

Schools, governors and disadvantage in England

Findings
Informing change

June 2007

School governors face major challenges in their work to ensure that the school is run effectively in a way that matches the local context. This study, by a team from the University of Manchester, investigates how governors in England meet those challenges where they are most acute, in schools serving disadvantaged areas.

Key points

- Governing bodies can make a valuable contribution to schools if they have an adequate supply of governors with time, commitment and expertise. However, those circumstances are difficult to create.
- Government guidance expects governors to act as 'critical friends' to head teachers and as strategic leaders of their schools. In practice, governors in the study felt happier offering support rather than challenge, and relied on heads to set a strategic direction for the school.
- Governing bodies faced complex tasks. These demanded time and expertise which many governors did not have. They were also constrained by external policy frameworks which limited their freedom of action.
- Governors had a strong sense that they were acting in the best interests of the school and its students. However, they could not always articulate those interests clearly, and did not have a detailed vision of 'service quality' on which to base their leadership.
- Membership of governing bodies did not reflect the make-up of parent bodies or local communities.
- In some places, positive steps had been taken by schools to increase the capacity and representativeness of governing bodies. However, more radical changes in school governance may be needed.
- There is confusion about the precise role of governing bodies. The expectations of governors have increased over the years, without any fundamental rethink of what they are for. The researchers conclude that there needs to be a widespread debate on these issues.

The research

By a team from the University of Manchester.

Background

State schools in England are required to have governing bodies made up of members of stakeholder groups – parents, members of the teaching and support staff, governors appointed by the local authority and governors drawn from the local community. Governors are expected to provide the school with a strategic direction, offer support and challenge to its staff, and act as the ‘critical friends’ of the head teacher. Amongst other things, they set targets for pupil achievement, manage the school’s finances, make sure the curriculum is balanced and broadly based, appoint staff, and review staff performance and pay. They have to report to parents annually and also have responsibility for plans that are drawn up in response to formal inspections of the school.

In recent years, the role of governing bodies has become increasingly important as schools have become more independent of local authorities and more responsible for managing their own affairs. This trend is set to continue as a result of the 2006 Education and Inspections Act which paves the way for an expansion of ‘trust’ schools, answerable to outside organisations rather than to local councils.

In many cases, governing bodies make a vital contribution to the development of their schools. However, they also face many problems. They may find it difficult to recruit governors able to cope with a complex and demanding role. Many governors also find it difficult to challenge head teachers, and some simply offer uncritical support.

There is a lack of clarity over the rationale that underpins the work of governing bodies. Their role can be defined in three, quite different, ways, as:

- managerial, enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of the school;
- localising, bringing local knowledge to bear on the implementation of national policies and the decision-making of head teachers; or
- democratising, representing local people in decisions about the local delivery of education.

It seems probable that these problems will be more acute in disadvantaged areas. There, schools are under considerable pressure, relatively few people

have the skills or confidence to act as governors, and there may be widespread disengagement from formal civic participation. This study, therefore, set out to investigate the state of school governance in schools serving such areas. Evidence comes primarily from interviews with governors, head teachers and other stakeholders in three areas. The areas (all names are pseudonyms) were:

- North Millington – a mainly white British residential area in a large, post-industrial and multi-ethnic northern city;
- East Moorfield – a predominant white British, semi-rural area in the north of England; and
- South Cityborough – an ethnically diverse London borough.

Governors and representation

The membership of governing bodies in these areas did not reflect the population of local communities or of the families using local schools. Governing bodies included disproportionate numbers of women, people from professional backgrounds and people who identified themselves as white. They were older than might have been expected and not all lived locally.

In practice, governing bodies divided themselves informally into a small active ‘core’, who did most of the work, and a less-active periphery who made fewer contributions. The core group was even less likely to reflect the local population than the governing body as a whole. It seems that many people from non-professional, minority or marginalised backgrounds were daunted by the prospect of joining governing bodies or playing a leading part in their work.

This lack of representativeness was not viewed as a problem by most governors. They did not see themselves as representing particular constituencies, even when they were elected. Indeed, they were mistrustful of fellow-governors who fought for sectional interests, or councillor-governors who put their political allegiances before their allegiance to the school. They tended instead to see themselves as acting in the common interest of the school and its students. As one governor put it:

“... we all seem to work together and want the best for the school and the children ...”.

(Governor, East Moorfield)

The nature of this common interest was usually taken to be self-evident and was rarely made explicit.

There were cases where governing bodies were prepared to battle in defence of common interest. They could, where necessary, challenge the head teacher, take on the local authority, and defend the school’s

actions to local people. However, for the most part governors preferred to work collaboratively in pursuit of common goals, particularly with head teachers. Indeed, some governors said that they had worked with head teachers who limited their access to information in order to minimise the opportunities for effective challenge.

Constraints and possibilities

Governing bodies' ability to lead and challenge was often constrained by their own lack of capacity. Being an active governor is a time-consuming commitment, which means engaging with complex managerial and administrative tasks, and coming to terms with the specialist knowledge and language of education. Even professional and experienced governors found these challenges daunting, while some parent governors were overwhelmed by them:

"I really didn't understand it at all, even as a governor, and I'm still finding it, two years later, still going – panic attacks and things."
(Parent governor in South Cityborough)

Sometimes, governors felt themselves being drawn into a managerial role which they did not want, and for which they were not adequately prepared.

