

Can private companies successfully turn around a failing school?

**Case study: Kings College for the Arts and Technology, Guildford:
A story of school transformation**

An International Research Associate Project

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with
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1. Preface

Writing about the involvement of the private sector in education immediately brings the writer into the political arena; even if not everyone believes in the “public sector good” and “private sector bad” perspective, that view triggers off a great deal of the debate in this area.

Guilbert Hentschke and I tried to move away from the political agenda to analyse what was actually happening on the ground. We did that in the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) publication ‘Public-Private Partnerships in Education: their nature and contribution to educational provision and improvement’. This was an attempt to look at how policy and practice were changing at the Local Education Authority (LEA) level. Part of this was an examination of why Surrey LEA involved a private-sector company in turning around a failing school. The second part of that research was to look at the difference that private-sector involvement made to an individual school. Ken Thompson undertook that project as an International Research Associate at NCSL.

This report from Ken Thompson examines the involvement of a not-for-profit private-sector company, 3Es, in the running of a school. It looks at the change from the ground up. It examines the strategy and approaches of the school leader in transforming the school and considers the relations of the participants in the journey: the students, teachers and parents.

It is impossible to generalise from a single study. Did the private sector provide a catalyst for a school that had failed under the public sector? The answer is undoubtedly yes. Was it solely due to the private sector? The answer would probably be that it was too complex to judge. Certainly the buffer of a private contract protected the school from political interference while it got on with the task of transforming learning. However, the Hawthorne effect of a new start and a focus on the school as one that could not be allowed to fail, new resourcing and an outstanding headteacher are also key factors.

The evidence would suggest that this school succeeded because the private sector had leveraged a whole series of resources in terms of human, intellectual and financial capital. The question that follows is: is such an experiment replicable on a large scale? It is difficult to see how the unique set of circumstances could be replicable. However, the City Academies initiative shares some of these characteristics, so we may need to await the outcome of this larger educational programme.

What is true is that a failing school was saved, turned round and transformed. Ken Thompson tells the story of the transformation.

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2. Introduction

Kings College for the Arts and Technology serves a large area of north-west Guildford in Surrey. It is on a site that had been known under two previous names: Park Barn County Secondary School and Kings' Manor School.

The school had suffered during the 1990s from underperformance, low recruitment and falling staff morale. The Kings' Manor School faced falling enrolments and, therefore, a distorted intake of students, including a number who had been excluded from other schools in Guildford. The area is considered to be relatively deprived economically. By 1999, the school was the first preference for just over 40 students. A 1997 Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) inspection put the school into special measures. Surrey County Council had, through its LEA, attempted to revive and restructure the school, but had not been successful in establishing a stable and sustainable culture of school improvement. By 1999, the school roll was just 395 in total, with no students in the sixth form.

Having failed to revive the school, Surrey LEA proposed its closure. However, a strong reaction by parents in favour of keeping a secondary school open on the site led to a radical rethink by the LEA. Having been unsuccessful in deploying its own resources to improve the school, the LEA sought external partners to work with it to continue to improve it. It is wrong to conceptualise this as privatisation. The school would remain an LEA school with voluntary aided status, but a private company would have responsibility for the operation of the school and would work through a governing body which consisted of members of the local community and representatives of the successful private company. After a selection process, the contract was awarded to 3 Es Enterprises, a wholly owned subsidiary of Kingshurst City Technology College in Solihull. A contract between Surrey and 3Es sets out criteria of attainment, attendance and other targets for the years ahead. The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) formally approved the creation of the new college in September 2000, with a new principal, David Crossley.

This research project looks at what the school was like before the public-private partnership was implemented in the view of the students, staff and parents, what the transformation involved and what the students, staff and parents now think of the school. It also examines pre-takeover and post-takeover Ofsted reports. The research is part of a wider study which NCSL has already published: 'Public-private Partnerships in Education: their nature and contribution to educational provision and improvement'.

3. What was Kings' Manor School like?

3.1 The parents' view

Parents interviewed were forthright in their views. They had children in Kings' Manor and then Kings College. They described Kings' Manor as a sick school. In hindsight, they believe the school had been experiencing difficulties for twenty years but, in their view, no one did anything about it. There was recognition of the school's making worthy attempts at linking with the community, but it was perceived that the teaching and learning aspects and the student behaviour management aspects of the school's development were not receiving the necessary attention. One of the parents reported that the teaching staff were distant, even on parent-teacher evenings. Parents described how things came to a head when the threat of closure became real. They saw teachers become despondent; many left the school and temporary staff took their place.

