



**Office for Standards
in Education**

Independent Schools Council inspections 2002/03

HMI 2075

February 2004

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Document reference number: HMI 2075

Website: www.ofsted.gov.uk

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Introduction

1. Independent schools that are members of the associations that constitute the Independent Schools Council (ISC) are inspected by the Independent Schools Inspectorate (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 not belonging to the ISC have been inspected by Ofsted under section 163 of the Education Act 2003.
2. Under an agreement between the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and the ISC, Ofsted monitors the ISI inspections through Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools (HMI). This is Ofsted's fourth report on the inspection of schools by the ISI and covers the three terms from autumn 2002 to summer 2003.
3. 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 or 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.
4. Last year a partnership with the National Care Standards Commission (NCSC) was established, the intention being that ISI and the NCSC would co-operate in the inspection of boarding.
5. In the year under consideration, ISI inspected 198 schools. HMI monitored 18 inspections and 35 reports.

Main findings

- The ISI has consolidated its inspection system and, in some areas, has made improvements. The leadership and management of inspections continue to be good; there is now a better match between the experience of team inspectors and their roles, and inspection reports take better account of the views of parents. There are further improvements needed in reporting on governance and management, the editing of reports, the use of national comparator data and the consistency with which judgements are made in reports.
- The year has not been without its problems. In the spring term, the ISI had considerable difficulties in establishing teams for inspections. This led to inconvenience both for schools and inspectors but did not affect the overall quality of the inspections. Since then, procedures for establishing teams have been tightened.
- The quality of the inspections continues to be good. Of the 18 inspections monitored, 15 were good and three were satisfactory. This is a similar picture to last year.
- The quality of the reports is much more variable. Of the 35 reports monitored, 15 were good, 19 were satisfactory and one was unsatisfactory. Compared with last year, the number of unsatisfactory reports has been reduced, but the proportion of good reports has also declined.
- The agreement between the ISI and the NCSC on the inspection of boarding has come into effect, but the fact that NCSC does not publish its reports means that there is currently no guarantee that parents have access to comprehensive findings on boarding education and provision in these schools. This will shortly be rectified through legislation as the NCSC responsibilities are taken on by the new Commission for Social Care Inspection.
- The coverage of boarding in the ISI reports has varied over the last year but administrative problems have now been effectively addressed.
- The response to last year's Ofsted report has been generally satisfactory but there are a number of outstanding issues which need to be addressed as a matter of some urgency.

Recommendations

- a) 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

- 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.

b) To improve the quality of reports:

- the ISI should continue to ensure that the inspection process leads to consistent and comprehensive reporting on boarding education and provision
- more attention should be given to improving the quality of editing to bring about greater consistency in the structure and writing of reports
- there needs to be greater consistency in the use and interpretation of national comparator data against which to judge pupils' progress and attainment
- 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.

Responses to the recommendations of the third Ofsted report

6. 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.

The ISI needs to continue to ensure that inspection teams have the appropriate expertise and training to meet the requirements of the inspection.

7. There is now a better match between team inspectors and their roles.

Training should continue to emphasise the role of the reporting inspector as leader, manager and mentor, as exemplified in the best inspections.

8. Steps have been taken to address this point. Reporting inspectors are monitored and supported every three years and new reporting inspectors are monitored on their first inspection. Some team inspectors are inspecting more regularly and so gaining more expertise. Leadership is strong in many inspections.

The ISI needs to ensure that its review and editing procedures guarantee overall consistency and quality of reports.

9. The ISI has taken steps to improve editorial procedures. For example, editors have their work monitored once a year. Better descriptors for inspectors to comment on the analysis of examination results have been devised. However, at this stage, this has not yet improved the overall quality of all reports. Weak editing of some reports leads to cumbersome or unclear expression and technical errors.

The reporting on governance and management should be clear and unequivocal.

10. This is still an area for improvement. A significant minority of reports do not make sufficiently clear the judgement on governance and management. The work and influence of the governing body is not always covered fully.

The reports should give a clear indication of the nature of the school's intake and ensure that this is reflected in judgements on pupils' attainment at the end of each key stage.

11. There is inconsistent use of national comparators to provide benchmarks for the assessment of pupils' attainment in nearly one in three reports. This is sometimes compounded by a failure to refer to pupils' prior attainment when judging their progress.

