

A Dynamic Governing Body

(The presentation given by Lord Nash, Under-Secretary of State for Schools to the National Governors' Association Summer Conference in July 2013.)

Lord Nash began by stating that governors were strategic leaders and crucial to schools. We had many excellent schools, but some were falling behind and often governance was failing in these schools. We needed to tackle this head on. Governors appointed headteachers and set the strategy, so they led the way for schools. We therefore needed more talent and to give importance to forming dynamic boards of governors. Governors were held to account and this was right. In return they must focus ruthlessly on driving up standards and holding Heads to account. Lord Nash referred to his article in the May/June edition of *Governing Matters (the NGA Magazine)*, in which he set out his views and his ambitions for schools and governing bodies.

Moving on, he spoke of the doubling of investment in governance through the National College, with training extended to governors and clerks in addition to the chairs' training. Chairs' training was particularly important, as professional boards needed professional leaders. Chairs could stay too long in post, and Lord Nash's view was that two terms of office should be the maximum. Then those who wished to continue in governance could become system leaders and support another school. Professional support was also essential, and clerking should be more than minute-taking. They should be the source of good advice on governing body practice and the exercise of its powers. New Regulations set out that governing bodies must heed the advice of clerks. The National College's training programme aimed to have 2000 more professional clerks in schools by 2015.

Lord Nash noted matters of importance in governance:

- Training for governors would include understanding data and performance related pay.
- Governors must have access to robust data, and not just from headteachers, and must learn to challenge the data.
- Governors needed to compare their schools with other schools. The data dashboard assisted this, as did RAISEonline.
- A new data portal would replace RAISEonline in 2015.
- The National College would cover RAISEonline and financial management and benchmarking. Governing bodies needed a good ability to understand finance, and this is where 'business' governors could help.
- Performance related pay: the Government believed this to be a far fairer system than the current situation. To hold headteachers to account governors needed a good, fair and robust scheme of performance management and performance related pay. Corporate sector governors had experience of this.
- The National College would provide training relating to performance related pay.
- Just because governors were volunteers this did not make them amateurs, so it was right to hold them to account and Ofsted was shining a light on governance.
- External reviews were often a catalyst for change. Schools could turn to National Leaders in Governance (NLGs) for external reviews.
- Because governors should show a sense of passion about their schools, Ofsted would meet with more governors during inspection visits, and all the governors should attend all of an Ofsted feedback. It must also be clear for Ofsted what training governors had attended and the number of GB meetings governors had attended.
- In secondary schools governors needed to be sure that there was careers advice available, and Lord Nash suggested going to local businesses and to HE institutions.
- Governors needed to ask about extra-curricular activities and the quality and breadth of these. Governors should visit classrooms to see what was happening there. They should look at curriculum enhancement in literacy and maths.
- High-calibre governors were of great importance in an increasingly autonomous landscape.

Lord Nash posed the question: should every school have its own governing body? He continued, by stating that federations and multi-academy trusts showed that overarching governing bodies had more command and more perspective. Governors needed to build the skills and competencies to do a good job and to address the new freedoms.

He concluded by saying that the Government would consider the Select Committee report but said he sympathised with many of the views; and finally, he asked that all governors should get involved, not just in their own school, but in a wider systems approach to governance.

Questions:

Qu 1 (Andrew Walker, Bucks): As Chair of the NGA Special Schools Governors' Forum, I refer to Ofsted's comment on governance, which noted that special school governors were among the best. This is welcomed but I must register my concern that no-one seems specifically to understand special schools funding.

Ans: The Children and Families Bill is just being addressed in the Lords. This country spends more on special schools than many others. I hope the National Funding Formula will assist in clarity.

Qu 2 (Stephen Quigley, West Sussex): What was the purpose of the governors' annual statement?

