ISI Independent Schools Inspectorate

School inspection report

9 to 11 June 2026

Unicorn School

238 Kew Road

Richmond

TW9 3JX

The Independent Schools Inspectorate is appointed by the Department for Education to inspect association independent schools in England. Our inspections report on the extent to which the statutory Independent School Standards and other applicable regulatory requirements are met, collectively referred to in this report as 'the Standards'.

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Summary of inspection findings

1. Governors and leaders provide clear direction for the school's development. They work collaboratively to ensure that Standards are met consistently and that the effectiveness of pupils' education and promotion of their wellbeing remain central to decision-making.

2. Risk assessment and management are typically effective. However, at the start of the inspection, effective action had not been taken to mitigate the potential risk that had been identified with regard to the way in which one window could be opened. Leaders rectified this issue before the end of the inspection.

3. Leaders promote the school's ethos and values successfully through the broad curriculum and activities that support pupils' development. Leaders encourage creativity across the curriculum through art, music and drama and provide pupils with a suitable extra-curricular programme. Leaders successfully support pupils to discover new talents and interests.

4. Teaching is effective and supports pupils to make good progress across the curriculum. Teachers have secure subject knowledge, which they use to plan engaging lessons. Pupils who have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) are quickly identified and supported through dedicated strategies that are shared with staff.

5. When required, staff provide pupils who speak English as an additional language (EAL) with additional support that enables them to develop and apply their language skills effectively.

6. Leaders in the early years create a nurturing and stimulating environment appropriate to children's needs. Staff plan activities that promote curiosity, independence and confidence. Children benefit from caring relationships with adults so that they feel safe and secure. As a result, children learn and develop well. They are well prepared for the next stage of their education.

7. Leaders ensure that effective pastoral support is in place, with appropriately trained staff able to support pupils' social, emotional and mental health needs. The personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) curriculum supports pupils' personal development, and the relationships and sex education (RSE) curriculum develops pupils' understanding of healthy relationships in an age-appropriate way.

8. Leaders oversee effective health and safety arrangements and ensure that the premises are suitable and well maintained.

9. Leaders ensure that pupils develop a meaningful understanding of British values. Leaders promote equality, diversity and inclusion through a culture of kindness and respect embedded in the school's 'Unicorn code'. Pupils develop awareness and respect for people from backgrounds and cultures that are different to their own.

10. Leaders ensure that pupils develop an appropriate understanding of social and economic wellbeing and learn how they can contribute positively to society. Pupils explore and discuss current affairs in a non-partisan way and visit well-known landmarks. However, teaching does not develop pupils' knowledge of British institutions and their role in British society as effectively as possible.

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11. Staff and governors receive appropriate training so that they understand their safeguarding responsibilities. Leaders and staff are vigilant in noticing and sharing concerns. The safeguarding team maintains and monitors detailed safeguarding records and, when appropriate, refers concerns to external agencies in a timely fashion so that appropriate support can be given to pupils and families. The safeguarding policy is updated annually. However, at the start of the inspection, this policy did not reflect all recent changes to current statutory guidance and referenced an out-of-date document. Leaders rectified this before the end of the inspection.

The extent to which the school meets the Standards

- Standards relating to leadership and management, and governance are met.
- Standards relating to the quality of education, training and recreation are met.
- Standards relating to pupils' physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing are met.
- Standards relating to pupils' social and economic education and contribution to society are met.
- Standards relating to safeguarding are met.

Recommended next steps

Leaders should:

- ensure that the safeguarding policy consistently reflects any changes to statutory guidance
- strengthen the monitoring of risk assessments so that effective action is consistently taken to address potential risks
- ensure that teaching develops pupils' knowledge of British institutions and their role in British society as effectively as possible.

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Section 1: Leadership and management, and governance

12. Governors maintain a high level of engagement with the school that provides them with a well-informed understanding of the school's operation. Governors visit the school regularly and receive informative reports at termly governors' meetings. Such understanding helps them provide a balance of support and challenge to senior leaders so that Standards are met consistently.

