

INSIDE ISI INSPECTIONS

A condensed read for senior leaders and governors.
For the complete analysis, see the full report.

Updated to include ISI's September 2026 withdrawal
of the "significant strength" label.

What 394 routine inspections tell senior leaders about the independent sector.

THE HEADLINE FINDING



Most independent schools clear the bar. The minority that miss it tend to stumble in the same places.

Of the 394 routine inspection reports ISI published between 15 May 2025 and 1 April 2026, 345 schools (87.6%) met all standards. The remaining 49, roughly one school in eight (12.4%), had at least one standard not met. The pattern in those 49 is consistent. Forty-six fell short on welfare or safeguarding. Four fell short on quality of education. Three were caught by leadership only, almost always around complaints handling or information disclosure. Every school met the standard on social and economic education.

The proprietor is responsible, by design, for ensuring all standards are met. So a Section 3 or safeguarding failure is also, in regulatory terms, a leadership and governance failure. Every “not all met” report carries a Section 1 finding for that reason.

ISI awarded the phrase “significant strength” sparingly. It appears 80 times across 77 reports, with three schools receiving the accolade twice in the same inspection. That is just under one in five inspected schools. The accolade rewarded distinctive practice. It clusters around teaching and learning (24), personal development (15), the parts of school life that sit beyond the timetable (15), specific provision for particular cohorts (11), and leadership and oversight (4). The remaining 11 are one-off accolades that fit none of these groups.

Inspectors give improvement direction in two ways. Action points appear only when standards fail. Across the 49 reports with unmet standards, 177 school-specific action points concentrate on attendance and registers (44), policies and statutory documentation (44), safeguarding records and process (39), health and safety (29), and premises (12). Recommended next steps appear in every report. The 722 next steps split between procedural directions (policies and documentation lead at 165) and educational ones (curriculum and teaching at 143, assessment at 80, careers at 53).

ISI withdrew the “significant strength” label in September 2026. Inspectors continue to describe what works in a school and what does not; the label that singled out the strongest examples has gone. The 80 awards in this briefing are the final record of that label. Everything else in an inspection report, and everything else in this analysis, is unchanged.

“Schools trip on paperwork. They are praised for teaching. The same inspection sees both.”

FROM THE FULL REPORT

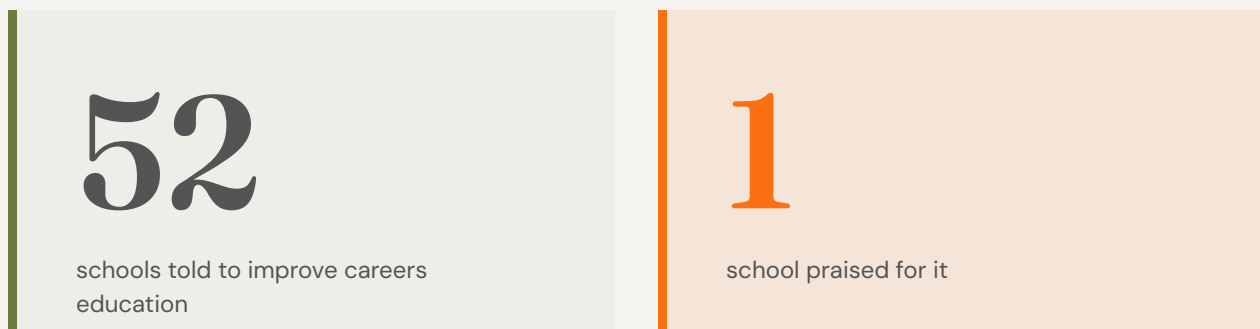
THREE FINDINGS WORTH DWELLING ON

Three numbers from the dataset are worth calling out separately.

The careers gap

ISI told 52 schools to improve their careers education. It praised one. That ratio is the most lopsided in the data.

The most lopsided ratio in the data



ISI is repeatedly asking schools to start careers education earlier than schools currently start it. The maintained sector has been doing structured careers education from Year 7 under the Gatsby benchmarks for several years. The independent sector is catching up, and ISI is documenting that catching up.

Argyle House School: “strengthen the careers guidance for pupils in Years 7 and 8 so that they are prepared effectively to make informed choices about future career opportunities”.

