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## **Independent Schools Council inspections 2001/02**

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## Introduction

### Background

1. This is Ofsted's third report on the inspection of schools by the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI).
2. Independent schools fall into two categories: those that are members of the associations that constitute the Independent Schools Council (ISC), and those that are not. Schools in the latter category are inspected by Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) working within Ofsted, but since January 1999 the ISC has been responsible for inspecting and publishing reports on schools belonging to the Council's associations. This is done through the operationally independent inspection arm of the Council, the ISI. Under the agreement between the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and the ISC, Ofsted monitors ISI inspections.
3. ISI inspection teams consist of practising or retired senior teachers from independent schools, with the teams being led by reporting inspectors. These are usually former HMI or heads of independent schools, or registered inspectors with substantial experience of inspecting maintained schools. Schools are inspected every six years. The inspections provide advice to the DfES on whether schools meet the requirements for continued registration.
4. The extent of ISI activities broadened during 2001/02. For example, three schools from the Council of British Independent Schools in the European Community (COBISEC) were inspected and there was an initiative with the Independent Schools Bursars Association (ISBA) whereby bursars have joined some inspections. A partnership with the National Care Standards Commission (NCSC) has been established and co-operation in the inspection of boarding is planned.
5. The ISI trained 275 teachers or bursars to work as inspectors this year and one-day courses were also held for 68 reporting inspectors. Courses on data interpretation, special educational needs, boarding education and writing have been held, and courses on other topics are planned. HMI attended a training day for reporting inspectors on the inspection of boarding, the new software system and the nature of future inspections.

### The report

6. This report covers the three terms from autumn 2001 to summer 2002. In this period the ISI inspected 198 schools. HMI monitored 16 of these and scrutinised 34 reports. Some of the reports relate to inspections carried out before autumn 2001.

## Main findings

- This has been a generally good year for the ISI and one in which there has been continued development of its systems and methods. The ISI has recognised and responded well to the issues raised in last year's report and useful guidance to inspectors has been issued to help them improve their practice.
- The quality of ISI inspections has improved, largely due to the continued good work of reporting inspectors, but also as a result of the increased experience and expertise of team inspectors. Of the 16 inspections monitored, 13 were of good quality and the remainder were satisfactory. Some continuing difficulties have been evident in the forming of inspection teams, although there have been improvements in this respect.
- The quality of the reports has become more diverse, with a higher proportion of good quality reports, but also an increase in the number of reports judged by Ofsted to be of unsatisfactory quality. Of the 34 reports scrutinised, 19 were good, 11 satisfactory, but 4 were unsatisfactory.

## Recommendations

### a) To improve the quality of inspections:

- the ISI needs to continue to ensure that inspection teams have the appropriate expertise and training to meet the requirements of the inspection
- training should continue to emphasise the role of the reporting inspector as leader, manager and mentor, as exemplified in the best inspections.

### b) To improve the quality of reports:

- the ISI needs to ensure that its review and editing procedures guarantee overall consistency and quality of reports
- the reporting on governance and management should be clear and unequivocal
- the reports should give a clear indication of the nature of the school's intake and that this is reflected in judgements on pupils' attainment at the end of each key stage
- judgements should be made consistently throughout the report
- the views of parents should be fully reflected and commented upon by inspectors.

## Responses to the recommendations of the second Ofsted report

7. In the report on ISI inspections in 2000/01, recommendations were made for the improvement of inspections and reports. These are stated here, together with a judgement on how well they have been met.

**The deployment of team inspectors needs to ensure that all have appropriate expertise, recent training and regular experience of inspection.**

8. This is an improving area, with team inspectors gaining more experience of inspection and improving in confidence. Nevertheless, there have been continuing, though reduced, difficulties in establishing inspection teams. This has been characterised by the late formation of teams or late changes to team membership, sometimes beyond the control of the ISI. The ISI now has a full-time member of staff with specific responsibility for building inspection teams.

9. The ISI still needs to ensure that the subject expertise of the team is precisely matched to the identified specialisms of the school.

**Reporting inspectors need to ensure that, when aspects are discussed at team meetings, all the inspection criteria are covered.**

10. This has improved in the last year, along with a general improvement in the conduct of inspections. It is still a weakness in a minority of inspections.

