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Dear Simon

Annual report on the quality of School Inspection Service inspections and reports 2007/08

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you and your inspectors for their openness, professionalism and courtesy this past year. This has made the task of Her Majesty's Inspectors in conducting their monitoring of inspections and reports produced by the School Inspection Service more simple. Through you, I would also like to extend our thanks to those schools affiliated to the Focus Learning Trust which we have visited in doing this work. I have pleasure in sending you the following summary of the outcomes of our monitoring work. 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 School Inspection Service (SIS) is recognised by the Secretary of State as an approved body for the purposes of inspecting registered independent schools affiliated to the Focus Learning Trust under section 162B of the Education Act 2002 as amended from September 2005. The SIS maintains its independence from the Focus Learning Trust and its member schools, and all inspections are carried out by professional inspectors. The framework for the inspection of schools affiliated to the Focus Learning Trust requires systematic inspection and reporting of the registration standards as set out in the Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2003, as amended from January 2005 and May 2007.

The Department for Children, Schools and Families requests that Ofsted monitor and report on the quality of SIS inspections and the reports. There are currently 25 schools in England affiliated to the Focus Learning Trust, ten of which were inspected in the academic year 2007/08. In the course of the year Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) monitored three inspections and reviewed five reports.



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

The handbook for the inspection of schools affiliated to the Focus Learning Trust defines clearly the model for inspection. A school inspection generally takes four days for a team of two or three inspectors to conduct. A special feature of an SIS inspection is the addition of a lay inspector from the Brethren community, who inspects and reports on the management of the school. The SIS has moved swiftly to a three-year cycle of short-notice inspections, with all reports being published on the SIS website within four weeks of the inspection. Systems for electronic communication have also been improved. The SIS is on track to fulfil its target of completing the first cycle of inspections of all Focus Learning Trust schools by the end of summer 2009, and it is now giving thought to its second cycle of inspections.

This is Ofsted's second annual report on the work of the SIS.

Quality of inspections

The inspections monitored by HMIs were all judged to be of good quality, with few areas identified for development.

A very positive feature of inspections is the good communication that inspectors establish with schools. The regular dialogue ensures that emerging issues and provisional findings are shared with the school's management as they arise, and this enables the school to contribute more fully to the inspection and get more from it. Inspectors are both courteous and discreet, always conducting themselves professionally in accordance with the SIS code of practice.

The inspections are planned carefully and managed efficiently. A clear and informative pre-inspection letter is provided to support the team and get the inspection off to a good start. Inspectors examine carefully a broad range of first-level evidence, including the school's records and policies, teachers' planning and pupils' work. Parents' and pupils' views are sought via questionnaires, and inspectors make good use of the information they provide. A good number of lessons covering a variety of subjects and year groups are observed, and inspectors take care not to over-burden staff in small schools, while ensuring that a representative sample of evidence is gathered. Lesson observations identify accurately the strengths and weaknesses of the teaching and the progress pupils make, although occasionally further text is needed to support the grades awarded. Where this occurs, reporting inspectors are generally quick to challenge any inconsistent judgements and to seek improvement in the quality of the evidence. They take seriously their role in assuring the quality of inspection.

Inspectors have a thorough and detailed knowledge of the framework and the regulations for independent schools, and rigorously check the school's compliance with them. The recording of evidence is usually good, providing sufficient justification for the judgements made. Team meetings provide opportunities for thorough consideration of the inspection evidence and sufficient debate to ensure that appropriate and well substantiated judgements are reached.

SIS inspections differ from Ofsted's inspections of independent schools in that they also report findings on organisation and management, which are not part of the regulatory requirements, but are required by the Focus Learning Trust. Although Ofsted does not directly monitor the work of the trained lay inspector who conducts this part of the inspection, HMI recognise that schools value this part of the inspection and that all inspectors work closely together.

Quality of reports

Of the five inspection reports produced by the SIS this year that were monitored by HMIs, three were judged to be of good quality and two of satisfactory quality. Reports are usually well written and are appropriate for the audience served. The SIS continues to ensure that the language in reports is free from jargon and not too technical. One of the best reports was judged as accessible to a wide readership, evaluative and capturing the essence of the school by drawing well on first-hand evidence from the inspection to exemplify the judgements made. The reports include clear and consistent judgements and the overall conclusions generally provide a fair and accurate summary of the main findings with clear pointers for improvement. In just one case the evaluation of the curriculum was less coherent than other sections of the report and would have benefited from a closer critical read.

Support provided by the inspectorate

Inspectors report that they value the availability and quality of the training opportunities provided by the SIS. There are at least two annual meetings a year for the small group of inspectors engaged in this work, and lay inspectors also attend. Inspection teams are varied to give all inspectors the opportunity to work with other colleagues, and this enables inspectors to learn from one another and develop good professional relationships across the small inspectorate. The SIS framework, handbook and instruments are well constructed and support inspectors well. The handbook is updated on an annual basis or as required following amendments to the regulations. The guidance for inspectors is clear and well used. The SIS has very good arrangements for the quality assurance of inspections: half of the inspections this year received monitoring visits from the Coordinating Inspector or another experienced colleague. These arrangements are helpful in ensuring that inspectors follow the framework consistently and make sound judgements in accordance with the criteria.

The SIS has equally clear procedures for assuring the quality of its reports. The procedures have improved over the year. All reports have a single quality reader and are also seen by the Coordinating Inspector prior to publication. Guidance for inspectors on report writing is clear and any information arising from monitoring or quality assurance is discussed with inspectors.

Administrative procedures to support the inspections are effective, and schools and inspection teams report that they received documentation in good time. Where

unavoidable circumstances occasion late changes to inspection teams, this has been well managed, and contingency arrangements are strong.

I hope that these observations are useful to you and your inspectors in your work to generate further improvement both in your inspection service and in the schools of the Focus Learning Trust.

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