

THE EDUCATION LANDSCAPE

SWITCHING CHAIRS – HEADTEACHER TO CHAIR OF GOVERNORS

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Since leaving headship I have undertaken a number of different roles. One I had not anticipated or planned for was taking on the role of Chair of Governors, but it has proved to be one of the most positive and compelling experiences. A genuine privilege to work with talented, dedicated colleagues and in doing so gaining a new perspective and understanding of the complicated governance procedures that exist in our schools. Simply put, as Chair I sat on the other side of the table to where I used to sit as a senior leader and

latterly as a headteacher. It was surprising how often situations looked and felt very different. Having worked closely with several Chair of Governors in Local Authority Schools and Academies throughout my career this should have been a straightforward switch. However, I found the experience highlighted significant gaps in not only my own knowledge and understanding - but also those that were working alongside me. Primarily, it was not immediately evident how to make the relationship between governors and senior leaders as effective as it needed to be.

This apparent gap in knowledge was not from a lack of Department of Education (DFE) documents outlining the principles and requirements of governance. The first being The constitution of governing bodies of maintained schools, to which schools and local authorities in England are required to adhere (Department of Education, 2017). Three additional documents stand out that partner the statutory guidance and associated legislation, The Governance handbook (2019), A Competency Framework for Governance (2017), and for Academy trusts The Academies Financial Handbook (2019). They provide details on how to build and maintain effective governing bodies. The Governors handbook states clearly the purpose of governance "...to provide confident and strong strategic leadership which leads to robust accountability, oversight and assurance for educational and financial performance". It sets out three core functions for all governance boards. The first to ensure clarity of vision, ethos and strategic direction. The second to hold executive leaders to account for the educational performance of the organisation and its pupils, and the effective and efficient performance management of staff; and finally to oversee the financial performance of the organisation and make sure its money is well spent (The Governors handbook, 2019). The handbook is supplemented by the Competency Framework (DFE, 2017) with details on the required knowledge and skills needed to enable effective governance.

Somewhat surprisingly, in my roles as both a senior leader and as a governor these documents were rarely referenced. In my experience the culture and functioning of governance was led by an attitude of '... this is the way we normally do things around here...'. As a senior leader I observed how easy it was to develop a defensive attitude to governors. Governor meetings being something to get through as quickly as possible but often running late into the evening, creating resentment and frustration by poorly chaired agendas. Understandably, governors' skills and knowledge vary considerably and often it was a challenge to ensure matters were not simply skimmed over or conversely, too much time spent explaining complex agenda items such as assessment, Ofsted or financial planning. Feelings of gratitude and frustration were common bedfellows. Gratitude for someone willing to give their time to check and challenge strategic thinking - but frustration resulting from dealing with a governance system that often failed in reality, to hold the senior leadership team and the headteacher to account.

Having my first governance role as a co-opted governor in 1993, the role appears to have changed little over time, especially in maintained schools. Whereas, Multi Academy Trusts have developed a range of governance structures and processes which are often more complex. What's more, the role of governing bodies in trust schools sometimes prove to have fewer opportunities to directly hold leadership teams to account.

Drawing on my own experience of undertaking both the role as headteacher and chair of governors the following thoughts focus on what I wish I had known sooner:

- ▶ As a governor aim to be as informed as possible about the processes and procedures of governance.
- ▶ Have clarity on the boundaries of what are operational matters and what is of strategic interest.
- ▶ Manage colleagues' expectations on the availability of governors and their ability to be actively involved in the school. For example for open days, recruitment of staff and attendance at sub committees.
- ▶ Keep in mind the motivations lying behind an individual's choice to volunteer their time. From parents wishing to be involved in their child's education, to others taking advantage of employers providing paid charity work days or simply wanting to be more involved in a local school and community.
- ▶ Ensure all governors are familiar and adhere to the Nolan 7 principles of public life (1995); selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership.
- ▶ Develop a strong relationship with the clerk to governors and ensure there is a shared understanding of their role. (Clerking Competency Framework. April 2017)
- ▶ Join an online organisation that provides practical support and guidance, such as a guide on what questions to ask pupils when visiting a school or what the recent changes to the Ofsted framework involve. For example, Better Governor, National Governance Association and The Key for School Governors.
- ▶ Utilise a school/trust specific Governors handbook.
- ▶ Make available research on what makes an effective governing board, i.e. A review of the literature on the role of the board chair: What are the messages for chairs of school governing bodies? (CfBT, James, C. etal. 2012).
- ▶ Ensure that the training offered is of high quality and easily accessible, taking advantage of Government funded training opportunities wherever possible.
- ▶ If you do not know, simply ask.

In summary, the reality of being a governor will differ considerably between schools. Thankfully, information and support for governance has moved on considerably since my first experiences in the early 90s and the role has the potential to be hugely rewarding. Offering the opportunity to make a significant difference to young people, bringing unexpected and engaging variety to other elements of professional or community life.

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James, C.R. etal (2012) A review of the literature on the role of the board chair: What are the messages for chairs of school governing bodies? A report from the Chair of Governors Research Project funded by CfBT Education Trust (2012). Chris James (University of Bath), Steve Brammer (University of Warwick), Michael Connolly (University of Glamorgan), David Eddy Spicer (University of Bath), Jane James (University of Bath), Jeff Jones (University of Bath)
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