Bickley Park School: “ensure that the oldest pupils, in Years 7 and 8, gain a secure, age-appropriate understanding of a broad range of career pathways available to them”.

The stretch question

Twenty-seven reports flagged that the most able pupils are not being stretched. That is the single most recurring teaching pattern in this year’s reports. The phrasing varies, the issue is the same. Pupils with higher prior attainment are being supported well, and extended less consistently into more complex application of what they already know. Schools that think of themselves as inclusive may be doing well by the middle of the cohort and less well by the top.

The remedy that is implied is a teacher-level move: more deliberate identification, in the lesson, of when individual pupils are ready to do something more demanding with what they already know.

The curriculum pattern

Curriculum and teaching attracts more recommended next steps than any other educational theme (143), and more significant strengths than any other theme (24). The most-praised area was also the most-challenged. The schools that earned the “significant strength” accolade had an explicit account of why their curriculum was designed the way it is. The schools that earn the next-step direction have something legible to improve: stretch, feedback, assessment, or coherence across year groups.

WHAT GOOD PRACTICE LOOKS LIKE

ISI used “significant strength” sparingly. 80 times across 77 reports, in 19.5% of inspected schools.

Three schools received the accolade twice in the same inspection: Blundell’s School, South Hampstead High School GDST, and The Leys School. The accolade clustered around five areas of school life, with a handful of one-offs outside them.

Significant strengths by cluster

80 awards across 77 reports · five clusters covered 69 · the final year of the label



Read across the clusters and four observations emerge.

First, the accolade rewarded distinctiveness. The schools singled out were almost always doing one or two things very well, with an explicit account of how and why. Uniform competence across all areas did not earn the accolade. A signature programme did.

Second, the accolade rewarded schools that could describe what they do, why they do it, and what changes for individual pupils because of it. Inspectors look for the same story across lessons, documents, pupil voice and outcomes. Schools whose distinctive practice is implicit may be doing the work without getting the credit in the document parents will read.

Third, what does not appear in this dataset is also informative. No significant strength this year went to traditional academic outcomes: exam results or university destinations. Bronte School’s accolade for “pupils’ academic outcomes” is the closest, and it is unusual.

Fourth, this dataset cannot be added to. ISI withdrew the label in September 2026. Inspectors continue to describe distinctive practice in the narrative of a report, so what this page shows about the practice they singled out has not stopped being relevant. What has gone is the designation that made the strongest examples countable, and quotable. These 80 are the last set that can be counted, and the last a school could lift from its report word for word.

“Uniform competence did not earn the accolade. A signature programme did.”

THE COMPLIANCE PICTURE, IN BRIEF

Where standards fail, the patterns are knowable in advance.

Of the 49 reports with at least one unmet standard, 35 fall short on Section 3 (physical and mental health) and 37 on the safeguarding section. Section 1 is engaged in every case because the proprietor is responsible by design. Section 4 is unbroken across the year.

Where standards are not met

49 REPORTS

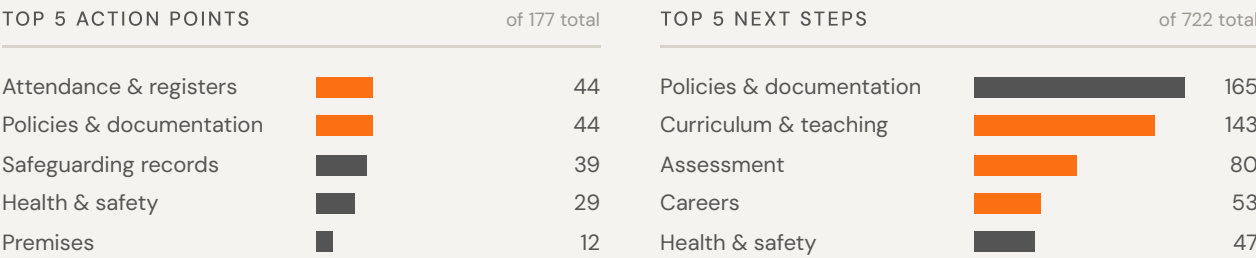


Section 1 engages in every case because the proprietor is responsible for ensuring all standards are met.