3.2 Staff members' views

For this project, two of the three Kings' Manor staff members who took up positions at the new school were interviewed. One of the staff members outlined clearly the deskilling that occurs in teachers in schools experiencing difficulties: "Working in a failing school deskills you, because you lose confidence in everything. It is monotonous; it's a grind." Interviewees described how staff would avoid dealing with issues, walking around trouble spots instead of addressing them. It was said that when the 1998 Ofsted Inspection was due, there was a sense that staff were hoping that the inspection team would identify the major problems so that something would have to be done.

It should be noted that former colleagues were not criticised. There was recognition of very hard work being done around some very good ideas, but the programmes were just not working. The school had lost its way.

3.3 The students' view

Students who had attended the Kings' Manor School were interviewed. In describing their experiences at the school they made several key points in their recollections: high rates of student absences for whole days and individual classes; little access to Information and Computing Technology (ICT); poorly equipped science laboratories and ageing book resources. They reported the poor physical state of the buildings, poor behaviour of students and poor treatment at the hands of staff members. Work was set by teachers, but the students interviewed believed that not enough help was given to them to enable them to complete the work. Students interviewed were of the view that academic standards were very low. They were of the opinion that the work being done in Year 11 was more like that of Year 8.

Very powerfully, one student said: "I felt really betrayed by Kings' Manor. I felt I was really let down by the school. It wasn't just me: it was all my friends I went to school with... It's just like they didn't care. Do you know what I mean? They seemed to say to us: 'You're not worth it.' So you were pushed to the back."

Students reported their perception of a high turnover of staff. One is quoted as having 6 Maths teachers in a year and another having 7 teachers in 6 weeks for one

subject. The latter student mentioned the challenge that this presented, with each teacher having a different style and different methods.

In discussing Kings' Manor, one student said: "I think what it really was, was no one really expected many people to do well, because it had a bad reputation. Everyone just thought that everyone who goes there is really not going to do very well. No one really bothered."

3.4 Ofsted

The 1997 Ofsted inspection, more than any other single factor, seemed to flag the need for change. The inspection included observation of lessons, registrations and assemblies, special needs provision and discussions with students and staff members. Student work was gathered and a variety of school documents examined.

The Ofsted report described the school as being in decline and losing popularity in the community. The standard of work was below national standards and the value added of the school was unsatisfactory. A significant amount of the teaching was unsatisfactory and staff morale was low. Pupil behaviour and attitudes were reported to be unsatisfactory in many cases and relationships of the people on site were frequently weak. Development of student welfare and guidance programmes and pupils' moral, spiritual and social development were seen as a weakness. The Ofsted inspectors praised the school leadership for imaginative ideas for dealing with the situation, but criticised the lack of capacity for their implementation. Links with the community were seen as a strength, as was cultural development.

The report goes on to describe a school with considerable problems. Walding, an LEA Officer (1997) and his fellow inspectors reported that:

- The attainment and progress of students was very poor (pp 3-4).
- Behaviour was frequently a problem (pp 4-5).
- Attendance was below the accepted benchmark (p 5).
- There was far too much poor and unsatisfactory teaching (pp 5-6).
- The curriculum structure was basically sound (pp 7-8).
- The policy for assessment was sound, but the assessment systems had shortcomings (pp 8-9).
- Efforts to develop pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural aspects were not yet successful (pp 9-10).
- Staff were caring, but systems to support students were not working well (p 10).
- Parent support for learning was of mixed quality (p 11).
- There were imaginative links with the community (p 11).
- The ethos espoused by the leadership was sound, but not effectively put into practice (pp 11-13).
- Staffing numbers were appropriate and new staff had good induction support (p 13).
- The school had a relatively high cost per pupil (p 14).
- There was sound provision for pupils with special educational needs (pp15-16).

4. Kings College: a new beginning

What initial factors made a difference?

4.1 Governance

This was a unique arrangement. 3Es were responsible for setting up and monitoring the management of the school. They did this by the appointment of the Principal and basing the culture, ethos and the operation of the school on the principles and practices of Kingshurst City Technology College. However, the most significant factor was the establishment of the governing body as a voluntary aided school. The role of the diocese in a voluntary aided school was taken by the Kingshurst Trust, which is responsible for 3Es. This allowed 3Es effectively to control the governing body (In practice they conceded their majority to the community.). As such, once the contract and the performance indicators were agreed with the LEA, the school was insulated from the normal LEA imperatives and controls.

