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Mr S Bennett  
Chief Inspector  
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**Christine Gilbert**  
Her Majesty's Chief Inspector

*Dear Sir,*

## **Annual report on the quality of inspections and reports by the School Inspection Service 2009/2010**

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 (HMI) to complete their monitoring of inspections and reports by the School Inspection Service efficiently. I should also be grateful if you would extend my thanks to those schools we have visited. I have pleasure in sending you the following report of Ofsted's findings from our monitoring work this year. A copy of this letter will also be sent to the Department for Education and will be published on our website.

### **Introduction**

The School Inspection Service is recognised by the Secretary of State as an approved body for the purpose of inspecting registered independent schools affiliated to the Focus Learning Trust under section 162A(1)(b) of the Education Act 2002, as amended. In September 2009 the remit of the School Inspection Service was extended to include members of the Steiner Waldorf Fellowship of Schools. There are 59 schools in the inspectorate's remit, of which 36 are affiliated to the Focus Learning Trust and 23 are members of the Steiner Waldorf Fellowship of Schools.

The School Inspection Service maintains its independence from the Focus Learning Trust, the Steiner Waldorf Fellowship and their member schools.

The framework for the inspection of schools affiliated to the Focus Learning Trust and the Steiner Waldorf Fellowship of Schools requires systematic inspection and reporting of the registration standards as set out in the Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2003, as amended. Ofsted monitors the work of the School Inspection Service at

the request of the Department for Education. This is Ofsted's fourth annual report on the work of the School Inspection Service.

In the academic year 2009/2010, the School Inspection Service inspected 22 schools. Ofsted's monitoring activities this year included a sample of inspections and reports from schools in the Focus Learning Trust and the Steiner Waldorf Fellowship. Her Majesty's Inspectors monitored five inspections, three of which were of schools in the Steiner Waldorf Fellowship, and reviewed six reports. This represents just under one quarter of the inspections that were conducted by the School Inspection Service in the academic year 2009/2010 and 27% of the reports published. It is a higher than usual sample owing to the inspectorate's new area of work this year in inspecting the Steiner Waldorf Fellowship schools.

The Focus Learning Trust is a national organisation which brings together schools that are owned and maintained by local assemblies of a religious group known as the Brethren or Exclusive Brethren. The schools are small day schools that currently cater for pupils of both primary and secondary age.

Steiner Waldorf schools follow a philosophy that relates education closely to a child's stage of development, for example the age at which a child is felt to be ready to learn to read and write. The curriculum reflects this philosophy. Accordingly, some Steiner Waldorf schools have been granted exemptions to parts of the learning and development regulations for the Early Years Foundation Stage.

### **Arrangements for inspection**

In line with other independent inspectorates, the School Inspection Service gives schools short notice of inspection and provides them with a detailed self-evaluation form and questionnaires to canvass parents' and pupils' views. Inspectors are supported well by a handbook of guidance, appropriate inspection instruments and regular training.

The inspectorate is staffed by a chief inspector and a team of inspectors, all of whom are former HMI. A particular strength of the inspectorate is that all inspections are staffed by teams of professional inspectors who have particular areas of expertise such as special educational needs, post-16 education, the primary phase, the Early Years Foundation Stage and school management. School inspection teams are led by reporting inspectors who have significant relevant experience including a good understanding of Steiner Waldorf philosophy and substantial experience of inspecting these schools.

Inspection teams are complemented by a lay inspector either from the Brethren community or the Steiner Waldorf community, as appropriate. The lay inspector is nominated by the appropriate community for the purposes of inspecting areas such as the financial management of the school and its distinctive ethos. The lay inspector is trained and approved by the inspectorate. This arrangement is a strong feature of the inspectorate's



framework as it provides good insight into the leadership and management of the school and how effectively its distinctive ethos is promoted. This is useful additional information for parents.

### **The quality of inspections**

Her Majesty's Inspectors judged all of the five inspections that were monitored to be of good quality. Inspections of the schools in the Steiner Waldorf Fellowship were good, reflecting the strong understanding the reporting inspectors had of the philosophy and practice that lie at the heart of those schools. Reporting inspectors brought considerable relevant experience and expertise to these inspections so that their judgements were insightful and well founded.

Inspections were thoroughly prepared and well organised. Inspection teams were suitably staffed, and were led by highly experienced reporting inspectors. When drawing up plans for the inspection, reporting inspectors made good use of the self-evaluation information provided by the school. This helped them to identify suitable areas of focus for the inspection. Good quality pre-inspection briefings ensured that teams followed up effectively the issues identified for closer scrutiny. Inspectors were clear about their roles and responsibilities.

