

THE OFSTED EXPERIENCE

—

A Governor's Eye View

A report of a Conference held in London on 14 April 1994
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RISE

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1. INTRODUCTION

This Report is of a conference sponsored by the Trustees of RISE and funded by the Nuffield Foundation to bring together governors of schools which had experienced an inspection by OFSTED during the autumn term, 1993.

The reason for the conference

The Education (Schools) Act 1992 led to a radical reform of the system of school inspection. From the autumn term 1993 all schools in England are to be inspected every four years by a team of inspectors recruited by OFSTED.

The role of governors is important in the OFSTED procedure.

Governors have a responsibility (Circular 7/93) to :-

- Agree a specification for the inspection.
- Inform parents, the LEA or Secretary of State, Foundation if relevant, and in the case of secondary schools, the local Training and Enterprise Council and representatives of the local business community that the inspection will take place.
- Arrange the meeting between the Registered Inspector and parents.
- With the staff of the school, offer the RI every opportunity to make a full and fair assessment of the school by providing the necessary documents, ready access to lessons and school activities and discussions with individuals and groups of governors, staff and pupils.
- Discuss with the RI the main findings of the report.
- Make arrangements for the parents of every pupil to be sent a copy of the summary report; make reasonable arrangements for the report and the summary to be available for inspection by the public; provide any person who asks for it with a copy of the report.
- Decide on and carry out an "action plan" arising from the inspection. This must be sent to the parents, employees, OFSTED, the LEA or Secretary of State, the Foundation if relevant and the local TEC. Progress on the implementation of the action plan must be reported in the governors' annual report to parents.

The aims of the conference

1) To bring governors of recently inspected schools together to share experiences, in order to identify and publicise any variations in the way OFSTED inspections have been conducted, particularly in relation to the role of governors in the inspection. To suggest possible improvements with a view to clarifying good practice.

2) To provide an opportunity for governors to discuss the formulation and implementation of the action plan they are required to produce.

Representation

Governors from one hundred schools which had been inspected during the autumn term 1993 were invited to the conference in London in April 1994. Twenty five representatives from 23 schools attended, most from mixed comprehensive schools, one from a grammar school, one from a boys' secondary modern school.

Three of the schools represented were grant-maintained and two were voluntary aided. There was a wide geographical spread of delegates. Thirteen of the delegates were chairs of their governing bodies and there was a representative spread of LEA nominees, co-opted and parent-governors and one Foundation governor from a voluntary aided school. The conference was also attended by a small group of RISE trustees and others, some of whom were also governors.

The programme

The conference consisted of two sessions, each introduced by a key-note speaker. Joan Sallis, chair of the Campaign for State Education was in the chair.

Margaret Williamson of OFSTED presented and discussed OFSTED's own evaluation of the first inspections. This was followed by discussion in working groups.

Dr. David Hopkins of the Cambridge University Institute of Education, a researcher into school effectiveness, discussed the action plan in relation to school improvement. This was followed by discussion in working groups allocated by time of inspection so that governors would be at the same stage of the action plan process.

The conference concluded with a plenary session to which the working groups reported.

2. THE SPEAKERS

Welcoming the delegates and introducing the conference, Joan Sallis said that she hoped that what followed would be an "honest day". It was important, she said, that if school governors were to be held responsible for school improvement after an OFSTED inspection they should have had genuine, hands-on involvement beforehand. Governors should have been involved in the process of inspection from the beginning and the process should have been a creative one for school improvement and for the self-criticism which governing bodies should embrace.

Margaret Williamson

OFSTED had been keen to evaluate the new inspection process from day one, Margaret Williamson, HMI, told the conference. The first evaluation of the new system, *A Focus on Quality*, produced in cooperation with consultants Coopers and Lybrand, was based on OFSTED's own evidence drawn from its first hundred secondary inspections in late 1993, and from the reactions of 100 headteachers, 68 individual governors and 83 groups of school staff.

Four key questions were posed:

- How helpful was the newly published Framework and Handbook to those being inspected?
- How satisfied were governors, heads and staff with the overall management and conduct of the inspections?
- How manageable is the inspection model?
- How should we revise and refine the model in the light of first reactions to the new system?