**Some team inspectors should be given training in oral reporting on subjects and aspects.**

11. This is another area in which there has been improvement. This aspect of inspection work has been particularly good when the reporting inspector has given clear guidance to team inspectors about the order of topics in the oral feedback and has helped them to clarify their judgements. There is, however, still too much variation in the quality of oral feedback.

**In some inspections, the team inspectors need to be given more detailed and timely information on their roles and responsibilities.**

12. This is much improved, alongside the improvement in the work of Reporting Inspectors and the forming of teams, although there were still instances when late, unavoidable team changes led to difficulties. These were usually dealt with effectively by Reporting Inspectors.

**Team inspectors on their first inspection should be assigned a mentor who is an experienced inspector. ISI is already considering this issue.**

13. This has not been done as a matter of course, but the ISI has initiated a system of support for some reporting inspectors through its own monitoring systems. This is intended to relieve the reporting inspectors of some pressure and hence their capacity for supporting others is enhanced. The degree of support team inspectors receive is generally good.

**Reports should give clear evidence, within the body of the text, that the requirements for registration are met. These requirements need to be agreed by ISI and the DfES.**

14. Reports have improved to a degree in this respect. Regulations regarding pupils' attendance and admissions are often covered well in reports but statements that all appropriate staff have been checked are not always explicit in the text.

**Significant variations in the standards achieved between subjects or between pupils of different ages or abilities should be highlighted in the relevant sections of reports and, where necessary, in the main findings.**

15. This remains a weakness in a minority of reports. The main findings do not always reflect the findings in the subject reports. The progress made by pupils with special educational needs is sometimes inadequately reported.

**All inspection reports should include the statistical results of the parental questionnaire and make explicit comments on their views.**

16. The statistical results of the parental questionnaire are not included in the reports, but there is a requirement to comment on parents' views. In the best reports this is done well, with inspectors not only reporting parents' views but also stating whether they agree with them. There is still much scope for improvement, particularly as inspections do not always offer parents the opportunity for a meeting with inspectors.

**The editing of reports needs to ensure a better balance in the length of the subject and aspect sections and greater consistency in the style, structure, content and judgements made in the different sections.**

17. The ISI has recently taken steps to improve the editorial process, but in the period under consideration, whilst there was a greater proportion of good reports, there was also an increase in the number of unsatisfactory reports. In some of the unsatisfactory reports the editing has been insufficiently rigorous to ensure the consistency of the judgements made, the reporting on subjects and the quality of the writing. Some of these reports have serious typographical errors. This indicates a need for better editing by some reporting inspectors and better quality assurance through the subsequent editorial process.

**Sections on boarding need to be clearer and to cover fully the criteria in the ISI framework.**

18. This area has improved and writing on boarding provision now generally matches the quality of the report as a whole. ISI inspections now follow the National Standards for Boarding and, under an agreement between the DfES, the ISC and the National Care Standards Commission (NCSC), it is anticipated that ISI and NCSC inspections will be carried out jointly.

**Ofsted should be informed by ISI of the outcomes of any complaints from schools about the inspection process, or the inspection report, and of the action taken on such complaints.**

19. The ISI has provided Ofsted with a list of schools which have complained about their inspections. In the period covered by this report there were 26 such complaints. The ISI has a procedure for considering complaints, first by the Director of Inspection and then, if necessary, by an ISC committee, although few reach this latter stage. Most complaints are about the findings of the report, but others are centred on the management of the inspection or the conduct of inspectors. About one in four complaints are wholly or partially upheld. The number of appeals by schools has increased this year.

## The conduct of inspections

20. HMI made monitoring visits to 16 inspections in 2001/02. Of these, 13 inspections were of a good standard and three were satisfactory. This represents a considerable improvement in quality on the previous year.

21. The key strengths of the good inspections reflected the high quality of leadership and management by reporting inspectors and their assistants, the thorough preparation for inspection, for example through the provision of good pre-inspection commentaries and appropriate documentation. Good relationships were established with schools and reporting inspectors ensured that a good working approach was achieved.

