



# **Independent Schools Council inspections 2003/04**

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## Main findings

- During the year the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) maintained its record of good inspections and, more importantly perhaps, improved significantly the overall quality of its reports. The improvement in the quality of reports has been partially accounted for by better editing and monitoring of the work of editors. Attention has been given to the issues raised in Ofsted's previous report, *Independent Schools Council inspections 2002/03*, (HMI 2075).
- The ISI has successfully modified its inspection framework to incorporate the arrangements for the inspection of new regulatory requirements. Also, during the year there has been continued development of new inspection arrangements, aimed at reducing the scope of inspections, with the member associations having been consulted on several new models of inspection.
- Overall, inspection teams are well led and well prepared. They are generally well managed and work hard to secure a firm evidence base on which to formulate judgements. The formation of inspection teams has improved, but in one in five inspections there is still a mismatch between the needs of the inspection and the composition of the team. In some inspections, the variable quality of the recording of lesson observations and weaknesses in the management of team meetings led to some lack of clarity in the final feedback.
- Most reports are well written and provide good coverage of the criteria in the ISI framework. Inspection judgements are, in general, clearly made and provide good information on regulatory requirements to the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). Although there have been improvements, there is inconsistent use of national comparative data when judging pupils' achievement or insufficiently explicit judgements about school management in some reports. The reporting on the assessment of pupils sometimes lacks sufficient detail.
- The inspection and reporting on boarding has improved. This is particularly the case when there has been joint inspection with the National Care Standards Commission (NCSC). Other reports, however, vary greatly in the extent of coverage and the detail provided.

## Recommendations

- The ISI should continue to ensure a good match between the needs of the inspection and the expertise and experience of the team.
- Training for team inspectors should continue to focus on improving the quality of recording lesson observations and on judging pupils' achievement and progress against national data.

- Reporting inspectors should ensure that all final judgements at team meetings are reached corporately and unequivocally.
- Training should focus on improving the overall consistency of reports and, in particular, making judgements on pupils' achievement.
- Reports should include explicit judgements about school management and need to be more consistent in the reporting of the provision for boarding.

## Conduct of inspections

1. Overall, the quality of inspections is good. This reflects the measures that the ISI has put in place in response to the recommendations in previous Ofsted reports. Of the 22 inspections monitored, 20 were judged to be good and 2 satisfactory. This is a further improvement on the good figures of the previous year.

2. Inspection teams work hard to secure a firm evidence base for their judgements. The initial planning is usually good and builds effectively on the preliminary visit and the issues identified in the parents' pre-inspection questionnaire. The best briefing papers for team inspectors are of good quality. They refer to previous inspection reports and thoroughly analyse the school's data and documentation, including material relating to pupils with special educational needs (SEN) and those with English as an additional language (EAL), to create hypotheses that direct the team to the main issues of the inspection. Inspectors are told which national benchmarks are to be used when judging pupils' achievement and are given guidance on matters such as inspecting regulatory requirements, observing lessons and recording evidence.

3. Most reporting inspectors provide strong and effective leadership of their teams and draw upon their own wide experience in both the maintained and independent sectors. They work hard to establish an effective and beneficial dialogue with the school, while not shying away from making hard judgements. During the best inspections, the school is kept well informed of the team's emerging findings and, in particular, tricky issues relating to school governance and management are dealt with head-on. Most headteachers and staff appreciated the courteous and sensitive way in which inspectors go about their business and compliment them on the helpfulness of their feedback.

4. Inspections are well managed. The best reporting inspectors ensure that the inspection code of conduct is followed scrupulously and pay close attention to the regulatory requirements that schools are expected to meet. They support team inspectors well and monitor effectively their records of lesson observations and other evidence. They chair meetings well, work hard to develop the corporate spirit of the team and ensure that judgements are arrived at corporately, while challenging team members to justify their views. In the best practice, reporting inspectors also pay particular attention to the needs of new inspectors and offer good advice on how to give feedback and to write reports. The effectiveness of their efforts may be judged by the fact that invariably inspection teams are successful in coming to clear, overall

judgements about schools, new inspectors feel well supported and valued for their contribution to the inspection, and the quality of oral reporting on subjects is improving.

