Independent Schools Inspectorate's inspections and reports in the form of a letter this year. In doing so, I would like to take the opportunity to thank you and your inspectors for their openness and professionalism, which enabled Her Majesty's Inspectors to conduct their monitoring duties efficiently while visiting both the schools involved and your office to examine quality assurance and training records. I have pleasure in sending you the following summary, a copy of which will also be sent to the Department for Children, Schools and Families and published on Ofsted's website.

Introduction

This is Ofsted's eighth annual report on the work of the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI). All the inspections monitored were carried out under the ISI's second cycle inspection framework during autumn, spring and early summer terms 2006/07. Monitoring is carried out by Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools (HMI) using three overall judgement descriptors: good, satisfactory and unsatisfactory.

Schools that are members of the associations that constitute the Independent Schools Council (ISC) are inspected by the ISI. It also inspects schools from the Council of British Independent Schools in the European Community. Those independent schools that do not belong to the ISC and are not affiliated to the Focus Learning Trust are inspected by Ofsted under the Education Act 2002 (amended in 2005).

Under an agreement between the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and the ISC which first took effect in January 1999, Ofsted monitors the effectiveness of the inspection procedures used by the ISI. This was updated in December 2003 by an agreement which set out the Secretary of State's expectations of the ISI in

respect of its functions as an approved body under section 163 of the Education Act 2002 (section 162B from September 2005), and its additional responsibilities as agreed and set out in the document.

Quality of inspections

Ofsted monitored 19 inspections during the reporting period and all were judged to be of good quality. ISI operates a peer inspection system using trained inspectors who are serving or retired senior staff of independent schools. These teams are led by reporting inspectors who are often former or current headteachers, former HMI, or inspectors with substantial experience of inspecting both local authority maintained schools and those in the independent sector. Some of the inspectors carry out only one or two inspections each year, so the guidance and support given by the reporting inspector are particularly important features of the quality assurance procedures during an inspection.

Preparation for the inspection is thorough. None of the schools whose inspections were monitored by HMI raised concerns about any lack of preparation. Reporting inspectors make two preliminary visits which include a thorough check on compliance with DfES, now DCSF, regulations. Schools report that this is carefully conducted. Monitoring visits confirm that regulatory checks are rigorous and any areas of concern are followed up during the inspection week. The pre-inspection commentary prepared by the reporting inspector provides the inspection team with an evaluation of the school's documentation and performance. The majority are of good quality and provide helpful lines of enquiry for inspectors to pursue.

Schools report that there is good communication with them during the inspection. This is essential for the smooth running of the inspection and to allow the school to respond to evidence as it arises. Monitoring visits confirm that this is a very positive feature of ISI inspections. In two cases schools felt that more information could have been given as the inspection unfolded, but this is a question for the reporting inspector about balancing the flow of information, rather than a point for development by the ISI.

At the start of each inspection week the team meets for a briefing and training session. This is an important part of ISI training and is conducted in the school by the reporting inspector. It ensures that team inspectors are fully aware of any recent changes to inspection protocol or legislation, are reminded about inspection methodology and have an opportunity to discuss the pre-inspection commentary. New team inspectors reported to HMI that they found these sessions valuable. Throughout the inspection week the reporting inspector is responsible for quality assuring the work of the team. HMI found this process to be a very useful feature of ISI procedure, with rigorous monitoring of the evidence and judgements, and feedback given to team inspectors on the quality of their work. New team inspectors especially said they found that this promoted their development and this contributes

to improving inspection. Leadership is particularly strong, and a key feature of ISI inspection is the high quality of its reporting inspectors.

The methodology for gathering first-hand and reliable evidence is secure. The ISI ensures that team members are well trained in inspection techniques and this training is continued by the reporting inspectors during inspection. Each team inspector follows particular aspects of the inspection and all are involved in observing lessons. The result is a comprehensive evidence base which is used during team discussions to arrive at corporate judgements. Each team member keeps a record of emerging issues in an inspector file. This is a key document which enables collation of a range of evidence and plays an important part in quality assurance. The ISI is continuously monitoring the use of the inspector file and recognises that further training is required for team inspectors in analysis and synthesis of evidence to ensure that the file is ready for team meetings. Reporting inspectors usually ensure that they have set aside sufficient time to monitor the quality of the inspector files and provide further guidance when required. Team meetings are an important part of each inspection day and the reporting inspectors are skilled at bringing the team to corporate judgements. They provide very good direction, manage the team successfully and merge all contributions into clear hypotheses for further investigation. Meetings are generally of a reasonable length, especially since the introduction of the second cycle framework, but can be too long where team inspectors are not sufficiently prepared or, very occasionally, the reporting inspector has not drawn up a clear structure for the meeting.