13. Leaders actively promote pupils' wellbeing and foster an inclusive community where pupils can be valued for their individual personality and talents. Leaders champion the pupil-led 'smiley people' initiative that underpins a positive, supportive community in which pupils feel valued, listened to, and included. Additionally, leaders take proactive actions such as creating calm zones for pupils.

14. Leaders ensure that the school meets the requirements of the Equality Act 2010. They maintain and regularly review a suitable accessibility plan that identifies actions designed to make the curriculum and premises as accessible as possible. For example, leaders support teachers and pupils in learning a sign language to aid them in their support of particular children and pupils.

15. Leaders have the appropriate skills and knowledge to fulfil their roles effectively. They are aspirational for pupils and ensure that opportunities are conducive to developing pupils' academic and pastoral skills. Leaders ensure that the taught curriculum develops pupils' creativity and encourages them to think. This is supplemented by a varied enrichment programme which includes a regular carousel of activities that develop pupils' skills and experiences, such as sewing, horse-riding and sailing. Effective pastoral systems are implemented consistently so that pupils receive appropriate care and support when they need it. As a result, leaders promote the school's aims to create a caring community so that pupils are happy and become confident and independent.

16. Leaders in the early years understand the regulatory requirements for the early years. This is reflected in their planning and organisation of the setting, where the development and wellbeing of children is a priority. Governors monitor early years provision through their regular visits.

17. Leaders gather feedback from pupils, parents and staff as part of their self-evaluation, in order to help them understand the school's most successful aspects and where it could develop further. A detailed school development plan outlines which aspects of the provision leaders intend to improve. Leaders monitor the progress towards the targets set in the school development plan and report regularly to governors about this. Leaders ensure that staff are aware of any changes to statutory requirements, including through training and regular updates. Policies and procedures are reviewed and updated annually.

18. Leaders ensure that all required information about the school is provided to parents through the school website, including an extensive selection of policies. Parents receive appropriate feedback on the progress and attainment of their child through detailed reports provided twice a year. These include comments on their child's attitudes and achievements across the range of subjects. Additionally, parents are also able to meet with staff to discuss their child's progress twice yearly.

19. Leaders liaise effectively with a range of external agencies to help them support children's social and physical development, mental health and attendance. They provide the local authority with the necessary information about how any funding is used to support pupils who have an education, health and care plan (EHC plan). Leaders inform the local authority whenever pupils leave or join the school at non-standard times of transition.

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20. Risk assessment procedures are typically effective. Leaders ensure that potential risks are regularly assessed and in most cases take suitable actions to mitigate identified risks. However, leaders' monitoring of risk assessments does not always ensure that effective actions are taken to reduce or remove risks that have been identified. In particular, when the inspection commenced, action had not been taken to mitigate a potential risk relating to the way in which one window could be opened. Leaders rectified this issue effectively during the inspection.

21. Leaders are proactive in their approach to managing complaints. The complaints policy is clear and implemented in a suitable manner within appropriate timescales. Details of all complaints and any actions taken in response in response are recorded in a suitable complaints log. There are appropriate arrangements in place to ensure that any stage three panel hearing is convened appropriately.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to leadership and management, and governance

22. All the relevant Standards are met.

Section 2: Quality of education, training and recreation

23. Pupils access a broad curriculum designed to enable them to develop a range of skills and knowledge methodically across a variety of subjects. Leaders plan lessons and activities designed to develop pupils' ability to think critically and develop their understanding through application of previous and emerging subject knowledge. The curriculum is appropriate to pupils' age and ability and is planned to enable continuity and progression within and across subjects, so that pupils become more confident in their skills and understanding.

24. Staff in the early years plan lessons effectively so that they offer appropriate opportunities for teacher-directed and child-initiated activities. Staff engage children with well-planned and chosen learning activities so that they are curious and keen to learn. Staff develop children's communication and language skills through activities that require them to share their thoughts and ideas, such as when describing the size, colour and shape of a caterpillar they have painted, or when explaining to visitors that a fort they have built is symmetrical.