5. In the less successful inspections and even in a few which are good overall, there are some common weaknesses. First, notwithstanding the efforts of reporting inspectors, lesson observation forms are of variable quality. In some, there is too much description and too little evaluation; in others, there is a clear mismatch between the text and the grades awarded, usually leading to the inflation of grades. Occasionally, lesson observation forms and team meetings show that team inspectors are not always clear about the differences between pupils' achievements and progress, and the appropriate national comparators to be used to judge pupils' attainment in relation to their age and abilities. Not all team meetings are well managed, leading to an uneven contribution by some team inspectors, a lack of challenge by the reporting inspector and, at the end, a lack of clarity on certain key issues. Both of these can result in weaknesses in the final feedback by the team to the senior staff and governors.

6. The arrangements made by the ISI ensure that most inspections proceed smoothly. The reporting inspector and team are usually well informed about the background to the inspection, with full details of previous inspections to support the necessary follow-up of key issues. However, in a small minority of inspections, team inspectors either did not have the most up-to-date guidance on inspecting the regulations or found the guidance on inspecting some of the aspects confusing. There is an increasingly good match between the expertise of the team and the requirements of the inspection, reflecting improvements in the ISI's team-building processes. Nevertheless, a lack of appropriate specialist knowledge or experience remained an issue in one in five inspections. Some teams encountered difficulties because the ISI had failed to take account of either the school's particular circumstances or limitations imposed by the calendar when setting up the inspections. Sometimes there was too long a gap between an inspector being trained and being called to inspect.

## Quality of reports

7. During the year, HMI checked 29 reports produced by the ISI. Of these reports, 26 were judged to be of good quality, 2 were satisfactory and 1 was unsatisfactory. This is a significant improvement compared with the previous year when 15 reports were good, 19 were satisfactory and 1 was unsatisfactory. The ISI has improved its editing procedures and this has paid dividends.

8. Good reports have a number of common features. They are well written, give interesting examples to support judgements, are carefully structured and provide comprehensive coverage of the criteria in the ISI inspection framework. They are helpful to all their audiences: parents, to paint a clear overall picture of the school; the school, to support further development and improvement; and the DfES, to clarify how well the regulatory requirements are met. Good reports use clear and

sharply stated judgements to emphasise the strengths of a school, but also state unequivocally what needs to be improved. They are consistent in the judgements made in the subject reports, the sections in the main body of the report and the main findings. Recommendations to the school are drawn from all the important issues throughout the report.

9. The good reports make effective use of comparative national data on judging pupils' achievement and are clear in establishing the ability range and profile of pupils. Where there are pupils with special learning needs or who have English as their second language, reference to the quality of the school's provision for meeting their needs is made throughout the report. Similarly, where very able pupils are identified, judgements are specifically made about the provision for them. The best reports make reference to previous inspection judgements as a means of measuring a school's progress. The views of parents, as expressed through the pre-inspection questionnaires, are taken into account.

10. Despite the overall improvement in the quality of reports, there are a number of issues which still need attention. The main one is to check for consistency between the various sections of the report, in particular the references to pupils' achievement and comments on the quality of teaching. A minority of reports continue to make insufficiently explicit judgements with respect to the overall quality of school management.

11. The quality of subject reporting has improved since last year, but further improvements would be helpful. For example, some subject reports are not clear when commenting on pupils' achievement, nor are they sufficiently comprehensive when reporting on the quality and effectiveness of the assessment of pupils. This reflects the limited view of some team inspectors on the nature of assessment.

12. A minority of reports contain a number of typographical and grammatical errors, clumsy phrasing and repetition which, despite the significant improvements made, reflect a need for editorial vigilance, both at the initial stage by the reporting inspector and through the ISI's own quality assurance procedures.

## Inspection and reporting of boarding provision

13. The ISI reported on the quality of boarding provision in its schools in two different ways. Where the ISI worked in partnership with the NCSC, a summary of the NCSC's judgements appeared in the text. In these cases reporting on boarding is consistent and refers in detail to aspects of provision for boarders while making clear judgements. Their reports often include further judgements in sections such as those on premises and accommodation and pupils' personal development. The majority of these reports offer straightforward, succinct and helpful comments on the quality of boarding and, in the best, particularly useful reference is made to the quality of activities for pupils.