HMI have found that there is no question about the range and validity of evidence gathered during inspections, but team inspectors do not always step back and evaluate their evidence. This weakness is noticeable in the lesson observation forms, which often contain too much description of a lesson rather than an evaluation of its impact on pupils' progress. The ISI is aware of this problem and has improved its guidance and training; completed forms are scrutinised during inspection and in post-inspection quality assurance procedures. Weaknesses are noted and either addressed by the reporting inspector or through central training. HMI have noted that although most reporting inspectors constantly check the quality of evidence, the thoroughness with which this is done depends on the planning of sufficient time for this key task. It is clear from the ISI's own quality assurance records that it has fully recognised the issues to do with the inspector file and lesson observation forms. Very detailed records are kept on all aspects of the ISI's quality assurance work. This ensures that the process is both comprehensive and consistent, and that any subsequent queries or complaints can be dealt with fully through an established and secure procedure.

Quality of reports

HMI monitored 21 reports during the reporting period. The majority of these were judged to be of good quality and only one had minor shortcomings.

The reports were well written in accessible language and provided a comprehensive picture of the schools. They were detailed and conveyed clear judgements about educational provision and performance. All reports highlighted areas of strength and provided appropriate guidance for school improvement. Development points were usually well chosen to help schools focus on immediate priorities. The DCSF requires reports to identify any regulations not met by the school, and all reports did so.

HMI scrutinised the extensive records of the ISI's editing process, which was found to be rigorous and effective. Findings are used constructively to inform training and support continuing improvement in the quality and clarity of writing. The ISI's own monitoring data indicate that fewer reports require a second or third reading, and fewer are being graded by editors as satisfactory, while more are achieving a good grading. Guidance given by the senior editor in regular updates significantly contributes to the improvement in writing. Training is provided for recording inspectors and appropriate support is available from editors. The ISI carries out rigorous checks so that reports do not contain factual errors, and the quality assurance procedure ensures that published reports are generally free of errors in grammar, spelling and typography.

Support provided by the Inspectorate

The ISI tries to put together inspection teams whose professional experience is well matched to the phase and type of school being inspected. This is an important feature of ISI inspection and one that schools value. However, difficulties can arise when schools raise concerns about an inspector, or when an inspector has to withdraw from an inspection at very short notice. Schools are entitled to query any team inspector on the basis of professional experience or conflict of interest. The ISI does its best to find suitable replacements and has always achieved this. HMI reported that team composition was a positive feature of the inspections monitored. The ISI was frequently praised by schools for managing late changes to teams. In only one of the monitored inspections was the ISI criticised by the school for not providing up-to-date information about the inspection team early enough.

A comprehensive training programme is run by ISI to provide guidance for inspectors, who also have an annual residential conference. Because many team inspectors inspect infrequently, long periods may elapse between training and inspecting. For this reason the training and support provided by the reporting inspector during an inspection, and valued by team inspectors, provides appropriate management for training issues as they arise. The ISI also ensures that inspectors receive regular updates on legislative changes. HMI reported that team members required most training in evaluative recording of their evidence and the consistent application of inspection criteria. However, training sessions, whether held centrally or during inspections, were not observed by HMI in this reporting period.

The second cycle framework is now embedded, and both your inspectors and the schools they inspect report that it is an improvement on the first framework. It

provides for inspection with a smaller team, which enables inspectors to focus and report more sharply on the main features of the school. However, the inspection programme is still based on a six-year cycle, whereas all other inspections of independent schools are conducted at three-yearly intervals, and you may like to consider improving the service you provide by increasing the frequency of inspection. In addition, the ISI gives the school a very long period of notice before inspection, sometimes several months. For the purposes of parity and consistency with all maintained and other independent schools, where generally less than one week's notice is given, and to reduce the pressure of preparation for schools, we would encourage the ISI to consider reducing considerably the period of notice you give to schools before inspection.

The protocol for the second cycle of inspection is clear about the extent of feedback schools will receive, but some have expressed disappointment that inspectors do not now provide a summary of the work of a department, and on occasions do not manage to give feedback to teachers after lesson observations. The ISI should continue to encourage inspectors strongly to take every opportunity for continuing dialogue with staff to provide them with clear feedback on their work.

HMI examined the ISI's quality assurance returns from schools for a period of one term. Three quarters of the forms were returned and virtually all schools gave the top grade to contact with, and support from, the ISI, with 96% reporting that the inspection met the ISI's quality requirements. Team inspectors' evaluations raised very few concerns, indicating that their preparation by the ISI was as good as could be expected for those who carry out inspection work infrequently. This also indicates that the training for team inspectors is at least satisfactory, a view supported by discussions with them during monitoring visits.

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