Ans: If GBs published the number of meetings attended by individuals, it would encourage all to turn up. It is also useful at GB meetings to ask what a governor has done in the last month: if the answer is nothing perhaps it is time that individual to move on

Qu 3 (Peter Edwards, Warrington): This question is on funding: there is unfairness between the funding per pupil from area to area. There should be a more common sense approach

Ans: The Government plans to reform the National Funding Formula to make it fairer.

Qu 4: (Gordon Taylor, Nottinghamshire): On the subject of fairer funding, are you planning to bring better-funded schools down or poorer-funded schools up?

Ans: Both, but at a gradual rate.

Qu 5 (Claire Barker, Surrey): You speak of getting rid of governors, but with elected ones you can't.

Ans: One way to remove elected governors is to wait until they are up for election and ensure that they have to state what they have done and their 'prospectus' for what they will do in the future

Qu 6: (John Uriel, Wirral): I understand the difficulty with poorly performing governors but how do you attract 'good performing' governors? You need to enthuse these, so have you any ideas?

Ans: We need to attract more good governors and SGOSS, CBI and BIC may help in this. Engaging governors more will be easier if they can be attracted to effective dynamic boards, which are not just talking shops.

Qu 7: (Neil Makin, Gloucestershire): Schools and businesses until 2010 had effective education-business partnerships, but these collapsed, and Connexions was working in some places. Careers advice can't be left only to schools. There is a need for guidance to help schools and businesses. Will the National College develop a programme to help?

Ans: I agree it is difficult for schools and teachers to engage with local businesses. Governors may be able to help with school-business partnerships, and many more of these are needed. I had not considered the National College in this.

Qu 8: (Governor from the Midlands): Ofsted comes in, and terrifies staff – are we sure they're getting it right in their inspections? Who checks? When there are concerns, what thought is given to the views of unions?

Ans: There are variable inspections because there are variable teams. Sir Michael (Wilshaw) is trying to address this. In regard to union views – a fairer system will lead to recruiting better teachers.

Qu 9 (Lisa Brown, Staffordshire?): Section 106 money: historically this was available from local authorities. We are now an academy so the funding link is broken. Does the Government intend to have a protocol and structure in place to fund academies' capital needs?

Ans: We need to talk more about this. Where there are large housing developments free schools and academies do get involved in providing places.

Qu 10 (Nigel Gann, Independent Consultant): I am gratified by the explosion of training for governors and clerks, but where is the training for headteachers on working with governing bodies? (Loud applause!)

Ans: We must look at this. The relationship can be a difficult one.

Qu 11: (Mark Blois, Browne Jacobson): With the scale of an umbrella trust, where does this leave a 'Local Governing Body'? I am chair of a large primary academy trust. We have a small board but there are 80 to 90 governors across the schools in the trust. I don't want a two-tier system.

Ans: I am a fan of smaller governing bodies and believe they make more dynamic bodies. The local GBs should be advisory boards or 'local governing bodies with less (ie no) power. However you should listen to them and they should be accountable for the advice and views they give.

Qu 12: (Graham Briscoe) My FE experience gives me a sense of *déjà vu*. After incorporation there was online guidance for governors and clerks. Can I suggest that you speak with BIS and review FE governance to see if there are lessons to learn from there?

Ans: Thank you for the prompt to talk to BIS about this

Qu 13: (Patricia Astwood, Calderdale): Some years ago we began refurbishing all secondary schools *and* there was some money for our antiquated Victorian primary schools. This all stopped, so where will we get money to give all our children the best environment for learning?

Ans: I'm a fan of Victorian buildings! However I do know that the school estate is not in great shape. There is an extra £1bn for targeted basic needs. BSF was profligate with money and we estimate that £10bn more than was needed was spent for the building work that was done.

Qu 14: (Mark Rogers, representing LA chief executives?): Michael Wilshaw has said that LAs should be the middle tier and challenge every school. Your comment?

Ans: I don't agree with everything Sir Michael says. The Government believes that the best support for schools is peer-to-peer support and federations. I don't believe LAs have done a good job.

[We are grateful once again to Judith Bennett, former Chair of NGA for this report]