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Dear Meg

Annual report on the quality of Bridge Schools Inspectorate's inspections and reports 2008/09

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 Bridge Schools Inspectorate efficiently. I would also be grateful if you would extend my thanks to those schools which we have visited. I have pleasure in sending you the following summary of Ofsted's findings from our monitoring work this year. 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 Bridge Schools Inspectorate was approved in 2008 as a body for the purposes of inspecting selected registered independent schools in membership of the Association of Muslim Schools UK (AMSUK) and the Christian Schools' Trust (CST), under section 162A(1) of the Education Act 2002 as amended from September 2005. There are currently 55 schools confirmed to be in the inspection remit of The Bridge Schools Inspectorate. The schools are evangelical Christian or Muslim schools, serving faith communities, which provide a distinctive religious curriculum alongside secular studies.

This is Ofsted's first annual report on the work of the Bridge Schools Inspectorate. Ofsted monitors the work of the Bridge Schools Inspectorate at the request of the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). During the Inspectorate's first year of operation, it was agreed with the DCSF that Ofsted would monitor up to 50% of the inspections carried out. As a result, during the reporting period HMI monitored eight inspections. In addition, nine inspection reports have been reviewed.

The Christian Schools' Trust has member schools across the United Kingdom and supports schools worldwide. It is an organisation whose focus is to support the people involved in Christian schools from 'the concept stage' onwards. The Association of Muslim Schools UK was established in 1992 with the aim to support

and develop excellence in full-time Muslim schools. The Association is 'owned' by its member schools.

The Bridge Schools Inspectorate was established to provide an opportunity for cooperation between faith groups and to enable them to come together to form an independent inspectorate with specialist expertise in schools with a distinctive religious ethos. The inspectorate gained approval from the Secretary of State for Education to inspect schools belonging to the Christian Schools' Trust and the Association of Muslim Schools UK throughout England and it began its work in October 2008.

The Bridge Schools Inspectorate's model of inspection has been agreed with the DCSF and is set out clearly in the Inspectorate's Framework for Inspection. The inspection model is similar to Ofsted's, in ensuring that schools meet the regulations for independent schools. It also reports on whether the schools continue to meet the expectations of the Christian Schools' Trust and the Association of Muslim Schools UK.

Schools are given approximately five days notice of inspection and are inspected on a three yearly cycle. Inspection teams are led by experienced former HMI who understand the distinctive characteristics of faith based education and have had substantial experience of leading independent school inspections. Team inspectors are drawn from the staff of schools involved. Each association puts forward candidates with substantial experience of teaching, leadership and management to be trained as inspectors. Candidates are trained by the Bridge Schools Inspectorate as team inspectors and become accredited Bridge Schools Inspectorate inspectors. In order to remain accredited, inspectors need to participate in at least one inspection a year and to inspect at least one school from outside their own association once every four years.

The quality of inspections

In its first year of operation, Ofsted judged all of the eight BSI inspections it monitored to be of good quality. This represented almost half of all the inspections conducted by the Bridge Schools Inspectorate in this reporting year.

The composition of the inspection teams is a key strength of the inspectorate's work. Teams consistently include well trained and knowledgeable inspectors whose expertise is well suited to the school, and includes knowledge of the Early Years Foundation Stage and religious ethos. These features are valued highly by the schools, who also frequently comment favourably on the inspectors' conduct, understanding of and respect for the schools' ethical and cultural customs and dress. In one inspection, for example, the specialist Muslim inspector had made a significant contribution to the inspection by gathering incisive evidence and bringing to bear an excellent cultural understanding and powerful writing skills which captured the ethos of the school extremely well.