Margaret Williamson said that some of the initial difficulties of the new system were caused by the speed at which it was implemented. Heads had complained about the late availability of the revised Handbook, the short notice that had been given and the tight timescale for the completion of the documentation. In future, she said, schools would be given one year's notice that they were to be inspected and an eight week period would be allowed for the completion of documentation. In only one third of schools were governors directly involved in preparation for the inspection and in few were governors involved in the preparation of the specification, this being left to heads.

The majority of registered inspectors had held meetings with representatives of the governing body, either during the inspection or at the time of the parents' meeting. Oral evidence of the work of governors was largely reflected through discussions with the chair of governors, though a small number of registered inspectors tried to involve other governors to gather a wider range of views.

Feedback to governors often took the form of a shortened version of the oral report to heads and senior staff. Reactions from governors to these sessions were mixed. A number of chairs of governors wanted clearer guidance from the RI of what to expect from the oral feedback. Some found it difficult to absorb the range of information and judgements. Some complained about the amount of educational jargon included in reports. One sought to avoid an "issues for action" section for fear of unfavourable parental reaction. Others requested help in the formulation of action plans. On the publication of the final report, some schools complained about the precise wording and about the brevity of the summary. RIs have been asked to improve the consistency and readability of the summary reports which go to parents.

Margaret Williamson concluded that the new system had got off to a reasonably good start but that

there were still issues to be tackled. Schools should not be left feeling stressed or swamped by the inspection procedure, she said. The proof of the success of the new system, she said, would lie in evidence of genuine school improvement resulting from it.

A Focus on Quality was published by OFSTED, Elizabeth House, York Road, London SE1 7PH in February 1994.

Dr. David Hopkins

Dr. Hopkins told delegates that inspection on its own would not improve schools. Inspection and support must go hand-in-hand. There was a risk that the pressure of inspection on its own would produce alienation, while support structures on their own would be a waste of resources. If schools were to improve as a result of inspection they must have development structures in place to enable them to build.

This meant that schools would need to create support networks to help in the processes of planning and improvement. They might in future have to forge alliances with other schools and with universities to provide themselves with the support structures that good LEA advisers used to offer.

His research project, Improving the quality of education for all, he suggested, offered some patterns and trends which could be used by other schools. Governors, whose role included the formal approval of the post-inspection action plan, have a crucial role to play in this process. They were part both of the pressure for change and the support system which would bring change about. With the advice of the senior management team, it was their duty to set priorities, and ensure that the conditions for change in a school existed.

He characterised school improvement as a journey of five phases, illustrated in the chart below:

Key questions for school improvement	
Phase of the journey	Key tasks
Where are we now?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • review internal conditions of the school • encourage involvement in development work
Where do we want to be?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • discuss the school's vision • identify priorities for development
How will we get there?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • consider implications for classroom practice • plan for action
What do we need to do?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • keep the momentum going • check regularly on progress
Where will we go next?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • move from one cycle of development to another • establish a development structure

Vision, Dr. Hopkins said, is a word which makes many people uneasy, but it was the experience of his team that successful schools are characterised by a set of values which are shared by most staff and that guide the actions of most people within the school. But it is through the practical task of identifying priorities and then working on them that a school's vision is secured.

Sequencing priorities is easier, he suggested, when governors, heads and staff consider the following factors:

- urgency, need and desirability,
- the size and scope of a plan and how long a priority might take to implement,
- whether or not innovations are "root" or "branch", which in the former case would require a well-designed staff development policy,
- and whether greater progress can be achieved by linking priorities together.

Many schools find it relatively easy to move into action, but sustaining momentum and checking on

progress prove more difficult. Evaluation should take place during implementation, and at the end of development work to ensure that a target or priority has been achieved.

The majority of a school's time and resources are taken up by its day-to-day activities, he said. But unless there is an element dedicated to development, then the school is unlikely to progress in times of change.