25. Teachers plan lessons that are suitable to the age and ability of the pupils they teach. Teachers know their pupils well and understand what they need. Teachers ensure that a variety of resources to support learning, such as vocabulary wheels, technology and practical resources to model and develop ideas, are used effectively when appropriate. Staff encourage pupils to extend their vocabulary and, for example, use appropriate figurative speech when writing creatively. Teachers encourage pupils to apply independent thought to solve problems, such as when making models to demonstrate forces in science, recording their efforts and reviewing where improvements can be made. Pupils respond well to this approach and engage in their learning with interest.

26. Teachers' subject knowledge and teaching methodology contributes positively to the progress that pupils make. Teachers use their specialist knowledge to inform and engage pupils so that they become enthusiastic and self-motivated learners. Teachers help pupils build upon their prior learning, refining their subject-specific skills and developing their expression of creativity and reasoning skills, such as when describing how to programme an item to move across a screen in computing or explaining why certain three-dimensional shapes would not be strong enough to be used as bridges. As a result, pupils gain confident subject knowledge and make good progress. They achieve successful entry to a wide range of academically selective senior schools, often with scholarships.

27. Teachers ensure that their teaching is inclusive and does not undermine British values. Pupils learn languages spoken by other pupils, such as Turkish and Bulgarian. Explanations and examples often have specific relevance to the school community, such as the challenges faced by those who are neurodiverse and the different composition of families.

28. Leaders ensure the early identification of pupils who have SEND. Pupils are assessed and monitored on entry to the school and regularly reviewed by their teachers. Leaders create individual learning plans (ILPs), known as 'pupil profiles', which guide staff in providing consistent support and appropriate challenge. When appropriate, staff make effective adjustments to their teaching, such as through the use of laptops, extra time and touch typing, to support pupils' learning and participation. As a result, pupils who have SEND make good progress in their learning.

29. Leaders assess any support required by pupils who speak English as an additional language (EAL) effectively. They provide targeted support to pupils who speak EAL when required, such as through the use of subject vocabulary lists, games and sign language, to help develop language understanding. As a result, pupils who speak EAL make good progress in their English.

30. Leaders maintain effective oversight of pupils' progress and attainment. Teachers carefully monitor and analyse the results of regular assessments and use them to inform planning so that activities can be adapted to help pupils make good progress across all subjects.

31. Leaders provide pupils with a varied range of clubs and enrichment opportunities to develop new skills and interests. Pupils are offered a choice from a selection of clubs each evening and a carousel programme of activities each Thursday enables pupils to enjoy sporting and creative experiences that develop their talents in areas such as golf, padel, tennis, sailing, horse-riding, art, cookery and sewing.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to the quality of education, training and recreation

32. All the relevant Standards are met.

Section 3: Pupils' physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing

33. Pupils' emotional and physical wellbeing is promoted effectively through the school's pastoral provision. Leaders and staff encourage pupils to share any concerns in worry boxes or directly with staff, ensuring that they are confident to do so. Leaders ensure that staff or the school listener will follow up and offer support. Staff know the pupils well and are alert to changes in mood and behaviour. Through different initiatives such as 'wellbeing Wednesday' and 'rise and ready', pupils learn how to practise yoga and mindfulness techniques and prepare themselves mentally for the day ahead.

34. Teachers ensure that children learn about relationships and sex education (RSE) appropriate to their age and maturity. Teachers follow statutory guidance to ensure that topics, such as puberty, are covered in appropriate ways for the pupils' stages of development. Pupils learn about features of positive and respectful relationships and signs that might indicate unhealthy aspects of these.

35. The school's 'Unicorn code' focuses on the importance and value of kindness and inclusivity and of being one's 'best self'. Pupils are encouraged to be confident about taking on new challenges and to be reflective. Pupils are supported in making presentations on topics of importance to them. They are rewarded with spot prizes, house points and 'star of the week' awards in recognition of their kindness, effort and achievement. Pupils develop independence, confidence and resilience through taking on challenges, such as when on residential trips. As a result, pupils develop self-esteem and self-confidence.

36. The PSHE programme develops pupils' understanding of the importance of looking after their own physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing, and about features of healthy lifestyles. Pupils learn about managing their own emotions and understand how to regulate themselves when they become anxious or upset. Staff encourage pupils to make healthy dietary choices at lunchtime.