Inspectors checked the regulations for independent schools rigorously, showing good understanding of the requirements of the framework for inspection. Their judgements were accurate and robustly founded on evidence. Inspectors drew on a good range of evidence from lesson observations, interviews with staff, scrutiny of pupils' work and documentation provided by the school to reach their conclusions. Practice varied in whether written notes were kept of all meetings held, including formal feedback to the school and inspector team meetings, and the inspectorate may wish to consider providing guidance on this matter to inspectors to ensure greater consistency particularly in the event of challenge or complaint.

Inspectors evaluated their findings carefully at team meetings, challenging each other's views when appropriate. Due regard was given to checking a school's procedures for safeguarding pupils' welfare, health and safety.

School leaders were very complimentary about the conduct of the inspections. They singled out the 'courteous and unobtrusive', 'professional yet sensitive' conduct of the inspectors. They praised the very positive relationships that inspectors established with them, and the 'excellent' communication with both inspectors and the inspectorate. As a result, they felt well prepared for their inspection. School leaders particularly appreciated the inspectors' understanding of their school's distinctive character. They welcomed the good opportunities to contribute to their inspection, for example through regular discussion of emerging findings with the reporting inspector, as the inspection progressed. A typical comment was that their inspection had been 'challenging, but not intimidating'.

Her Majesty's Inspectors monitoring inspections noted the detailed knowledge and understanding which inspection teams had of regulations related to the Early Years Foundation Stage. Inspection of the Early Years Foundation Stage was integrated effectively into the inspection of the school as a whole. For example, inspectors used the information in the school self-evaluation form as well as evidence gathered during the inspection, to consider the impact of the Early Years Foundation Stage provision and outcomes for the children in this stage, as well as in the school overall.

In schools in the Steiner Waldorf Fellowship, inspectors assured themselves at the outset of the nature of any exemptions applied for, or already granted, to the school, regarding the requirements for the Early Years Foundation Stage. The inspection was tailored to take this into account.

### **The quality of reports**

Her Majesty's Inspectors monitored six of the inspection reports that were published during 2009/2010. All met the required standard, and nearly all were clear about regulatory matters. Of those monitored, five reports were judged to be good. One, the first to be written on a Steiner Waldorf school, was satisfactory.

Reports were well written. They painted a convincing picture of the school. Inspectors' judgements were clearly stated and were explained well for parents and others, often with helpful, illustrative examples of aspects of the school's work. The main findings highlighted successfully the key strengths and weaknesses of a school's work and made clear the impact this had on pupils' academic and personal development. Reports were similarly candid about a school's weaknesses and what needed to be done to improve. Where appropriate, they showed clearly how the schools had improved since the previous inspection. A particularly good feature of some reports was the way in which the views and concerns of parents and pupils featured strongly throughout the report. In a similar vein, the school's Christian ethos was often mentioned throughout the report. This served not only to emphasise successfully the particular character of the school, but also to help the reader understand the links between ethos, provision and the beneficial way in which the community works in tandem with the school. The vast majority of the reports monitored set out unambiguously the extent to which the independent school standards and regulations had been met. Just one left some doubt for the reader as to the impact on pupils of safeguarding failures, but in general the reports were consistent throughout and interesting to read.

One inspection report was reviewed that had a section on the Early Years Foundation Stage. This report met requirements, with helpful and interesting descriptions of the provision and its impact on the outcomes for children. However, key judgements about the provision and outcomes were not sufficiently clear to the reader, and thus it was not easy for the reader to compare this section of the school with other settings nationally, for example in maintained schools.

Overall, the inspection reports were helpful to schools as they aim to bring about improvement, particularly where weaknesses exist. The inspectorate might also wish to



ensure that reports make clearer to good schools why aspects of their work are not yet outstanding. In general, reporting inspectors highlight accurately those aspects of a school's work which they consider to be the most important in a 'summary of main findings' section. In just one report this summary was a little too positive, leaving the reader to look much further into the body of the report to identify the weaknesses.

The reporting of the non-statutory aspects was interesting and relevant to each school, but it was not always obvious how the recommendations in this section related to the rest of the report. It would be helpful to the reader to have some further explanation of the impact any recommendation made here is intended to have on the education provided for the pupils.

### **Issues for the inspectorate's consideration and action**

Quality assurance arrangements are good. The use of the first day in school for both preparation and training of inspectors helps equip them well for their duties. Reporting inspectors provided very good support and guidance to their inspection teams. Lay inspectors felt well briefed by the training the School Inspection Service provides and were therefore confident about their duties. They are clearly a fully integrated part of the inspection team. However, the inspection handbook and guidance for inspectors do not specify how the quality of the lay inspector's inspection work is to be assured, and the School Inspection Service may wish to consider this inclusion.

The work of the School Inspection Service is clearly of good quality. Nevertheless, the inspectorate may wish to bring about further improvement through guiding inspectors towards greater consistency of inspection practice and clarity in report writing.

I hope that these observations are useful to you and your inspectors. I know that you constantly strive to bring about continuous improvement both in your inspection service and in the schools that you inspect.

*Yours sincerely*  
*Christine*

**Christine Gilbert**