

Alexandra House
33 Kingsway
London WC2B 6SE

T 08456 40 40 40
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

Direct T 020 7421 6762
Direct F 020 7421 6546
christine.gilbert@ofsted.gov.uk



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Dr Roy Long
Coordinating Inspector
School Inspection Service
15 Fishpond Close
Denton
Northamptonshire NN7 1EE

Christine Gilbert
Her Majesty's Chief Inspector

Dear Roy,

Annual report on the quality of School Inspection Service inspections and reports 2006–07

As you know, we have agreed to send you a letter summarising Ofsted's monitoring of inspections and reports from the School Inspection Service this year. In doing so, I would like to take the opportunity to thank you and your inspectors for their openness and professionalism, which enabled Her Majesty's Inspectors to conduct their monitoring duties efficiently. I would also like to extend our thanks to the schools of the Focus Learning Trust. I have pleasure in sending you the following summary, a copy of which will also be sent to the Department for Children, Schools and Families and published on Ofsted's website.

Introduction

The School Inspection Service (SIS) is recognised by the Secretary of State as an approved body for the purposes of inspecting registered independent schools affiliated to the Focus Learning Trust (FLT), under section 162A(1) of the Education Act 2002. SIS maintains independence from the member schools and the FLT, and all inspections are carried out by professional inspectors, almost all of whom have served as Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools (HMI). The framework for the inspection of schools affiliated to the FLT includes effective reporting on the registration standards as set out in The Education (Independent School Standards) (England) Regulations 2003.

The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) requires Ofsted to monitor the quality of SIS inspections, reports and inspection teams, and to report regularly to the DCSF. There are currently 26 schools in England affiliated to the FLT, seven of which have been inspected since September 2006. Six of these inspections have been monitored by HMI, using three overall judgement descriptors: good, satisfactory, shortcomings. This is Ofsted's first annual report on the work of the SIS.

Quality of inspections

All the inspections monitored by HMI were judged to be of good quality and no areas were noted for development. This is a very positive outcome for SIS in its first year of operation. Inspections were well organised and the reporting inspectors (RI) prepared detailed and clear pre-inspection information for the inspection teams. A very positive feature of inspections was the good communication with schools established by the teams to ensure that emerging issues were shared with school management. Schools reported favourably to HMI on this aspect of contact with the team. HMI noted that the teams gathered a good range of evidence which was carefully analysed to reach secure judgements about the schools. Lesson observations were properly evaluated and appropriate conclusions drawn to help the schools identify strengths and weaknesses in teaching. The regulatory checks were found by HMI to be rigorous. On several monitoring visits the excellent professional conduct of the team was particularly noted by HMI, and schools have commented that inspectors are both courteous and supportive.

Quality of reports

HMI have read all the reports produced by SIS this year. All are well written, appropriate for the audience and have clear and consistent judgements throughout. The overall conclusions in the reports provide fair and accurate summaries of their content. A number of minor points have been raised with SIS to do with the procedures to ensure that reports refer to safeguarding issues even when the school is fully compliant with DCSF regulations, that the language of the report is free from jargon and does not contain statements couched as advice rather than as judgements. SIS has already attended to these issues through guidance to their quality assurance report-readers.

Support provided by the inspectorate

The inspectorate gives good support. Inspectors reported favourably on the good quality of the training opportunities provided by SIS. HMI praised inspectors' thorough knowledge of the framework and their familiarity with the regulations for independent schools, and the clear guidance produced by SIS. SIS builds good teams for its inspections and quality assurance visits are carried out by an experienced coordinating inspector. Administrative procedures were completed efficiently; schools and inspection teams reported that they received documentation in good time. Schools understood the inspection process clearly, although one school reported that they would have liked more information about the professional background of the inspectors prior to the inspection. Unavoidable circumstances have occasionally resulted in late changes to inspection teams, and this has been well managed by SIS, ensuring that all inspections were carried out on schedule with suitable teams.

SIS has prepared very clear documentation for all aspects of the inspection. The framework, guidance and forms are well constructed. The inspectors particularly like the format of the evidence forms, which allows flexibility in recording evidence, and HMI found these to be fit for purpose. The original SIS framework was designed around a six-year cycle with a lengthy period of notice to schools. SIS is to be congratulated for moving swiftly from this to a three-year cycle with less than a week's notice to schools. This brings its timescales into line with those of Ofsted inspections.

SIS inspections differ from Ofsted inspections in that they also report on aspects of leadership and management which are not part of The Education (Independent Schools Standards) (England) Regulations 2003, and inspection reports include an appendix on aspects of the school's ethos written by a lay inspector. These additional elements are required by FLT to provide information for 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 of the Focus Learning Trust.

Yrs sincerely,

Christine

Christine Gilbert