37. Pupils develop their spiritual awareness through exploring nature, such as watching flowers they have planted grow, and learning how listening to music can be calming. Pupils learn about the importance of rest and sleep and what they can do to relax and self-regulate. Pupils learn about a range of faiths and the importance of respecting people with different beliefs to their own.

38. Leaders in the early years ensure that children engage in regular exercise, through free play and physical education (PE) lessons, to support their physical development. For example, climbing apparatus, cargo nets and tricycles encourage children to take risks and develop different ways of moving. Specialist teaching in swimming and PE develops children's physical skills such as their fine- and gross-motor skills.

39. Older pupils participate in a PE programme and range of sports that help develop their fitness, teamworking skills, strength and co-ordination. Pupils learn the benefits of regular exercise for keeping fit and healthy. Pupils develop their understanding of passing and space in team sports such as netball and football and their hand-eye co-ordination and use of bats and sticks in cricket and hockey. Pupils learn how to look after themselves during physical activity, for example by warming up before exercise to protect their muscles and bending their knees when landing after jumping from a height to protect their joints and prevent injuries.

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40. Leaders and staff model the school's values of kindness, politeness and respect and communicate clear expectations about pupils' behaviour. Pupils know what is expected of them and what rewards and consequences may be given for their behaviour. Pupils are encouraged to reflect on what they have done and consider alternative actions they could have taken, should they have made poor behavioural choices. As a result, behaviour is well managed, and pupils are respectful and polite.

41. Leaders have an effective anti-bullying strategy that pupils understand. Pupils know the key members of staff who oversee bullying prevention and learn to share their concerns with an adult rather than retaliate should any poor behaviour or bullying be aimed at them. Leaders take swift and proactive action when unkindness arises so that pupils are appropriately supported.

42. Leaders ensure that pupils are appropriately supervised at breaktimes, on trips and when moving around the school. Pupils can locate a member of staff when needed. In the early years, staff-to-child ratios are maintained in accordance with statutory requirements. As a result, supervision is effective.

43. The school maintains suitable admission and attendance registers. Leaders actively promote the importance of high attendance. They monitor attendance figures and proactively liaise with local agencies to support families where pupils' attendance falls below acceptable levels. Leaders understand their responsibility to report attendance concerns when key thresholds are breached.

44. Health and safety arrangements are effective. Leaders maintain the premises well and ensure that it is cleaned regularly. Leaders support the health and safety of different areas of the school by arranging regular checks and maintenance and taking actions such as adding astroturf to the playground to create softer play areas. Indoor and outdoor lighting is suitable, and the school site is protected by entry systems and appropriate closed-circuit television (CCTV) monitoring. Regular fire and lockdown drills are carried out so that pupils are familiar with what they need to do in the event of an emergency.

45. Leaders ensure that pupils receive effective first aid should they become injured or feel unwell. Staff have appropriate first aid training and qualifications, including paediatric first aid for those working in the early years. The school has a suitable medical room.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to pupils' physical and mental health and emotional wellbeing

46. All the relevant Standards are met.

Section 4: Pupils' social and economic education and contribution to society

47. Leaders ensure that pupils develop a meaningful understanding of British values, encouraging pupils to compare them to the school's own 'Unicorn code'. Pupils learn about the importance of the rule of law and individual freedom and the importance of showing tolerance and respect for others whose cultural backgrounds, faiths and beliefs differ from their own. Pupils develop their understanding that laws guide behaviours and are there to protect the community and people within it.

48. Leaders further promote respect for people who are protected under the Equality Act 2010 and develop their understanding and appreciation of diversity. Such learning is advanced through a well-planned PSHE curriculum and the use of the library and its collection of books, which challenge stereotypes and promote tolerance and inclusion. Pupils learn about 'standing up and speaking out' and challenging unkindness. They invite others to join their games and look to befriend those pupils who are lonely on the buddy benches. Staff support children in learning different languages to help develop respect for people with diverse geographical and cultural backgrounds. As a result, pupils demonstrate respectful and tolerant relationships and attitudes towards others.

