

Governing Bodies and the Challenge of Challenge

The mantra of 'challenge and support' has long been an accepted aspect of the governing body role, but all of us in the governance world are well aware that it is the challenge aspect of the role which causes the most angst, both to governors, but also to headteachers and other senior leaders who are supposedly subject to the 'challenge', as well as the more comforting 'support'.

Why 'challenge'?

Perhaps in any discussion such as this, the starting point should be an understanding of the purpose of challenge. Put simply, it is part of the governor role in securing school improvement. All governing bodies should routinely, in their quest to fulfil their core responsibilities of ensuring good conduct and high standards in their schools, be seeking to understand what their school needs to do to improve, and how well their school is progressing towards achieving that improvement. It is in this monitoring role that the technique of questioning and challenge is used so that the governing body can reassure itself that the school is doing the very best that it can to secure continual school improvement for all the community's children. And this should be the case in all schools. Ofsted may not routinely inspect outstanding schools, but, using school performance data they risk assess those schools that they don't anticipate inspecting. If there are any indicators of slippage in conduct or standards, then they are likely to start asking questions (to challenge), and this can lead to an inspection. So even in outstanding schools governors should not suspend the questioning and challenge aspect of their role, for they too need to be in possession of certain information which can provide the basis for being assured that the school is improving. (And I would argue that if all the priorities and targets for improvement are being routinely met, then they are not challenging enough ... and in themselves should be challenged.)

Information, information, information

So how do governors get hold of the information they will need to reassure themselves and, if necessary to question and challenge? Especially when it is often said that governors don't know what they don't know? However, governors should know about the school improvement cycle, and that key priorities for school improvement should be identified, and that targets should be agreed to show how the school will work towards in achieving those priorities. In order to measure progress towards these priorities and targets, governors will need to work with the leadership team so that they can understand what information is available, and in what form it can be presented, in order to demonstrate the progress being made (or not ... and if so, why not). It is being in possession of the right information in the right form – and it is the school's leadership team's responsibility to provide this – which will pave the way for questioning and challenge.

This may sound straightforward, but all too often it isn't. There are generally two reasons for this, the first being that governors don't reach a clear understanding with the leadership team about the information that is needed and in what form; the second being that the school's leadership team may feel insecure and/or defensive of their position, and so is uncomfortable about providing information, let alone being challenged on what is being provided.

Monitoring school improvement

I have recently become interested in the notion of addressing this whole issue by developing a policy on monitoring school improvement – in effect formalising the process. The policy can then make clear:

- the legal responsibility the governing body has for conduct and standards
- how this responsibility is recognised in the school's aims and objectives
- how the school uses its school improvement cycle to achieve its aims and objectives
- how the school monitors progress

- how the governing body monitors progress

It is in this final section that there is the opportunity to agree with all parties what data and information should be made available (and for example, how far back trend data should go), and in what form, how the headteacher should report on progress towards agreed priorities and targets, and how formal governor visits will link to monitoring progress towards achieving these priorities. (This is also a convenient place to define the protocols for such visits, how such visits are reported, and what constitutes a formal visit ... as opposed to an informal visit and volunteering.)

Once such a policy is agreed, the business of questioning and challenge is depersonalised, and therefore should become easier. So if the data isn't forthcoming as agreed, or the head's report doesn't address progress against targets, or there is a suggestion that the governors' visit this term should involve helping out at sports day, then challenging the issue is not a personal challenge, but is one necessitated in order to adhere to the agreed policy.

Training and preparation

Governors of long experience will probably have worked with heads and senior leaders from both ends of the spectrum ... those who absolutely hate and resent any form of questioning or challenge and who are past masters at wriggling away from providing any sort of data or evidence which may provide the governing body with even the slightest clue as to what is going on with either conduct or standards (including financial conduct) in their schools, and those who are open and receptive to questioning, challenge and ideas – in other words the complete opposite. It is perhaps unsurprising that it is in the former scenario where relationships are more likely to become strained or to break down completely.

And this brings me to my final points. It has long been an NGA view that it is not just governors who need training in their monitoring role, but that headteachers need to be better trained and prepared to understand not only how monitoring fits into the governance framework in which schools operate, but also the culture of accountability that the framework represents. Challenge is a part of this framework, as it is part of any healthy system of accountability.

Finally, we know that really successful schools have school leaders who positively enjoy and encourage questioning and challenge because they understand that it is by being transparent and open to challenge, that they will make their schools even better.

Clare Collins
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(Clare is Chair of the National Governors' Association. We are indebted to her for her contribution to this issue of the Newsletter - Ed)