4.2 An imperative for action and change

1. A community that was prepared to organise to protest about the loss of secondary education on the site, but was willing to work with the LEA to consider innovative options for the future.
2. The LEA was prepared to take action. The LEA had a propensity to take action. Even in the face of community opposition, it was prepared to work with the community and turn the problem into an opportunity. It also had the will to find a way in which new players could be brought to bear on the challenge, so as to lead to the new use of existing legislation.

4.3 3Es providing a tangible model of what could be, on the basis of a real-life example

The acceptance by the community of the closure of Kings' Manor was made easier when a key tenderer was able to show what had been done in another setting. It was assumed that this success could be transferred to the Guildford site. The tenderer had considerable clout as well as connections in high levels of business and government.

4.4 A specific culture and ethos

The 3Es organisation publishes the following summary of its ethos and operating style.

“The ethos of any college is what you see and feel when you walk through the door. We have the highest expectations of our students in behaviour, attitude and discipline. Every student, with his or her parents, has committed to the Kingshurst code in our partnership agreement. We assume our students will get things right and treat them as if they will.

There is clear guidance about what is and what is not acceptable, and all students carry a copy of the basics in their college diary, which they use every day. Students can play an active part in shaping our college through our student council.”

4.5 The appointment of a successful and experienced school leader

The staff members of the College all have very high regard for the College Principal, Mr David Crossley. He is regarded as a key strategic thinker and planner, both within and beyond the college. People seem to like and trust him on a personal level and trust his judgement. They are willing to be led by him. In the College there was effective leadership and effective followership. The ethos was clearly a unifying and clarifying influence. High levels of organisational congruence were apparent. The principal is seen to value all staff members on an individual level. His frequent letters of thanks are appreciated.

4.6 The injection of considerable funds for facilities and programmes

The injection of funds for refurbishments and the new arts centre via Surrey LEA and the government through the Fresh Start Scheme (approximately £4 million) were of great symbolic and practical importance. The design process has built in the themes from the college ethos. The Fresh Start support has better enabled several programmes to begin. However, it seemed that, at the end of 2002, there had been little thought given to resourcing programmes once Fresh Start funding had run out.

4.7 Choice of staff

Although all staff members were guaranteed jobs in the new school, in effect only seven of the teaching staff did move to the new school. There were, however, a large number of temporary staff who naturally came to the end of their contracts. The majority of support staff did move to the new school. New staff members were hired on the basis of a clearly stated set of beliefs. It is believed that some teachers have moved on or have not had their contracts renewed when they found the workload too high or themselves not quite in sympathy with the college's ethos. Most of the staff members employed tend to be relatively young. It has been reported that relatively few have commitments of their own away from work, so that they can devote a lot of time to the school.

4.8 Market segmentation: the International Baccalaureate

There were indications that offering the International Baccalaureate (IB) will attract students from far and wide, although it did not seem to have attracted huge numbers by September 2002. The IB students were a very diverse group of most interesting young people. It is believed that Kings College is one of the few non-grammar schools to offer the IB.

This is an example of finding a unique market and being seen as differentiated from the general market.

4.9 Innovation: developing new ideas and abandoning old ones

There are many examples of innovation, both large and small. Many are adaptations from other non-school and business settings, such as the large foyer, the charge-card system for payment and the cloakroom. Some of these are examples where inferior systems have been abandoned: for example, the lockers have been abandoned and a cloakroom provided in their place. There is an innovative culture where staff members feel that they can try anything and that even if something is not agreed for full implementation, it is likely to be trialled in some way.

4.10 Early success in student results

It seems that beginning with a very low level of student achievement can be an advantage in that a threefold improvement in GCSE results is attainable in a relatively short time. Having these improvements is a great encouragement in the early days of reform. Because of the dire situation of Kings' Manor and its threatened closure, all stakeholders wanted to be part of a success and perhaps some feared being part of a failure.

4.11 Strong commitment to staff development and welfare

Staff members of all categories commented on the many excellent opportunities they had for development. The support staff members commented on the range of activities from which they could choose. Teachers commented on the on-the-job training derived from being in an innovative school, the support received from their colleagues, the collaborative work and the benefits of fast-tracking their careers in the college. The senior leadership team members interviewed commented on the professional rewards of working together and the opportunity to work with David Crossley. The premises staff seemed to feel really valued as a result of being invited to the residential staff conference.

5. Kings College: views from the participants

The researcher had the opportunity to gather a variety of data regarding the new school. Using the schools own ethos document, survey instruments were designed to gain an impression of the progress the school had made against its own key ethos indicators after two years of operation. Year 7 students (new to the school) were surveyed. Also some Year 10 students were asked to complete the survey, which was modified to compare their view of Kings College against their recollections of Kings' Manor.

