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Mrs M Buckingham
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Christine Gilbert
Her Majesty's Chief Inspector

Dear Meg,

Annual report on the quality of inspections and reports by the Bridge Schools Inspectorate 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 Bridge Schools Inspectorate 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 (DfE) and published on our website.

Introduction

The Bridge Schools Inspectorate was approved in 2008 as a body for the purpose 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)(b) of the Education Act 2002, as amended. There are currently 70 schools confirmed to be in the inspection remit of the Bridge Schools Inspectorate: 43 from AMSUK and 27 from CST. The schools are Islamic or evangelical Christian schools, serving faith communities, which provide a distinctive religious curriculum alongside secular studies. This is Ofsted's second annual report on the work of the Bridge Schools Inspectorate.

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.

Ofsted monitors the work of the Bridge Schools Inspectorate at the request of the DfE. Since the inspectorate has operated for only two academic years, it was agreed with the DfE that Ofsted would monitor up to 30% of the inspections carried out and 30% of the reports published this year. As a result, during the reporting period, HMI monitored seven inspections and reviewed five inspection reports of the 22 schools that were inspected by the Bridge Schools Inspectorate.

The Bridge Schools Inspectorate's model of inspection has been agreed with the DfE and is set out clearly in the inspectorate's framework for inspection. The inspection framework is similar to Ofsted's in its focus on the regulations for independent schools. It also reports on whether the schools continue to meet the expectations of the CST and the AMSUK.

Schools are given five days' notice of inspection and are inspected on a three-year 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 member schools. Each association puts forward candidates with substantial experience of teaching, leadership and management to be trained as inspectors. Suitable candidates are trained to become accredited inspectors for the Bridge Schools Inspectorate. In order to remain accredited, inspectors must participate in at least one inspection per year and inspect at least one school from outside their own association once every four years.

In most cases one Christian and one Muslim inspector, normally serving headteachers, are deployed to each inspection to ensure that inspection teams arrive at a secure and well-balanced view of the school's secular and faith provision. This is a good feature which enables inspectors to look in depth at the school's provision for promoting understanding and tolerance of other cultures and faiths; one of the independent school regulations related to pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development.

The inspection model works well. The small size of the inspectorate and the continuity of service provided by the lead inspectors result in good quality assurance procedures. Although they do not inspect frequently, team inspectors benefit from good training by the inspectorate and good support from lead inspectors. This effective approach to training and quality assurance helps to ensure that the inspection evidence bases are secure.

The quality of inspections

Ofsted judged all seven of the Bridge Schools Inspectorate's inspections that it monitored, to be of good quality. This represented approximately one third of all the inspections conducted by the inspectorate in this reporting year.

Inspections were very well planned and suitable teams were deployed. The composition of the inspection teams remains a key strength of the inspectorate's work. The calibre of the lead inspectors was high and the team inspectors who are serving practitioners brought up-to-date knowledge and insight to the inspections.

Lead inspectors used their considerable knowledge and experience of inspection to very good effect, supporting and guiding those team members who inspect only occasionally. Inspectors were very well prepared for inspection through the inspectorate's initial training and subsequent update sessions. They were also provided with excellent guidance through the inspectors' handbook and had access to a telephone helpdesk during inspection, if required. As a result, inspectors showed good awareness of the regulations for independent schools, including those for safeguarding, and made secure judgements.

Team inspectors brought helpful insight to the inspections as serving practitioners in schools or as representatives of different faiths. Schools commented very favourably on the understanding inspectors showed of their particular type of school. For example, on one inspection the faith inspector was able to explore more deeply an aspect of spirituality that appeared to be a weaker part of the school's work and to explain this to the other team members.

The composition of teams reflected both Christian and Islamic faiths; this added to the impartiality of the inspections and enabled inspectors to explore rigorously faith issues in schools. There was good dialogue between the two inspectors for the different faiths; they pooled together inspection evidence about spirituality and the school's promotion of tolerance.

Inspectors placed a high priority on checking safeguarding requirements. On one inspection, the lead inspector toured the school site at length with the headteacher, to emphasise where inadequacies in meeting health and safety requirements had been found. This ensured that the headteacher had a very clear picture of what had to be put right. On another inspection, the inspectorate's helpline supported the lead inspector very effectively with an answer on a safeguarding query, so that feedback to the school was both accurate and fair.

Inspection teams gathered a good range of evidence. They considered carefully the school's self-evaluation and the views of its parents, carers and pupils. The role of the lead inspector in quality assurance was significant. For example, lead inspectors checked evidence forms carefully to ensure that judgements about the school's provision were related to their impact on the outcomes for pupils. This is an improving picture from last year. The evidence base was very carefully checked and team meetings considered all the evidence fairly and thoroughly. The team's corporate judgements were reliable and were well founded on evidence. The points

for improvement which inspectors suggested to schools were appropriate and helpful.

The inspection of the requirements for the Early Years Foundation Stage was thorough. Evidence was collated into a supplementary inspector notebook that had useful prompts reminding the inspector of what to look for. The findings from the Early Years Foundation Stage were fully considered when arriving at judgements about the quality of the school as a whole.

Schools reported that they were very happy with the conduct of the inspections. They valued highly the courtesy, sensitivity and good communication both from the inspection teams, and from the inspectorate's administrator. As a result, headteachers knew what to expect, were kept well informed about emerging findings during inspection, and were clear about the extent to which they met the independent school regulations. A typical comment about the inspection from a headteacher was that it was 'rigorous, but not disruptive'.

The quality of reports

Her Majesty's Inspectors monitored five of the reports that were published during 2009 to 2010; all were good. They reported clearly on regulatory matters. The inspectorate acted swiftly on advice given when occasional minor shortcomings were identified, ensuring that subsequent reports addressed these.

Reports were well written, easy to read and painted a convincing and interesting picture of the schools. They stated clearly which regulations had or had not been met and where not met, why this was so. The strengths and weaknesses of the school were evident in reports and appropriate next steps were suggested to help schools improve further. The summary section gave the reader a good overall view of the school, with areas of strength balanced well with weaker aspects.

Judgements were unequivocally stated, with helpful examples given to explain them to the reader. The overwhelming majority of judgements were well substantiated and clearly explained. The exception was a judgement of 'good' for welfare, health and safety and welfare where the school had not met some of the regulations related to safeguarding.

The reporting of the Early Years Foundation Stage was good. The reports contained helpful illustrations of the features of provision, especially where this had been judged to be outstanding. The reporting of this aspect has improved and is more detailed and explicit. This is more helpful for parents who wish to compare the provision for the youngest children in faith schools with that made elsewhere in the country.

Overall, the extent of schools' compliance with regulations was listed clearly in reports, leaving schools in no doubt about the action they were required to take. The inspectorate promptly rectified the omission of a clear statement about compliance with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, as amended. This has been included in all subsequent reports.

Issues for the inspectorate's consideration and action

The inspectorate has retained and built upon the strengths that were evident in the first year of its operation, in particular, the high quality of the lead inspectors and their experience and skills in leading and managing inspections. The inspectorate has acted effectively on Ofsted's recommendations from last year and inspection reports are good, well written and continue to improve. Occasionally, reports could do more to tell a good school how to become even better.

Inspections rigorously check safeguarding requirements. While judgements are evident in the text of the report, BSI might consider inserting a clear statement at the start of reports about the extent to which safeguarding requirements are met, which would be helpful and reassuring to parents.

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 you inspect.

Yours sincerely
Christine

Christine Gilbert