Judgements should be made consistently throughout the report.

12. This is an area for continued improvement. Reports that are judged to be satisfactory overall can lack some internal consistency, for example between the aspect and subject sections.

The views of parents should be fully reflected and commented upon by inspectors.

13. This is an improved area and is done well in the good reports.

Conduct of inspections

14. Overall the quality of inspections is good and reflects further positive development. Of the 18 inspections monitored, 15 were judged to be of a good standard and three were satisfactory. This represents a similar picture to the previous year.

15. Effective initial planning and preparation by the reporting inspectors are positive features of all inspections. They help team inspectors in preparing for their own responsibilities. Pre-inspection commentaries generally provide clear and helpful information, based on the reporting inspector's initial visit and the information provided by the school. In the best examples, the pre-inspection commentary is well-prepared and identifies clear issues for the inspection. The commentary makes reference to parents' views and the perceived standards. The good quality of planning and preparation is particularly helpful on those occasions when inspectors have to join the inspection at short notice, a feature of several inspections.

16. Leadership is strong in most inspections. Reporting inspectors are experienced and some have valuable experience in leading inspections of maintained schools. They generally support team inspectors well, in particular the least experienced. Relationships with schools are usually handled both professionally and sensitively. In the best examples, reporting inspectors give considerable attention to building the confidence of team inspectors and there is continuing dialogue between the reporting inspector and the school.

17. Overall, inspections are well managed. In most respects, the monitoring by reporting inspectors provides good support for team inspectors and helps to assure the overall quality of the inspection. Most provide valuable additional practical training through the inspection process, particularly for less experienced team inspectors. Most reporting inspectors monitor the quality of the work of team inspectors well, assisting them in making judgements and preparing their reporting to the school. In good inspections the oral reporting on the various aspects and subjects being inspected is done well by the team inspectors and messages are delivered with structure and clarity. Team meetings are effectively managed, with all team inspectors contributing actively to the formation of judgements.

18. Some weaknesses highlighted by the last Ofsted report remain. For example, the quality of judgements on lesson observation forms is a weakness in a minority of inspections, sometimes despite the best efforts of reporting inspectors to provide support and guidance. Some judgements on the management of the school are not entirely resolved at the team's meetings and this is sometimes reflected in the final

school report. Weakness in oral reporting by some team inspectors is a feature of a minority of inspections, mostly because of inadequate preparation. In the best cases, the reporting inspector gives clear guidance on the structure to be followed. There were some weaknesses in understanding the necessary procedures for dealing with statutory requirements in three of the inspections monitored. For example, checks on the suitability of staff placed too much reliance on spoken assurances rather than checking the original evidence.

19. Other weaknesses related to the lack of reference to DfES guidance on the required staffing ratios, or requirements relating to fire checks. There are still some instances where team inspectors play too passive a role at team meetings. The late appointment of team members was a feature of some of the inspections. Whilst not affecting the overall quality of inspections, this placed additional pressures on the reporting inspector's time. In two inspections the necessary details required for the inspection had not been fully communicated to the team. Communications between the ISI and teams are effective in most instances, but occasionally they are not entirely successful. For example, the reporting inspector and team are not always fully informed about the background to the inspection and full details about previous inspections are not provided to support the necessary follow-up of issues.

Quality of reports

20. Checks were made on 35 reports. Of these, 16 were good, 18 were satisfactory and one was unsatisfactory. Whilst the proportion of good reports has declined, so has the proportion judged unsatisfactory.

21. The good reports exhibit a number of common strengths. They present a clear and convincing overview of the work of the school. They are thorough, comprehensive and refer to the full range of pupils, whatever their age and ability. They cover all the criteria in the ISI framework and make direct reference to the regulatory requirements. Each section contains judgements that are clear and concise; these build on the evidence and are well supported by appropriate examples. The reports are consistent throughout, for example in their choice and use of national benchmark data in assessing pupils' attainment. They do not shy away from making judgements which may be unpalatable to the school.

22. Good reports are structured well and sections are uniformly strong; for example, the subject reports all follow a common format which makes them both accessible and readable, whatever the audience. They are well written: succinct, informative and free of jargon. This is particularly true of the summary section. The editing is meticulous and ensures that the report is free from technical errors. There are also good links between the summary, main findings and the body of the report, and between each section. They respond to the issues raised in the previous inspection and their recommendations follow naturally from the evidence in the text. Good reports also take account of, and comment on, the issues raised in the parents' questionnaires and, increasingly, they consider the views of pupils as well. They endeavour to help schools to improve by offering helpful, practical recommendations for the future development of both the school and individual departments.

