

Basildon College
Reinspection of Governance: February 2001
Report from the Inspectorate
The Further Education Funding Council

THE FURTHER EDUCATION FUNDING COUNCIL

The Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) has a legal duty to make sure further education in England is properly assessed. The FEFC's inspectorate inspects and reports on each college of further education according to a four-year cycle. It also assesses and reports nationally on the curriculum, disseminates good practice and advises the FEFC's quality assessment committee.

REINSPECTION

The FEFC has agreed that colleges with provision judged by the inspectorate to be less than satisfactory or poor (grade 4 or 5) should be reinspected. In these circumstances, a college may have its funding agreement with the FEFC qualified to prevent it increasing the number of new students in an unsatisfactory curriculum area until the FEFC is satisfied that weaknesses have been addressed.

Satisfactory provision may also be reinspected if actions have been taken to improve quality and the college's existing inspection grade is the only factor which prevents it from meeting the criteria for FEFC accreditation.

Reinspections are carried out in accordance with the framework and guidelines described in Council Circulars 97/12, 97/13 and 97/22. Reinspections seek to validate the data and judgements provided by colleges in self-assessment reports and confirm that actions taken as a result of previous inspection have improved the quality of provision. They involve full-time inspectors and registered part-time inspectors who have knowledge of, and experience in, the work they inspect. The opinion of the FEFC's audit service contributes to inspectorate judgements about governance and management.

GRADE DESCRIPTORS

Assessments use grades on a five-point scale to summarise the balance between strengths and weaknesses. The descriptors for the grades are:

- *grade 1 - outstanding provision which has many strengths and few weaknesses*
- *grade 2 - good provision in which the strengths clearly outweigh the weaknesses*
- *grade 3 - satisfactory provision with strengths but also some weaknesses*
- *grade 4 - less than satisfactory provision in which weaknesses clearly outweigh the strengths*
- *grade 5 - poor provision which has few strengths and many weaknesses.*

Audit conclusions are expressed as good, adequate or weak.

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Basildon College Eastern Region

Reinspection of governance: February 2001

Background

Basildon College was inspected in October 1999. The findings were published in March 2000 in inspection report 14/00. Governance was awarded a grade 4.

The key strengths were: governors' commitment to the college; and close monitoring of financial performance. The major weaknesses were: limited progress in addressing the long record of poor academic performance; slow progress in developing a system to monitor academic performance; inadequate arrangements for development and appraisal of senior staff; and inappropriate clerking arrangements. The FEFC's audit service concluded that governance was weak. The corporation substantially conducted its business in accordance with the instrument of government. The corporation did not substantially fulfil its responsibilities under the articles of government. It did fulfil its responsibilities under its financial memorandum with the FEFC.

In May 2000, following a recommendation from the FEFC, the phased resignation of governors commenced. A new board was constituted. It includes an FEFC nominee. In addition an FEFC observer attends corporation meetings. The new board currently comprises nine governors, including the principal, a staff governor and the FEFC nominee. There are two corporation committees for search and audit.

Reinspection took place in February 2001. Inspectors and auditors examined a range of documents, attended a corporation meeting and had meetings with governors, managers and the clerk.

Assessment

In the seven months immediately following the inspection, before the resignation of key governors, little progress was made. The appointment of the new board, in May 2000, quickly led to major changes in the culture and operation of the corporation. The new governors have shown exceptional commitment to the college. They have constructive relationships with senior managers and they have made a major contribution to improving the morale of managers and staff. They have determined a clear merger strategy for the college and devoted considerable time and energy to its implementation. However, they do not have formal contingency plans should the merger not take place.

The current governors have made good progress in addressing the weaknesses identified in the inspection report. The post-inspection action plan provides good coverage of the weaknesses identified by inspectors. Governors now receive regular reports on retention, attendance and achievement. Suitable arrangements have been implemented for the appraisal of the acting principal, and this has taken place. Progress on planned actions is regularly monitored at board meetings. Governors are aware of the serious financial position of the college. Failure to achieve funding targets and repayment of funds to the FEFC for provision that was ineligible for funding contributed to the weak financial position that became apparent to the new governors. Financial information received by governors is appropriate. They receive monthly management accounts and regular position updates on student unit delivery and funding implications.

In August 2000 the corporation appointed an external clerk to serve all committees. He has been instrumental in addressing some of the audit recommendations arising from the last inspection. The corporation has adopted a revised code of conduct and introduced procedures for the annual update of the register of interests and eligibility declarations. Training materials have been provided to governors. The board has adopted a governor training policy and it is currently establishing a formal programme of events.

The FEFC's audit service concludes that, within the scope of its review, the governance of the college is adequate. The corporation substantially conducts its business in accordance with the instrument and articles of government. It also substantially fulfils its responsibilities under the financial memorandum with the FEFC.

The decision to operate with a reduced number of members and only two committees was taken in order to streamline the operation of the board in the transitional period before merger. A skills audit of governors and careful selection of new governors has resulted in a board which has a good balance of skills and experience, including expertise in finance, law, personnel management, business and further and higher education. The small number of governors permitted a significant increase in the number and frequency of full corporation meetings. Corporation meetings typically have long agendas. Papers are often tabled during meetings. Full consideration is given to key issues, but discussion of other issues is sometimes limited. The low number of members has resulted in some meetings becoming inquorate when considering confidential items. However, overall attendance at corporation and committee meetings is good.

Revised grade: governance 3.