*Further details of Dr. Hopkins' work appear in **Creating the conditions for school improvement**, by M. Ainskow, D. Hopkins, G. Southworth and M. West, published by David Fulton Publishers, 1994.*

3 THE EXPERIENCE OF GOVERNORS

The questionnaires

Conference delegates were asked in their discussion groups to complete a questionnaire giving some indication of how they had been involved in the inspection process at their schools. Thirteen of those present were chairs of governors.

The questionnaire revealed the following information:

1. Only two of the twenty two governors responding felt they had not been made aware of their responsibilities as governors for the inspection.
2. Eight governors felt that they had been excluded from the preparation for the inspection.
3. Less than half of the respondents had seen the documentation involved in the preparation work for the inspection: six had specifically seen the financial questionnaire, and four had seen the head-teacher's form.
4. The majority of governors had met the registered inspector before the inspection, half the meetings taking place with governors alone, half with members of the school's senior management team present.
5. Half the governors had met the inspectors during the course of the inspection, either individually or in a group, and in three cases, in both ways.
6. Just over half the governors had learned what issues had been raised at the parents' meeting. Most of those who did not were chairs of governors but not parent-governors,
7. Without exception the registered inspector reported back to the whole governing body.
8. Governors' views on the inspection process had been sought by OFSTED evaluators in seven schools through discussion and in two cases by questionnaire.
9. With only one exception the governors present had been involved in compiling the school's action plan following the inspection.
10. Arrangements for writing the action plan varied widely: in three schools the head teacher drafted the plan, in one the chair did so, but in most individual governors and the senior management team or a specially constituted working group of governors and staff drew up the plan. In one school the whole governing body and the SMT compiled the plan.
11. Action plans were split equally between those which were based on the points for action in the summary report, and those which were based on the issues raised in the full report.
12. Not all governors knew how many parents had asked for a full copy of the report. Two schools had had twenty requests, one had had ten, the rest had had one or two or none at all.

THE DISCUSSIONS

The benefits of the OFSTED inspection

There was a general feeling amongst governors that the inspection had been a largely positive process. Governing bodies had found that it clarified their role and responsibilities and that it generally strengthened relationships among governors, pulling less active members into the team, and between head teachers and their governors. Relationships with staff had often improved. Some had found that the process increased the level of trust between school and parents.

Many governors felt that their right to make strategic decisions and to monitor the school had been clarified, as had their right to be involved in curriculum matters. A school which had been threatened with closure felt that their report endorsed their right to "stay alive".

Many governors expressed the view that the process had been highly educative for them: it spelled out their legal duties and responsibilities, informed them much more fully about the work of the school, gave them a means to identify weaknesses which had not previously been discussed openly and in many ways acted as a catalyst for future development. As one said: "It gave us the key to the schoolroom door". Many governors said that they had been empowered by the inspection which had made their role transparent to head, staff and parents. One governor welcomed the "free audit". Others claimed that management and financial procedures had been sharpened by the experience. The Handbook was felt to be an extremely

useful "guide to good practice". Although few governors said that their reports told them anything they did not already know about the school, they appreciated having professional confirmation that the school was heading in the right direction. A "second opinion" was highly valued.

The weaknesses of the OFSTED process

Many governors complained of the very short time-scale on which their early inspections had been run. One school had been hit by a flu epidemic in the two weeks before the inspectors' arrival and felt ill-prepared as a result. There were also complaints about the volume of paper-work required, and the lack of resources to meet OFSTED's demands, both before and after the inspection, and the levels of stress imposed on heads and staff.

There was some concern about the composition of inspection teams. A grant-maintained school governor felt that it was unacceptable to be inspected by a team from their previous local authority. Others felt that local authority teams should not inspect in their own area (although, conversely, some governors felt that a team which knew the school previously would make a fairer inspection). Two governors were concerned about specific team members whom they had tried to have removed because of their previous relationships with the school. Conflict of interest was held to be a potentially serious problem.