Questions related to each key element of the ethos document and were designed to find out the extent to which students perceived that the indicators were being achieved. Interviews were conducted with:

- college governors
- senior staff member college governors
- assistant principals (including those who had served in a capacity at Kings' Manor School and those who had not)
- teaching staff members (including those who had served in a capacity at Kings' Manor School and those who had not)
- support staff members (including those who had served in a capacity at Kings' Manor School and those who had not.)
- upper-school students (including those who attended Kings' Manor School and those who had not)
- lower-school students
- Year 7 students specifically

5.1 Survey

The overall results of the surveys were remarkably consistent and the following observations were made.

1. The Year 7 students provided positive responses to the statements in the survey.
2. The Year 10 students indicated clearly positive ratings about Kings College. These views suggests that, from a student's perspective, the College was positively achieving observable outcomes against the ethos statement.
3. The Year 10 students who were former students of Kings' Manor provided more positive responses about Kings College than Kings' Manor. These results indicate that Year 10 students, who had experiences of both Kings' Manor and Kings College, clearly perceived the new school more positively than its predecessor.

5.2 Interviews

5.2.1 Year 7 students

These students were asked what they liked about the school. Of particular importance were the facilities, especially the new arts and information technology (IT) facilities and science. They appreciated access to computers, including the Cyber Café. They commented on the friendliness of the atmosphere, the lack of bullying ("Less than at primary school," one said, and others agreed) and the trust and

comfort. Students commented that the helpfulness of teachers rubbed off on all the students, who took this example in relationships with one another. Students seemed convinced that the staff members cared about them.

The Year 7 students interviewed agreed that lessons were fun and that teachers were helpful. When some students got rowdy, all were asked to work in silence. They reported teachers making use of methods such as brainstorming, rather than making students copy notes off the board.

Students gave accounts of the email communication they and their parents were able to have with teachers, especially their tutors. They described instances where they have used email. One reported a parent using email to change an appointment on parents' evening. It would seem that the use of email between students, parents and teachers is informal but focused and of assistance to students. Students spoke of moving on to new learning when they arrived at the College. They contrasted this with primary school where revision was often the content of first lessons of the new year.

Students talked of staff treating them with respect and like friends. They felt as if they were treated as adults. One female student said of staff members: "They treat us like we're adults and they – it's like, when they are helping us, it's like they are helping a friend or something." When asked what this meant, a male student said: "They expect us to do things automatically, without having to tell us. Like in primary school, she [the teacher] had to tell us everything we had to do." A girl added: "When the teachers say to us, like, to do something, then you automatically do it." Students seemed to value the chance to have a say in lessons. They mentioned the tutor time, especially the opportunity to discuss what they had learned during the week.

Students were asked whether they would recommend the college to other young people considering where to start their secondary education. All said they would recommend the college. The reasons they reported for choosing Kings College were various combinations of proximity to home, improved reputation and reports of recently rising standards.

5.2.2 Year 10 students

The first group of students interviewed were mostly students from the former Kings' Manor School. Many of their comments contrasted their experiences of two years in the new school with their former school. Among the good things about the new school these senior students mentioned were the lack of bells, improved access to ICT and better canteen arrangements. Especially strong was the belief that they could achieve and that the school was pushing students to achieve their potential. As one student said: "I like the way that the teachers are enthusiastic about your learning."

Among the positive aspects mentioned by the students were:

- the positive learning atmosphere
- the buzz of enthusiasm and the feeling that people want to be at school
- the new facilities, such as the Physical Education (PE) & Arts centre, science labs and IT
- the way lessons are run
- the use of double lessons

- the access to good resources, including ICT, throughout lessons
- the enthusiasm and friendliness of teachers
- the encouragement given to students who have learning difficulties
- the way students are treated well, like adults
- the relatively young age of teachers and the consequent nature of their relationships with students
- the feeling that students are respected

Students reported ample opportunity to get involved with school life through sport, student council, drama, after-school enrichment activities, being a host at open evenings, a fashion show and college assemblies.

In response to a question asking students what had made the major differences they had reported, they suggested it was the “whole new start” that had been made. They shared a view that there were different expectations in the new school that all would do well.

Students said they would be willing to recommend other young people to come to the school, but only if they were willing to comply with the school’s requirements.