49. Leaders in the early years develop children's understanding of social responsibility effectively. Children go out on regular litter-picking walks, use recycled materials to make pictures of the plants they are growing and take on the role of 'table captains' as they take turns to clear up after snack time. Older pupils develop their sense of social responsibility through roles as 'eco-warriors', where they actively promote sustainability, recycling and the conservation of energy within the school.

50. Staff support children in the early years to become independent readers and writers so that they can assimilate and share information by themselves. Staff help pupils to manage their possessions so that they are adequately prepared for their transition to Year 1. Children visit their next classroom to develop familiarity with their next teacher and their expectations, and to familiarise themselves with the physical area, in support of their progression to their next class.

51. Older pupils participate in a junior citizenship programme that develops their independence and helps prepare them suitably for their transfer to their next school. The junior citizenship programme also teaches pupils first aid skills and provides them with guidance about how they can use public transport safely. Pupils are supported in developing their examination technique and practise interview and presentation skills to support them with entry processes for senior schools.

52. Leaders ensure that pupils develop relevant economic and financial knowledge and understanding to help them prepare for their future lives. Children in the early years use pretend money in their role play and understand the idea that things can be bought when money is exchanged. Older pupils learn about budgeting when planning stalls for the school fair, that houses can be bought over time with a mortgage and that money can grow when interest is added after saving in a bank.

53. Staff provide older pupils with an appropriate early insight into the careers that may be open to them. Visiting speakers share their experiences of the work they do as, for instance, engineers, lawyers and physicists. Focused workshops on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) help develop career-specific skills.

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54. Leaders provide pupils with the opportunity to take on a wide range of leadership positions and act on behalf of others. Pupils act as members of the 'pupil parliament' and the school council, or as 'smiley people', whose task is to spread happiness and seek to include others, fostering a sense of belonging. Leaders listen to pupils' views and take them into account in their decision-making, such as by refurbishing a playground. Pupils also have appropriate opportunities to engage with and contribute to the local community. Pupils experience regular visits to nearby Kew Gardens, raise funds to plant trees and sing at local care homes.

55. Staff enable pupils to develop some knowledge of British institutions. For example, pupils visit the Houses of Parliament, museums and art galleries. However, teaching does not develop pupils' knowledge and awareness of British institutions and their contribution to British society as effectively as possible.

56. Pupils learn that they can express their opinion and preferences through the democratic process, providing opportunities for them to vote for representatives on the school council and for songs at assembly and the school disco. As a result, pupils understand that they can make a positive contribution to decisions but that democratic decisions are made that reflect the majority viewpoint. Pupils explore current affairs and learn about the democratic selection of members of parliament in general and by-elections and that the party with the majority would form a government or lead a council. Leaders ensure that a balanced and impartial perspective is presented on political issues raised in such discussions.

57. Leaders and staff provide pupils with opportunities to discuss and engage with current affairs and the ethical issues that they might raise. Pupils learn that there are two sides to every story and that different media may present news stories or perspectives in a biased manner. Pupils discuss issues such as whether politics and football should overlap, whether any countries should be excluded from competing based on their human rights record and contribution to international relations and whether there are positive or negative results from using artificial intelligence. Pupils learn to explore different viewpoints and form their own opinion, creating and delivering presentations on topics such as how we should help those affected by homelessness, women's rights and why we should stop using palm oil.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to pupils' social and economic education and contribution to society

58. All the relevant Standards are met.

Safeguarding

59. Governors maintain effective oversight of safeguarding. They receive training to develop their knowledge and understanding and offer support and challenge to leaders to ensure that safeguarding is prioritised and effective. Governors regularly review the school's safeguarding arrangements and procedures, including through an annual audit, and ensure that leaders act on any feedback from the local authority. As a result, a robust culture is established where safeguarding matters are well considered.

60. Leaders with responsibility for safeguarding attend regular training for their role and often liaise with external agencies for advice and guidance.

61. Leaders ensure that a detailed safeguarding policy provides clear information about identifying, recording and reporting concerns about pupils. The policy is updated annually. However, when the inspection began, the policy referenced an out-of-date version of some statutory guidance. Leaders amended the policy suitably before the end of the inspection.