Fundamental to the positive views held by schools is the good quality of leadership and management exemplified by the lead inspectors. This is typified by inspection

planning which is a strength of the lead inspectors' work. Inspection activities are well planned to ensure that the team gathers a good range of evidence and covers the regulatory requirements comprehensively. The inspections demonstrate a good balance of observations, interviews and discussions with staff and pupils and good use is made of the analysis of pupils' and parents' questionnaires. However, in some inspections, inspectors record evidence in the inspection notebook, particularly in sections relating to teaching and assessment, that is weighted towards provision and the link to its impact is not clear. Similarly, evidence forms recording lesson observations do not always show clearly the impact of teaching on learning so that judgements are securely supported.

Team inspectors are well supported by the lead inspectors, in particular where they are inspecting for the first time. Joint lesson observations between team inspectors and the lead inspector enable expertise to be shared and judgements discussed and standardised. This helps to develop new inspectors' confidence and strengthen good quality assurance procedures.

Team meetings exemplify effective communication between inspectors. Time is used well to discuss emerging judgements and identify areas for further investigation. The tightly organised meetings cover all matters relating to the framework and are run very professionally. All team members are expected to contribute to the discussions and this ensures that the evidence is debated fully in order to reach judgements which are reliable and secure. Effective communication is also well established between inspectors and staff. Schools consistently report their appreciation of the inspection process being fully explained to them. They value the regular feedback from lead inspectors that enables them to have a good understanding of the emerging findings throughout the inspection. They also greatly appreciate the courtesy and efficiency of the inspection teams and the professional interactions with staff and pupils.

The quality of reports

HMI monitored nine of the reports that were published during 2008/09; all met the required standard and most were clear about regulatory matters. Of those monitored, four were judged to be good and five satisfactory.

The best reports are very clearly written and provide helpful examples to explain to the reader the judgements made. Strong features of the school's provision are well exemplified and the reports deal firmly with weaker aspects and provide a clear steer for the school's future improvement. These reports also provide a good balance between description, judgements and most importantly how the provision impacts on the outcomes for pupils. In reports on schools with an Early Years Foundation Stage, the effectiveness of this provision is made clear. Reports are concise and cover the reporting requirements comprehensively. Where there is any non-compliance with regulations, the text clearly explains why and the actions that must be taken. The overall conclusions give an accurate summary of the inspection outcomes and suggested points for improvement are well made and can be traced through the report.

While the satisfactory reports still meet the required standard, there are a number of improvements which could be made. The reporting on the Early Years Foundation Stage in these reports is not consistently as good as the best practice; for example, judgements are not always clear and precise about how to improve provision where shortcomings have been identified. In one report, it was described how pupils in the school spent a day each week working at home with their parents on topics and activities suggested by the staff. However, the report did not follow up this arrangement and tell the reader whether the activities are suitable, whether these arrangements meet the requirements for full time education, and how this part of the pupils' education is monitored and evaluated by the school. In another school which was not meeting some important regulations relating to pupils' welfare, health and safety and the suitability of staff, the report left the reader unclear about how these failings impacted upon the quality of the school's provision as a whole. Occasionally, judgements are made on aspects of provision that would appear to conflict with the shortcomings described, and therefore need further explanation to clarify the judgement made.

Issues for the inspectorate's consideration and action

The Bridge Schools Inspectorate has made a positive start in its first year of operation. Schools are clearly very appreciative of the quality of the inspection they receive and speak highly of the inspectorate and their inspectors. Good guidance is provided to support inspectors and clear procedures are in place for them to follow in the event of a safeguarding issue arising. The inspection instruments are suitably structured to enable inspectors to gather the necessary evidence to demonstrate compliance with regulations. New inspectors also speak positively about the intensive practical training they receive from the inspectorate and the professional advice and support of the lead inspectors. Amid these many notable strengths, however, the inspectorate is advised to take steps to improve the quality of some of the recorded evidence, and ensure that reports explain judgements fully and carefully, so that they all attain the consistently high standard reached by the best examples. We note that the BSI has already implemented some of these recommendations in its quality assurance and training procedures.

With best wishes for the coming academic year to all colleagues at the Bridge Schools Inspectorate.

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