5.2.3 Parental interviews

These parents, like the students, commented on the benefits of having younger teachers. The way the school operates, in that the students know where they stand, was perceived to be a positive. This was linked to the home-school agreement that set clear ground rules for the enrolment. The parents said they would recommend the school to others, but not if a recommended student might let the school down.

For those involved in the development of the new school, there is considerable emotional attachment: “I get goose bumps thinking about it, because, when we, as the parent action group, agreed to support 3Es in their bid, we weren’t exactly expecting the school to develop. We were looking at a five-year plan. We were looking at waiting five years before we see major changes, but, within six months, we could see that there were changes, and now, two years on, I’m just so looking forward to the Year 9 SATs results in May, because that has got to be positive proof that this school is achieving the standards. Attitudes are different.”

5.2.4 Staff interviews

Several staff members were interviewed, and there was considerable consistency in their observations about what is good about the school. These included:

- the principal’s leadership, vision and enthusiasm
- the flat management structure and the opportunities it provides
- the progress with the building improvement
- the positive and vibrant atmosphere
- the support staff being valued and being treated the same as the teaching staff
- the sense of innovation and of being at the sharp end of education
- access to many forms of professional development
- the team structures and feeling of being supported
- the whole school ethos

- the emphasis on learning
- the availability of resources

As one would expect, there are some frustrations, but usually about positive things. Among them were:

- getting the ethos across to new staff members
- the sharing of responsibilities
- the possibility of taking the focus off good classroom practice
- the speed at which things have to be done
- the need to spend time on student and parent issues at the expense of time on curricular issues
- the volume of work that had to be completed at home.

5.2.5 What is different about this school?

There was a clear view that Kings College is different. The question “What is different about this school?” was asked of all staff member interviewees. The experience of staff members varied quite a lot. For some it was their first school, while others had worked in other schools.

The responses varied from broad to quite specific matters. Some of the specific differences, drawn from all the interviews, were:

- the absence of school bells
- the presence of a cloakroom (and the associated absence of lockers)
- the length of lessons (with most being doubles)
- the fact that doors are not locked
- the relative smallness of the school
- the availability of different spaces
- the staggering of lunch and brunch and the resulting student movement (ie the rolling school day)
- the quality of the food
- the respect for property
- the fact that windows were being cleaned
- the provision of many more facilities (eg the Cyber Café)
- the practice of reporting every six weeks
- the fact of having an approachable principal

Other items cited were:

- the younger age profile of the staff
- the school’s open-door policies
- the interest of staff members
- the buildings such as the Arts Centre: “You get the equipment you need.”
- the International Baccalaureate
- work experience links to business
- more opportunities for staff professional development
- the two-day conference (attended by all staff members, not just teachers)
- the positive attitudes of the staff and students to the flat management structure (and the many opportunities it gives younger staff to assume responsibilities)

- the high level of commitment among staff (believed in part to be related to the staff's relatively young age profile and the associated lower levels of family commitments)
- good relationships between experienced staff and younger staff ("You need your wisdom. You need a shoulder to cry on when things are going wrong")
- clear expectations
- the informality
- the policy of looking after the staff
- the two-way respect between staff and students (An interviewee described as "very, very scary" the visit he made for interview while Kings' Manor was still operating.)
- the money (One staff member said of the Kings' Manor School: "I'm sure if money had been pumped into it and its surroundings improved, it wouldn't have failed, probably.")

At the broadest level the role of the college ethos was acknowledged: "Overall it is the ethos, because that's not something that is sold as much in schools: it's not the way." The mantra of achieving more than was first thought possible was mentioned. Another phrase heard a lot around the school and in these interviews relates to the flexible flat structure: as one interviewee put it: "You are what you do, not what you are called."

5.2.6 What has changed about your role since coming to Kings College?

To ascertain what these differences in the school might make to people working in it, the question "What has changed about your role since coming to Kings College?" was asked. The responses to this question varied quite widely. This depended on the role the respondent had in the college and their prior experience, including whether or not they had been promoted into the college and whether they had been at Kings' Manor.

The clear themes from those interviewed were:

- the view that one is respected for what one does and not the position one holds, which seems to be an outcome of the flat management structure
- higher workloads
- reaching higher standards of work themselves
- relentlessly dealing with students all day long, which seems to be an outcome of the rolling school day
- providing parents with more frequent feedback on student performance
- a sense that expectations are getting higher (One interviewee responded about this in relation to students: "There is a real sense of change in those students, those who thought there was bravado in being known as the worst school in Guildford.")
- the way in which appointments to Kings College have resurrected careers and beliefs in teaching through careers development and job satisfaction.

