

Basildon College
Reinspection of Management: 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 management: February 2001

Background

Basildon College was inspected in October 1999. The inspection findings were published in inspection report 14/00. A grade 4 was awarded to management.

Inspectors identified two strengths: extensive links with external organisations and the effective analysis of market needs. However, these strengths were outweighed by the following weaknesses: the failure to improve poor retention and achievement rates; lack of effective arrangements to monitor performance; ineffective management of the curriculum; inefficient use of resources in some areas; needs of curriculum managers not met by management information systems; and the lack of systematic review and monitoring of some policies.

Management was reinspected in February 2001. The inspection team considered the college's updated self-assessment report, the action plan provided in response to the last inspection and other evidence provided by the college. Inspectors held meetings with senior and middle managers and staff.

Assessment

Since the last inspection there have been significant changes in the management of the college. An acting principal was appointed in March 2000 and new managers were appointed to key posts in the revised structure. Three interim managers have been employed by the college pending the outcome of discussions on the merger with another college. The new management team identified an initial need to address the underlying issues of poor communication and staff morale. Staff and managers are now positive about their working environment and relationships. Managers command confidence and trust. Communication is open and effective. Staff are well informed about current priorities and feel able to contribute views and opinions openly. This cultural change has been sensitively managed and has enabled the college to harness the skills and goodwill of the staff in making progress.

The college produced a strategic recovery plan which addressed all the weaknesses identified in the inspection and set out clear aims and objectives focusing on the achievements and quality of experience of students. However, the plan is reliant on a successful outcome from merger negotiations to address its financial weaknesses. It has no detailed contingency plans should the merger not take place. The college is in poor financial health with net current liabilities which include significant provision for the clawback of previous overpayments by the FEFC. It has failed to meet unit targets for the last two years and forecasts underachievement in the current year. Costs of the college's core provision continue to exceed income. Of its recurrent income, 24% relies on open and distance learning provision. In response to the weakness relating to inefficient use of resources, teaching staff now work up to their contracted hours and the number of part-time staff has been reduced. However, class sizes remain small and there is no systematic costing of courses.

Management of the curriculum and the monitoring of performance are no longer weaknesses. The rationalisation of the curriculum into six schools has increased the coherence of curriculum management across the college and the heads of school are closely involved in

both management and monitoring of performance. Course teams and schools hold regular meetings. Attendance, retention and achievement rates are discussed routinely, though the quality of analysis and evaluation varies. Course targets are set but not yet used effectively. The principal and director of curriculum hold weekly or fortnightly individual meetings with other managers to discuss issues, allocate tasks and monitor financial and academic performance. The management information system provides appropriate information on the college intranet for managers. All staff have access to this information. Users of the system were consulted and reports created or adjusted to meet their needs. At present, the system relies on individual staff making the effort to use the intranet. Heads of school make sure that course teams have attendance and retention data to inform their meetings.

Active monitoring of retention and achievement rates and the implementation of strategies to improve them have had some small impact on outcomes for students. Retention has shown little improvement over the three years from 1997 to 2000. However, a comparison of retention in February 2000 with that in February 2001 suggests that overall retention has improved from 68% to 75%, though the final outcome for 2001 cannot be predicted. Achievement rates have significantly improved in 2000 but, with the exception of level 2 courses, they generally remain below national benchmarks.

The college has taken rigorous action to improve its implementation and monitoring of its health and safety policy. The health and safety committee has been reactivated, has reviewed the policy and meets regularly. It undertook an audit of health and safety procedures, produced an action plan and reports progress towards its objectives frequently to the governing body. The monitoring of the equal opportunities policy is not yet systematic, although a working group is guiding a range of activities to address equal opportunities issues.

The strengths identified in the last inspection report have been maintained or strengthened. Links with an extensive range of community organisations have been augmented by working more closely with an increased number of schools. The strategic recovery plan contains a detailed and well-considered analysis of market and community needs which contributed to the radical re-focusing of the college's curriculum on level 1 and 2 courses.

The college should further address: the low retention and achievement rates; the use of targets at course level; the monitoring of the equal opportunities policy.

Revised grade: management 3.