It was often difficult in disadvantaged areas to find and retain governors with the necessary time and expertise to face these challenges. As a result, governors with a professional background and/or with experience were particularly valued and often played leading roles on governing bodies. This was true even if they were not members of the communities served by the school, and had no other connection with it. This explains in part why the membership of governing bodies did not accurately reflect that of local communities or parent bodies.

Governors were also required to act within complex and prescriptive national policy frameworks. Although they did not accept these uncritically, they were in no position to challenge them. Likewise, they often did not feel able to challenge decisions made by local authorities:

"We've basically got to take the [Local Education Authority's] advice and just accept what they say to us, especially if that's come from the head master."
(Governor, East Moorfield)

Their position was not helped by the lack of connection between governing bodies and local decision-making processes. By and large, governor support services experienced low status in local authorities, governing bodies were poorly connected into local policy partnerships, and there were few links between

governors and local activist groups.

There were, however, promising developments in some places. Some governing bodies and local authority services were proactive in recruiting governors from under-represented groups, and a government-sponsored initiative – the Governors' One Stop Shop – was giving schools access to would-be governors with commitment and professional expertise. Some governing bodies were imaginative in setting up induction schemes, or organising their business so that all members could play a full part. Some heads invested heavily in developing their governing bodies to the point where they could act effectively as 'critical friends'. However, these local initiatives did not in themselves overcome the structural constraints with which governing bodies were faced.

Some options for change

Governors were often highly committed individuals, doing work that benefited their schools and was highly valued by head teachers. Despite this, they were beset by serious problems. One head told us:

"If you took my secretary away or the school [caretaker] ... or any one of my class teachers away, it would have a huge impact ... Governing bodies ... can be highly effective, full of very good people [but] if it didn't exist, you might not notice."
(Head teacher, South Cityborough)

In particular, there were problems with all three of the rationales for the role of governor:

- Many governing bodies lack the capacity to fulfil a managerial role, and do not in any case see this as their primary function.
- Most governors feel comfortable with a localising version of their role, but are unrepresentative of local people, have no real legitimacy as definers and defenders of the common interest, and have limited freedom of action.
- Unrepresentative governing bodies, disconnected from local activist groups and suspicious of sectional interests, are in no position to undertake a democratising role as the voice of local people.

Worse still, these rationales undermine one another in practice. Governors with managerial skills may well not understand the local context, and vice versa. Likewise, governors who genuinely represent local interests may not accept a consensual definition of the 'common interest' of the school and its students. In the words of one chair of governors:

“You need governors who can contribute, so it’s a toss-up isn’t it, between either governors who are representative of the community of the school population, but also you need governors who can actually pull their weight and get the work done ...”.
(Chair of governors, South Cityborough)

Three options were identified for change:

- Incremental improvement. Governing bodies could remain much as they are, but imaginative practices for widening recruitment and encouraging participation could be adopted more widely. At the same time, the Government could reduce the demands placed on governing bodies and consider more carefully the implications for the work of governors in any future reforms.
- Structural change. Other education systems manage without governing bodies. In principle, governors could be replaced by direct control from local authorities or a government agency set up for the purpose. In practice, this may be out of tune with the direction of policy in recent years. It might be more feasible to create a core of skilled and committed governors – perhaps paid – to lead groups of schools, with school-specific governors added for particular purposes.
- Radical alternatives. The Government is committed to devolving decision-making about public services to local communities. In this context, the democratising role of governing bodies could be taken seriously. This would mean developing the links between governors, local communities, and activist groups. It would also mean giving governors more power to shape the work of their schools to local needs and wishes.

The problems besetting governing bodies arise in large part because, as the school system has changed radically in recent decades, questions about school governance have been something of an afterthought. There is an opportunity now to ask what sort of governance we want and what we want it for. This is connected to questions about how we define quality in education and who has the right to formulate such

definitions; about the sort of democracy we want, and about what democratic participation means in areas where large parts of the population appear alienated from traditional democratic processes. There is an urgent need for a widespread debate on these issues.

About the project

The study was located in three contrasting areas characterised by social and economic disadvantage. The researchers identified the schools (14 in total) serving the majority of children in these areas and interviewed over 100 respondents connected with these schools. These included 73 governors, together with head teachers, representatives of the local authority governor support services and local authority officers involved in regeneration or community development. Interviews focused on three questions:

- Whose interests do governing bodies represent?
- What influence do governing bodies have?
- What is the relationship between the actions of the governing body and the quality of service provided by the school?

The researchers also asked respondents to talk about particular events and issues which shed light on these questions, and explored these in detail.

Further information

The full report, **Schools, governors and disadvantage**, by Charlotte Dean, Alan Dyson, Frances Gallannaugh, Andy Howes and Carlo Raffo, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It is available as a free download from www.jrf.org.uk.

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Tel: 01904 615905 email: info@jrf.org.uk