5.2.7 What impact had 3Es had on raising standards at the school?

Interviewees were asked "What impact had 3E's had on raising standards at the school?"

There was a clear view that expectations had been raised. "Students now have high expectations for their work, their presentation of their work, the way they work in a

lesson, how they behave in a lesson. I think teachers also have higher expectations of how they plan the lesson, how they teach their lesson, how they mark their work and how they can produce lessons that involve more than just simply getting the kids to copy something down,” said one teacher. He was saying that 3Es had brought higher expectations of students and staff. This was the view put by most of the interviewees.

Another view was that 3Es had raised standards: “I think because students know what they are coming into, before they even come here, half of our work is done before we even lay eyes on them.” This was an apparent reference to the process of an assistant principal interviewing all prospective students and parents and the signing of the home-school agreement. The view was that students are at the college because they want to be.

A staff member of the Kings’ Manor School said that it was working because of the tripling of GCSE results, from 10 per cent achieving 5 grades A+ to C. It was seen that there was considerable improvement yet to be made, but that measurable progress had been achieved. One sensed that the staff member was looking forward to seeing the GCSE results of the first cohort of students to have an all Kings College experience of secondary school at the end of 2005.

Some key environmental factors were mentioned, including the expectation that students would not be shouted at. The continuity of teachers, compared with the Kings’ Manor days, was believed to be important in achieving high standards. Further, the spending on the environment was seen to say to students that they are valued.

The view was put that, in relation to the actions put in place: “It is clearly working and you can change a student’s perception of himself or herself. David [Crossley, the principal] comes up with a quote continually from Henry Ford: ‘If you believe you can or you can’t, you are right.’ They are starting to understand what he means.” The ethos was mentioned again in this context.

A former staff member of Kings’ Manor said: “The students themselves, you can see them walking in the college on the first day, and they suddenly felt they weren’t the worst college in Guildford.” The interviewee went on to say that students from Kings’ Manor used to be turned down for jobs on the basis of the school they went to. The view is that this no longer occurs.

5.2.8 If a friend was thinking of applying for a post at the College, would you encourage them to apply?

The staff responded in an interesting way to the question: “If a friend was thinking of applying for a post at the College, would you encourage them to apply?”

The responses could be summarised as a qualified yes. One of these qualified yes responses was: “Obviously I encourage people who I think would do well here. I think that certain people may not do so well.” Another said she would recommend it to someone who “thought the way we do”.

Another said: ‘The first year would be horrendous, but after that you get the rewards 100 times over. It is the most difficult college to work at in your first year. They say a year here is the same as 3 years anywhere else. Some staff members go for interviews and come back and say I’m staying. I know when I am onto a good thing.’

Along the same lines, another said: "I'd say, if you want to join a college where you would be fast-tracked, where you will have a credible staff experience, where you will work very, very hard and also go to the fast end of where education is, the sharp end of where education is, come and join us and you will enjoy it. If you want to have a restful time, this is not the place to be."

Again the theme was continued: "Go for it, but expect to work harder than you have ever worked in your life before, but it will bring great benefits, great rewards and will fetch you up careers-wise for the future if you are good at what you do."

Another expressed concern that if he recommended anyone they might not work out.

6. Kings College external reviews

6.1 Investors in People

The college applied for Investors in People (IiP) status. Two assessments were undertaken, the first as an initial assessment and the second as a continuation of the assessment.

The initial assessment, taken in the college's second term of operation in 2001, was based on a briefing meeting, interviews with a representative sample of 34 per cent of staff, a telephone interview with two of the Board of Governors and informal discussion with staff while on site. The report then gave feedback on how the college met or did not meet the IiP standard. The reviewer found that while there were many excellent practices in place, more time was necessary to meet all the standards. This was very valuable feedback for the principal and pointed to areas for attention.

The assessment was continued in 2002 and focused on areas such as teacher induction. This report outlined a number of very positive practices at the college and a culture of continuous improvement. It was concluded that the college clearly met the IiP standards, with many very positive observations being made, including and especially the high quality leadership of the college principal and senior team members.

6.2 Ofsted reports

A consequence of the Fresh Start Scheme was Her Majesty's Inspector of Schools (HMI) monitoring visits to assess the implementation of change in the new school. Three monitoring reports were available, one prepared in June 2001, the second in December 2001 and the third in May 2002. A full report of the Ofsted inspection in April 2003 is also available.

Each of these reports illustrated significant improvement in all areas including:

- increasing enrolments
- quality of teaching
- behaviour of students
- attendance
- punctuality
- curriculum planning
- prospect of improvement in achievement.

