

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