22. In good inspections, team inspectors were given good support and their work was generally well monitored. Support for new inspectors was effective and continued to improve. Reporting inspectors provided an effective and practical extension to the training initially provided by the ISI. There was effective feedback to team inspectors about the quality of their work, for example with respect to the writing of lesson observations or with regard to preparation for reporting to the school. Team meetings were thorough and the level of debate good. Judgements were reached collectively, with team inspectors contributing effectively to discussion of them. Increased emphasis was placed on regulatory matters and on schools' arrangements for child protection issues.

23. In inspections not judged to be good there were some weaknesses. Not all of these were evident in every such inspection, but they were reflected to differing degrees in some of the reports examined over the year.

24. Details of the specification agreed between the reporting inspector and the school were not always understood by all in the school. Lesson observation forms sometimes contained insufficient detail to support the judgements made and the grades awarded; and they sometimes lacked adequate reference to pupils' attainment. The management of inspections was not always completely secure. There was sometimes a failure to establish collective and clear-cut views among the inspection team on certain key issues, such as management and governance and, where team inspectors were hesitant in contributing to discussion at team meetings, reporting inspectors did not always encourage sufficient debate. Oral reports on subjects occasionally lacked clear and consistent structure and this resulted in a lack of clarity of the judgements made.

## Inspection reports

25. HMI monitored 34 reports on schools in the period under consideration. Of these, 19 were good, 11 satisfactory and 4 unsatisfactory. The proportion of good reports has increased from last year, but so has the proportion of unsatisfactory reports. Some of the unsatisfactory reports relate to inspections carried out before autumn 2001.

26. School reports provide information for different audiences: the school, the parents of the pupils, the ISC and its member associations and the DfES.



27. A majority of the reports monitored were of good quality. Reports of good quality provide a clear picture of the school. They communicate effectively with their range of audiences. They provide an effective description of the achievement of pupils in relation to their ability, the quality of education provided and the provision for pupils' welfare and support. Such reports are direct in their reference to regulatory matters. They make reference to the views of parents – and whether inspectors agree with these views – and are informative to parents. They are likely to help schools to improve.

28. In good reports, judgements are succinct and unequivocal. The main findings and recommendations clearly reflect the judgements in the main body of the report. Effective examples are used throughout to clarify judgements. Reports are carefully edited to ensure that the judgements are consistent throughout the report and there are no typographical errors. There is a thorough application of the criteria in the ISI handbook throughout the report, giving a complete picture of the school. Clear statements are made on the attainment of, and the provision for, the full range of pupils. There are references to the attainment of pupils on entry to the school and good use is made of appropriate comparative data. Comparisons, for example with other schools or national averages, are well founded, clearly expressed and, where appropriate, applied consistently in every subject section. Subject sections are consistently well structured throughout the report, refer to pupils from the full range of ability, and make important judgements and recommendations for improvement. There is good reference to any previous inspection reports, including those relating specifically to pupils' welfare.

29. Some reports had a number of the strengths described above but also some weaknesses. The balance of strengths and weakness was quite varied. Reports generally provide a convincing picture of the school and a sound basis on which the school can make further improvements. The writing is generally satisfactory but can be of inconsistent quality, particularly in the subject sections. Some sections are too descriptive or imprecise in addressing all the required judgements, such as the impact of resources or accommodation on teaching and learning, or in relation to the needs and abilities of all pupils. Sometimes there is insufficient reference to groups in the school, for example those with special learning or additional language needs.

30. In the unsatisfactory reports the weaknesses greatly outweigh the strengths. Editing has been insufficiently rigorous to ensure the consistency of some important judgements and the quality of the writing. Judgements reflecting criteria in the inspection framework are sometimes omitted from these reports. For example, they may make reference to the number of pupils who require learning support or to those from overseas, yet there is no specific reference to either group in the section on pupils' attainment. There is a lack of clarity in some key judgements, either because the judgement has not been fully made, or is only hinted at in the text. The judgements may also be contradictory. For example, messages in the subject sections are not always compatible with those conveyed in the main findings of the report.

31. Reporting on the overall management and governance of schools is a weakness in some unsatisfactory and other reports. They may say too little about management at all levels and some subject sections do not make an unequivocal judgement about it. Comments on public examination results can be confused in some reports. There may be variations in the use of benchmarks in the subject sections when comparing standards against other schools. The attainment of pupils on entry to the school is not always well defined and this makes comparison with other schools difficult to understand, and possibly misleading.