Parent surveys indicated a 94 per cent satisfaction level with the college. Beneficial links with 3Es were acknowledged.

The April 2003 Ofsted report indicated that the interim targets, as agreed with the LEA, were being met.

6.3 The Ofsted inspection of Kings College from 31 March to 3 April 2003

According to the report of the inspection, Kings College was regarded as "a good and improving school with many excellent features" (p 7). Especially positive comments were made about the leadership of the principal and the support of the senior staff

and governors. The report notes that: “Students who attended the previous college often had poor previous educational experiences, but are now making good progress.” Teaching is described as “good overall, with a significant proportion of very good and excellent teaching. Major investment in staffing, accommodation and resources has increased unit costs, but the systems in place ensure the college has an excellent capacity to succeed. It is currently providing good value for money.” The improvements reported covered many areas. Significant improvements in the number of students achieving five A* to C grades (10 per cent in 2000, 15 per cent in 2001, 27 per cent in 2002) were indicative of the improvements achieved. Current-intake students are only slightly below national standards, and it is believed that they should reach national standards by their Year 9 (p. 8). Students at the previous college had had very low primary college test scores (p. 8).

Ofsted reports that: “The college, as part of its contract with the local education authority, is meeting its interim targets for standards.”

As far as students’ attitudes and values were concerned, attitudes to the college and behaviour in and out of classrooms were regarded as good (p. 9). Personal development and relationships were judged to be very good and attendance was regarded by Ofsted as satisfactory. The quality of teaching at all levels was regarded as good, as was the provision for students with English as an additional language and provision for students’ personal, spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Ofsted believed that the quality and range of the curriculum, the provision for students with special educational needs and the quality of care for its students were very good.

All aspects of the school’s leadership and management were regarded as excellent, including the leadership of the principal.

The parents’ support was particularly evident. Ofsted’s reporting of their views includes a comment on the “dramatic improvement over the previous college” (p. 11).

7. Informal observations made in a week by an experienced Australian school leader

In my travels, I have always found the observations of cab drivers to be of interest. It took no time for the cab driver at Guildford to be talking to me about Kings College. He had heard and read the publicity about the new school. He said most people were interested, but were yet to be convinced. As the cab approached the roundabout near the school and the buildings came into view, it certainly did not look like a remarkable place.

Entering the foyer, I at once realised that this entrance marked the school out from most others. The foyer was very spacious, more like a corporate entrance. The members of the reception staff were not behind bars or windows. It was an open area. Students moved along the back of the foyer to their classes. It was carpeted, not noisy. The paintwork was bright and good, and there was a cared-for look about the foyer. The new and renovated, while obvious, blended well with the old.

The building had many interesting features. A cloakroom had replaced lockers. There was a Cyber Café (with smart-card payment system and almost gourmet-style food), which facilitated the continuous school day, with rolling brunch and lunch arrangements. Rooms were open and not locked. There was a consistency about all that is done.

There was a sense of purposeful perpetual motion. I soon realised this was because of the continuous school day. People seemed to know where they were going and they were busy. Everyone had things to do. Most of the people seemed committed. Maybe this was part of the recruitment and staff retention strategy. They seemed to crave success for the new school, and maybe they feared failure too.

The staff members seemed to be happy, if somewhat hurried. They all seemed to have responsibilities. I came to realise they work very hard. I wondered if these workloads were sustainable. There was plenty of informal collaboration on the run, agreements reached, information shared. Emails seemed to fly constantly between staff members during the day.

Everyone seemed to know what his or her general purpose was. They might laugh at the principal's sayings, quotations and mantras, but were deeply committed to them as well. The staff meeting had been known to run a bingo game on the principal's sayings and mantras. It was fun, but very respectful fun. They regarded him highly and were proud of his excellent reputation beyond the school.

There were many young teachers. Some were still in training. One young dance teacher quickly demonstrated a significant gift for teaching. She gained the respect and co-operation of students by her very presence. Among the students there was the same goodwill that existed among staff. There was also clearly goodwill between the students and staff. Students did push the barriers, but just a little – a shirt untucked and the like. When gently reminded by staff of their transgression, they apologised and fixed the problem. There was no apparent resentment.

Everyone seemed to feel part of the philosophy and mission, part of the Kings College ethos. Among the whole staff, there was a high level of commitment. Students accepted encouragement and intervention from all staff members.

Kings College is an interesting total package, with consistency of values and purpose, and operations and facilities in alignment with the broader ideals.