Five themes account for 129 of the 177 action points. What is largely absent from the action-point data is teaching, learning, and pupil outcomes. Of 177 bullets, only seven concern curriculum and teaching, and only eight concern assessment. When ISI finds standards not met, the gap is almost always in the procedural infrastructure that supports learning. The learning itself is rarely the issue behind an unmet standard.

Two reads, same schools.

ACTION POINTS CONCENTRATE ON PROCEDURAL COMPLIANCE. NEXT STEPS ADD THE EDUCATIONAL DIRECTION.



129 of 177 action points sit in these five themes. Shared scale 0 – 165 across both panels.

For leaders, the practical implication is sharp. The dozen recurring compliance issues that account for most failures are catalogued in the full report. An internal audit against that short list, run annually and triggered by changes in statutory guidance, would have caught most of this year’s “not all met” outcomes before ISI did.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERS

A handful of questions worth putting on a leadership or governance agenda this term, drawn from section 7 of the full report.

FOR THE SENIOR LEADERSHIP TEAM

- 01 If our next inspection produced a “Recommended next steps” list, which three bullets are most likely to appear? What is our internal evidence for each, and what would close the gap before then?
- 02 Where in our school is the most able cohort being stretched, and where is it being supported but not extended? How do we know?
- 03 Our next report will describe what we do well without the “significant strength” label. Which of our practices would an inspector single out in the narrative, and what evidence would they see?
- 04 What does our careers provision look like in Key Stage 3?

FOR GOVERNANCE

- 05 Of the five compliance themes that account for most unmet standards, which has been audited internally in the past twelve months? Who owns each audit? Where is the evidence reviewed?
- 06 What is the school’s distinctive offer, articulated in two sentences, and what evidence do we hold that it is delivered as advertised? Could a thoughtful external observer identify it from our website, our policies, and a day’s observation?

“If your school is sitting comfortably in the middle, the question to ask is what would need to change for an inspector to name something you do as genuinely impactful.”

A CLOSING THOUGHT

Two stories about the same schools. ISI inspects both.

The compliance story is governed by statutory guidance and changes incrementally each year. The best-practice story is governed by inspector judgement and rewards distinctive practice that the inspector can see, name, and evidence in the report. The label that marked the strongest examples was withdrawn in September 2026. The judgement behind it was not.

A school can meet the compliance baseline and pass inspection. A school can far exceed it and still receive recommended next steps about register codes and policy publication dates. Both are inspected in parallel and reported in parallel.

For senior leaders preparing for inspection, refining strategy in light of the year's findings, or benchmarking against peer schools, the practical implication is to read both sides of your own school with the same seriousness ISI applies to each.

What this summary leaves out

This briefing carries the spine of the year's data. The full report carries the detail that turns a useful read into something a leader can act on.

Sections 3 to 5 break out the 722 recommended next steps, the 80 significant strengths cluster by cluster, the final set to carry that label, and the 177 action points with the four recurring failure patterns and the verbatim phrases ISI uses. Section 6 tracks the themes worth tracking: mental health, technology, EDI, pupil voice, AI, and digital strategy. Section 7 carries the full set of SLT and governance prompts alongside the three-part preparation audit.

The appendix carries the 29 themes, the alphabetical list of all 394 schools, and a pre-inspection audit checklist designed to drop into a board pack. The not-met rate broken down by school type, phase, and region is in section 5, so you can see how schools like yours did.

GET THE FULL REPORT

Fifty pages. Every next step, action point and significant strength, tagged and counted. Not-met rates by type, phase and region. The phrases ISI uses when it praises and when it directs. A board-ready pre-inspection checklist. And the final record of a label ISI has now withdrawn.

azimuth.org.uk/inside-isi-inspections

NEXT STEP

For senior leaders preparing for inspection, refining strategy in light of the year's findings, or benchmarking against peers in the same region or phase, the full report is the document. Version 3 records ISI's September 2026 withdrawal of the "significant strength" label and closes the dataset it produced.

The full report is at azimuth.org.uk/inside-isi-inspections. For a conversation about how this year's findings apply to your school in particular, write to hello@azimuth.org.uk.

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