23. Satisfactory reports have a number of these strengths but also some weaknesses which detract from their overall effectiveness. They may lack internal consistency, for example, between the sections on aspects and on subjects. Thus, comments about assessment and recording can contradict what is said about reporting to parents; judgements about attainment do not always correspond to the data on public examinations. Sometimes, the recommendations lack supporting evidence and are not substantiated by what is written in the main body of the report. In some reports opportunities are missed to highlight overall strengths and weaknesses, including those relating to governance and management.

24. Weak editing of some reports leads to cumbersome or unclear expression and technical errors. Such reports lack clarity, precision and a common format. The expression is weak and the style is uneven, which can lead to vague and ambiguous writing. Sometimes this is because the ISI guidance on the use of grade descriptors has not been followed. Poor editing can also fail to detect too much trivial detail or unnecessary descriptive writing, and sections that are too brief or lack exemplification.

25. One report was deemed unsatisfactory because it exhibited too many of these weaknesses. There was a notable lack of clarity on major issues, including the omission of certain key points. In addition, some sections lacked a clear structure; others were too descriptive and lacked sufficient judgements. The quality of the writing was uneven, imprecise and confusing, and lacked technical accuracy.

26. The inconsistent use of national comparators to aid the assessment of pupils' attainment and progress remains a weakness in nearly one in three reports. This is sometimes compounded by a failure to refer to pupils' prior attainment when judging their progress. This can result in confusion over pupils' standards of work and achievements.

27. Nearly one in three reports has omissions of important elements. These include judgements about: improvement since the last inspection; provision for pupils with special educational needs or English as an additional language; and the progress made by individual groups of pupils, for example boys or the more able. Some reports fail to refer to some of the statutory requirements.

28. Finally, one in five reports does not always make clear judgements, notably concerning governance and management. This even applies in reports where judgements on other matters are unequivocal.

Inspection and reporting of boarding provision

29. Major changes have been implemented this year in the inspection of boarding. This results from the partnership agreement between the ISC and the NCSC for the inspection of boarding schools in membership of the ISC. This agreement envisages ISI and NCSC inspections of boarding schools occurring simultaneously, with the inspections of national minimum standards for boarding being conducted by the NCSC. To strengthen this link, Boarding Sector Professional Inspectors (BSPI) have been selected from staff in the boarding sector for their expertise and experience.

They have been trained to work alongside NCSC staff as part of the NCSC inspection.

30. The agreement sets out what is to be expected if the ISI and NCSC are partners in joint inspection and what is to be expected if they are not. If no joint inspection occurs, the agreement envisages that the NCSC boarding standards report would be available to parents on application. The ISI report would then offer evaluation of the contribution of boarding to pupils' education and general development, as well as a view about the extent to which issues arising from previous inspections have been addressed. However, there is no statutory power for the NCSC to publish their reports and this restriction on publication has led to considerable unevenness in the reporting of boarding. There is currently no guarantee that parents have access to comprehensive findings on boarding education and provision.

31. If joint inspection occurs, the ISI inspectors work alongside the NCSC inspectors to ensure that, through the two reports, there will be comprehensive reporting on the extent to which a school meets the national minimum standards for boarding, and an evaluation of the quality of the boarding experience.

32. After some early problems with liaison, the inspection system has settled down and teams have been working well together. Schools that have had joint inspections have appreciated them. In a small school, however, there can be considerable pressure on boarding personnel if they are also full-time teachers.

33. The extent of coverage of boarding in the ISI reports has varied over the last year. The proformas, which are meant to inform readers what to expect in the body of the report, have varied in the consistency of the information provided and what has followed in the text has not always matched the statement of intent. Where it has been possible to compare full NCSC reports with the summaries included in the ISI reports, the latter have been succinct, fair and relevant, and they accurately reflect the overall findings of the NCSC report.

34. The NCSC's inability to publish their reports will shortly be rectified through legislation as its responsibilities are taken on by the new Commission for Social Care Inspection. Administrative problems have now been effectively addressed by the ISI.