8. What seem to be the key factors of success in this case study?

David Crossley has written about the considerable effort put into communicating details of the new secondary school, which led to an increase in enrolment for Year 7. Staffing processes included the senior staff being appointed and in post five months before the new school started operations. A capital project was planned to provide:

- a new foyer reception area
- four new science laboratories
- a learning resource centre developed from four classrooms and adjacent office and corridor areas
- general redecoration
- IT infrastructure installation
- a Cyber Café in the refurbished dining room

The flat staff structure of the new school appears to have been modelled on its City Technology College (CTC) parent organisation. There are no heads of department or year, but assistant principals take responsibility for a curriculum and pastoral area. Other responsibilities are distributed according to need on an annual basis. The basic premise is that you are judged by what you do, not what you are.

David Crossley describes the physical environment of the former school as: ‘very run down, and the refurbishment outlined above changed the character of the college’. As well as the flat management structure and the building refurbishment, David Crossley highlights the following features of the College:

- promotion of an ethos of trust and commitment to life-long learning
- alignment of ethos, curriculum development and site developments
- curriculum plus, a type of tutorial
- early opening and late closing of the learning centre
- high expectations of student work and behaviour
- half-term curriculum modules and half-term reporting to parents
- the introduction of International Baccalaureate, instead of A levels
- after-college-day enrichment activities
- the development of leading-edge ICT facilities, including the piloting of leading-edge “anytime, anywhere” wireless technology

- the continuous working and learning day – rolling brunch and lunch similar to a more adult learning environment, with teachers accompanying their students to the meal breaks

David Crossley further states the importance that is placed on the ethos of the college: “We have put a great deal of energy into developing and communicating our ethos. Essentially, it is an ethos of trust that assumes our students will get things right and treats them differently if they do not. It treats them more like adults. We also sought to create an environment where it is ‘cool to succeed’. This ethos is communicated at parent-information nights, the new student uniform and the home-college contract.”

David Crossley emphasises that the ethos is not one initiative, but the combination of aligned initiatives that both individually and collectively make a difference: “We took account of a wide range of strategies that make a difference in schools and applied theory to practice. We have only just begun, and there are many things we still wish to achieve. However, we believe that we have made significant steps in creating a working and learning environment where students can and will achieve more than they first thought.”

9. Has Kings College been successful to date?

The above factors have acted positively to bring about improvement to Kings College. While this writer has not seen every Fresh Start initiative, I have seen schools that have opened on former school sites and also high-value-added Inner London schools.

All the evidence points to Kings College being a remarkable transformation, perhaps one of the most remarkable of any school in the developed world. One could argue that this would have been possible under the Kings' Manor School if it had been well resourced. This writer does not accept this argument; rather he believes that the Kings College case brings together a range of key factors, all of which are necessary to turn around a lost school.

10. Has the private sector been pivotal to the improvement?

It could be argued that 3Es is not a typical private company. It is a not-for-profit company wholly owned by a very successful CTC. It is not like a car company or paper company taking over a school for profit.

Would this remarkable transformation have taken place without the licensing out of the school operations? This writer believes not. This is despite the fact that the Kings' Manor School was taken out of Special Measures before the new College had taken over.

The school is driven by the need to achieve the requirements of the agreement with the LEA. The principal seems to spend a lot of time and energy working towards targets set in the agreement between 3Es and Surrey LEA. There seems to be a great desire to fulfil these obligations. It would seem less likely that this sense of urgency and "must do" (as opposed to "can do") would be found in an LEA school.

11. Is the experience replicable? (Can an approach to school transformation be franchised?)

Governments and LEAs would be delighted if a formula could be concocted to create excellent schools on each site. While the characteristics of effective schools have been well documented, they are not a set of ingredients that can produce the same product wherever mixed. On the basis of a single case study alone, it is not possible to answer this question. 3Es is, however, establishing other schools, so that it might be possible to undertake a series of case studies that will enable the question to be addressed.

However, there are several messages in this case study for those in authority at the local, LEA and national level. When a school is failing, the cost to young people and those employed in the setting is too great to let the situation continue. Without assigning blame, it must be possible to restart a school by radical but supportive actions designed to transform every aspect of the school. This may mean the handing over of the operations of a school to experienced educators within a privatised or quasi-privatised model.

It is no longer an option to allow schools experiencing difficulties to struggle along. Positive outcomes are possible when the authorities and local community have a determination to turn the situation around – and if the right leadership and staff can be recruited, and the resources they need are provided to bring about the transformation.

The Kings College transformation means that there is no longer a need or excuse to wait. It is time for thoughtful but radical action.

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