62. Leaders provide staff with regular safeguarding training, starting at induction, that equips them with the knowledge and confidence to recognise potential concerns and to respond to these in line with agreed procedures. Safeguarding training is reinforced through regular updates and discussions. Staff are vigilant and report any concerns about pupils.

63. The safeguarding team responds effectively to any concerns that are raised, including by closely monitoring the wellbeing of pupils affected by these. Leaders understand local thresholds and make appropriate referrals to external agencies when these are reached to help enable the provision of timely support to pupils and families.

64. The school has suitable arrangements a to respond to any low-level concerns or allegations about adults working with pupils. Leaders refer such concerns to the local authority or other agencies when appropriate.

65. An effective internet filtering and monitoring system is in place and tested regularly. Leaders monitor and resolve any concerns or alerts. Pupils learn about online safety and its importance through assemblies and the curriculum. They learn how to manage online risks confidently and to make informed and responsible decisions, such as not sharing personal information and being cautious about to whom they chat online.

66. Safer recruitment procedures are methodical and implemented consistently. All appropriate pre-employment checks are completed before adults take up their roles. The single central record of appointments (SCR) contains an accurate record of these checks. Governors regularly review the SCR and recruitment procedures to ensure that they are completed and recorded accurately.

The extent to which the school meets Standards relating to safeguarding

67. All the relevant Standards are met.

School details

School	Unicorn School
Department for Education number	318/6069
Registered charity number	312578
Address	Unicorn School 238 Kew Road Richmond Surrey TW9 3JX
Phone number	020 8948 3926
Email address	enquiries@unicornschool.org.uk
Website	www.unicornschool.org.uk
Proprietor	Unicorn School Ltd
Co-chairs	Mr Paul Rathbone and Mrs Charlotte Lee
Headteacher	Mrs Polly Fraley
Age range	3 to 11
Number of pupils	144
Date of previous inspection	27 to 29 June 2023

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Information about the school

68. Unicorn School is an independent co-educational day school situated in Richmond, West London. The school is a registered charity and is administered by a board of governors. The school comprises three sections: the early years, for children aged 3 to 5 years; infants, for pupils aged 5 to 7 years; and juniors, for pupils aged 7 to 11 years. The current co-chairs of governors took up their responsibilities in November 2023 and October 2025.

69. There are 24 children in the early years comprising one Nursery class and one Reception class.

70. The school has identified 26 pupils as having special educational needs and/or disabilities. A very small number of pupils in the school have an education, health and care plan.

71. The school has identified English as an additional language for 23 pupils.

72. The school states its aims are to be a happy and welcoming environment and forward-thinking community where pupils are encouraged to flourish creatively and enjoy the process of learning. It seeks to encourage pupils to be kind and support them to be the best they can be so that they establish a lifelong love of learning, are interested in the world around them and are excited to embrace new challenges. The school intends for pupils to have high expectations and recognise that success comes in many forms. It aims to provide a broad curriculum that promotes emotional, physical, aesthetic, social and intellectual growth.

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Inspection details

Inspection dates	9 to 11 June 2026

73. A team of three inspectors visited the school for two and a half days. The on-site inspection was quality assured by a monitor.

74. Inspection activities included:

- observation of lessons, some in conjunction with school leaders
- observation of registration periods and assemblies
- observation of a sample of extra-curricular activities that occurred during the inspection
- discussions with the co-chairs of governors and safeguarding governor
- discussions with the headteacher, school leaders, managers and other members of staff
- discussions with pupils
- visits to the learning support area and facilities for physical education
- scrutiny of samples of pupils' work
- scrutiny of a range of policies, documentation and records provided by the school.

75. The inspection team considered the views of pupils, members of staff and parents who responded to ISI's pre-inspection surveys.

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- The Department for Education is the regulator for independent schools in England.
- ISI is approved by the Secretary of State for Education to inspect independent schools in England, which are members of associations in membership of the Independent Schools Council.
- ISI inspections report to the Department for Education on the extent to which the statutory Independent School Standards, the EYFS statutory framework requirements, the National Minimum Standards for boarding schools and any other relevant standards are met.
- For more information, please visit **www.isi.net**.

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