There was criticism of the way in which the inspection teams performed. "Private" teams were held to be less well integrated than LEA teams. There was dissatisfaction with the performance of the lay inspector in several schools. Staff had expressed reservations about the sometimes clumsy way in which lessons were observed and feed-back presented. Governors felt that there were weaknesses in communication throughout the process, sometimes between inspection teams and the school, sometimes between heads and chairs of governors. The feeling was strongly expressed that if governors are to be inspected, they must be fully integrated into the process and all communications addressed to them must reach them.

There was dissatisfaction with the reporting system. Some governors complained that the language used was "bland", others that it was "alienating and meaningless". There was general agreement that terms such as "satisfactory", "good" and "poor" should be more carefully defined. Does "satisfactory" mean up to standard?

There were complaints that reports contained glaring omissions and inaccuracies: a school facing severe difficulties on two sites did not have this factor acknowledged; at another inspectors had informed the head verbally of a fire risk but not included it in their report - shortly afterwards there was a fire. This led governors to believe that the process was too rushed and tended to give only a "snapshot" view of a school, with little account taken of local issues and conditions.

There were also complaints that there were discrepancies between feed-back to staff after a classroom observation, verbal feedback to management teams and governors, and the final published report and summary. There was, overall, too much emphasis on failure and too little on success.

Room for improvement

The following points emerged (not in any order of priority):

1. Less bureaucracy and paperwork would assist schools, as would help with the expense of an inspection.
2. Better communication systems, particularly with governors, would make it easier for them to play their full role in the process. OFSTED should ensure that communications addressed to chairs of governors actually reach them.
3. The language in which reports and summaries are written should be clearer and better defined. Reports should emphasise success as well as failure.
4. The feed-back to governors should be based on a written, not an oral, draft and should never be read to them.
5. The inspectors should be willing to take account of schools' comments on the report at the feed-back sessions.
6. The inspection process should be longer and less rushed, and the opportunity taken for offering professional advice to staff.
7. More attention should be paid to dealing adequately with specialist areas like special needs, personal and social education and non-National Curriculum subjects.
8. Lay inspectors should be selected and trained more carefully.
9. Governors should be offered training "pre-OFSTED".
10. Communication with parents should be at a more appropriate level, especially in areas where more than one language is spoken.

The Action Plan

Most governors felt that drawing up an action plan was a helpful exercise, enabling schools to prioritise future improvements and clarify objectives. A minority felt that the 40 days allowed was too short. Several commented on the potential for integrating the action plan with the school's existing development plan, as a way of clarifying development, although some felt that there was some conflict here.

Some schools had produced two action plans, a long version for internal use and a summary for parents, although it is not clear whether this is acceptable to OFSTED.

Some schools found the OFSTED language on action plans opaque and in general it was felt that schools needed far more guidance than they had been offered in drawing up a plan acceptable to OFSTED, resourcing it and monitoring its implementation. This reflected the plea for greater professional guidance on school improvement during the inspection process. Some governors said that they had relied heavily on the school's senior management in drawing up the plan.

Some issues, such as the common difficulties over collective worship, had been deliberately fudged in action plans.

Most governing bodies had agreed to some form of monitoring of the implementation of the plan over time.

There was a general feeling that the divorce of inspection from advice meant that schools where problems had been identified were left without support in matters of school improvement, and there was some anger that no account was being taken of the financial implications of the inspection process or school improvement.

Room for improvement

1. The Registered Inspector should receive a copy of the Action Plan.
2. Means should be found to provide the resources needed to implement an Action Plan after an inspection.
3. There is a need for more support and training for governors and staff in the drawing up and implementation of an action plan.

Conclusion

Many of the governors attending the conference felt that their OFSTED inspection had been a very positive experience both for them and for the schools they represented. They had constructive criticisms about the way in which the process, and its follow up action plan phase could be improved. They also had some philosophical objection to the divorce between the inspection process and the advisory and support services which they felt school needed if they were to make constructive use of the inspections process and improve the schools for which they were responsible. They also had reservations about the way in which the new procedures put them, as amateur, unpaid volunteers, into a highly responsible and accountable role, which was highly vulnerable to adverse comment. Although few went as far as one delegate who insisted that the purpose of the system was to "create fear and panic" most agreed with another who said: "there should be no inspection without support!"