14. Where there has not been a joint inspection, reporting is less clear. The explanatory notes which precede the body of the report declare that 'no specific

judgements on the National Minimum Boarding Standards will be made', but that the report will comment on 'the progress made by the school in meeting the recommendations set out in the most recent statutory boarding inspection' and will evaluate 'the quality of the boarding experience and its contributions to pupils' education and development in general'. There is, however, no consistency between reports in the way these objectives are fulfilled.

15. The best reports written without an NCSC presence make clear judgements, particularly on premises and accommodation. These reports thread the references to the provision for boarders throughout the text. The least helpful merely record that there was no NCSC presence and make only token reference to boarding in the text. A majority comment on the extent to which the previous recommendations have been met, but they rarely enlighten the reader as to what these are. Mention may be made under premises and accommodation to the boarding provision being satisfactory or unsatisfactory, but no supporting detail is provided. If the quality of the boarding experience is mentioned, too little reference is made to its contribution to pupils' education and development in general. Similarly, insufficient reference is made to provision for boarding in relation to pupils' achievement and the quality of their activities.

16. Nonetheless, boarding has been covered more effectively than in the previous year, although guidance to inspectors has yet to be translated into a consistent format for both schools and parents. Further provisional guidance for 2004/05 has been issued which should, if followed, assist in achieving greater consistency and clarity of reporting.

## Responses to the recommendations of the fourth Ofsted report

17. In last year's report a number of recommendations for improvement were made. These are repeated here, together with a commentary on how well they have been dealt with.

To improve the quality of inspections:

- **ISI must ensure that inspectors are aware of the need, not only to cover statutory requirements, but also to emphasise the importance of thorough procedures for doing this.**

This is an improving area. Reporting inspectors pay close attention to the regulatory requirements that schools are expected to meet, and they gather sufficient evidence to support their judgements.

- **ISI should ensure that reporting inspectors and team inspectors have all the necessary information about the nature of the inspection and details about previous inspections.**

Some improvements have been made in this area but there are some examples where all team inspectors did not have the most recent guidance on inspecting the regulatory requirements; some guidance from reporting inspectors on how to judge pupils' attainment is still not always secure.

To improve the quality of reports:

- **with its inspection partner, the ISI should ensure that the inspection process leads to comprehensive reporting on boarding education and provision, readily accessible to parents.**

There has been some improvement in the reporting of boarding but there is still too much variation in the extent of coverage and the quality of the writing. Reporting is better where boarding is inspected jointly with the NCSC.

- **more attention should be given to improving the quality of editing to bring about greater consistency in the structure and writing of reports.**

This has improved so that there is now much better consistency in the quality of ISI reports.

- **there needs to be greater consistency in the use and interpretation of national comparator data against which to judge pupils' progress and attainment.**

Efforts have been made to tackle this, with some consequential improvement. However, some reports still lack clarity over the national comparators to be used. This leads to confusion about judgements on pupils' achievement in relation to their ages and abilities.

- **inspection reports should take every opportunity to help schools improve by identifying all their strengths and weaknesses in the main findings, including judgements about governance and management.**

This is an improved area, but a minority of reports still lack clear judgements relating to the management of the school.

## Notes

18. Independent schools that are members of the associations that constitute the Independent Schools Council (ISC) are inspected by the ISI, the operationally independent inspection arm of the Council. They also inspect schools from the Council of British Independent Schools in the European Community (COBISEC) and two such schools were inspected this year. Since September 2003, independent

schools that do not belong to the ISC have been inspected by Ofsted under section 163 of the Education Act 2003.

19. During the year, the DfES agreed to make the ISI a body approved by the Secretary of State for Education and Skills for the purpose of the inspection of ISC schools under section 163 of the Education Act 2002. Ofsted monitors the ISI inspections through the work of Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools (HMI).

20. Ofsted monitors 10% of ISI inspections and 15% of its reports. This is Ofsted's fifth report on the inspection of schools by the ISI and covers the three terms from autumn 2003 to summer 2004. During the year ISI inspected 190 schools. HMI monitored 22 inspections and 29 reports.

21. 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, 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.

22. A partnership with the NCSC has been established so that, where convenient, the ISI and the NCSC co-operate in the inspection of boarding. This happens in a minority of inspections. In April 2004, the work of the NCSC became the remit of a new inspectorate, the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI). For simplicity, reference is made to the NCSC throughout this report.