

NATIONAL GOVERNORS' ASSOCIATION

Conference: *Governors as Leaders*

Saturday, 19th November 2011

Jury's Inn, Birmingham

Clare Collins, Chair of NGA, opened the conference with a welcome to delegates.

Turning to the theme of the Conference – *Governors as Leaders* – she observed that governance was increasingly much in evidence. The White Paper had had a whole chapter on governance; the National College's remit had now changed from solely headteachers to include governors as leaders and the development of chairs' training was well under way; and Lord Hill acknowledged governors as prime decision makers. Instead of inching towards leadership acknowledgement we seemed at last to be motoring.

The first speaker to be introduced was Professor Chris James from the University of Bath, an old friend of NGA, who presented an update on his research into governance.

Chris began by referring to the World Trampolining and Tumbling Championships taking place in Birmingham: not a bad metaphor for governing, he felt, although perhaps stumbling may be more appropriate than tumbling. Turning to the topic more seriously, it was essential that schools were well led and well governed. Leadership meant influencing people but also taking responsibility and that was management. He asked who in the room was a chair of governors and who had been a chair (large response). Further, he asked who was chair of more than one school and who was the chair at more than two. More than two and he felt you were in need of therapy! He referred to the research he was undertaking with CfBT and his previous report, *The Hidden Givers*. The new project was looking at the role of chairs and involved seeking opinions from headteachers as well as chairs. He hoped to interview heads and chairs together. The research was feeding into materials for the new National College training for chairs.

Chris referred to the legal responsibilities: responsibility for the conduct of the school and to appoint a chair and vice-chair. The job was demanding and rewarding. There was talk of scaling the job down but he felt schools would lose by this. If you made the job difficult you attracted good people! When questioned, chairs clearly had a depth of feeling for the job but also emphasised that they were part of the collective. He continued by noting many aspects of the chair's role: the importance of relationship with a headteacher; the ability of a good chair to change the school and the governing body for the better; the significance of the chair in time of crisis; the in-school presence and involvement, and the significance and importance of this; working with parents; dealing with complaints; and chairing meetings.

The current research showed that 49% of chairs were female: 51% male; and 97% white British. About one third were 40 to 49 years old; a third were 50 to 59 years; and a third 60 years and beyond. Almost none were under 40, which was possibly not surprising. In terms of experience, on average those who replied to the survey had been governors for ten years and chairs for five years. 27% were parents of current pupils and 41% parents of former pupils. 61% were employed and 27% were retired. 70% of those employed were allowed paid time off for governance duties. Most chairs were professionals in terms of occupation – teachers or lecturers, doctors, lawyers, consultants, civil servants or managers/directors. Typically chairs spent one to six hours a week on governing issues, half at the school; 10% spent more than ten hours.

Chairs' and headteachers' views on governing body functioning. Overall both groups tended to agree. However, chairs had a more positive view. Chairs believed that governing bodies added to the school leadership: heads were not so positive; more heads than chairs felt that governing bodies struggled with managing the strategic-operational divide; heads had a more positive view about the amount of information provided at meetings!

The chair/headteacher relationship: overall relationships were strong; the two groups differed in their views on the frequency and length of interactions (chairs more frequent and longer); heads

accepted that chairs had to challenge them – chairs did not have such a positive view. Heads said that they were open with chairs: chairs did not necessarily agree.

Important aspects of chairs' practice: heads and chairs agreed on what was important. Leadership /group management skills (such as supporting effective teamwork and managing differences of opinion) were prioritised over functional skills (such as finance and HRM). The important skills were in managing the group to ensure collective functioning.

The role of the chair was complex, demanding and multi-faceted, yet hidden from view. The chair could impact powerfully upon schools and their governing bodies. The role involved boundary work: *between the school and the governing body and increasingly between their own and other governing bodies.* Finally, Chris concluded, the role is '*a significant educational and community leadership responsibility*'.

The second, and keynote, speaker of the day was Steve Munby, Chief Executive of the National College. When introducing Steve, Claire commented that he had always been very supportive of governors.

Steve began by referring to the partnership formed between the National College and NGA: it was a good and a powerful one. He was a fan of good governance and the Governing Council of the National College he found invaluable.

Steve referred to the great change in the educational world, with currently 1300 academies: by the end of next year more than 50% of secondary schools would be academies, with a significant number of primary schools too. There were 24 free schools and 70 on the way. The new Ofsted framework would concentrate on only four aspects of the school's performance and was raising the bar in terms of what constituted an Outstanding school. Secondary floor standards were being raised. The 200 primary schools, which had been below the floor for five years, would become academies; the 500 schools above that would be in talks about joining an academy chain. Other developments were the new Early Years' Reading Test, the E Bacc, and focus on behaviour and admissions. For a Government that said it would be 'hands off' this was rather a lot!

How should schools and governors react? One could ignore or challenge, but the best advice would be to understand the new context and then do what was best for the school. Steve then quoted Leonard Cohen: '*There's a crack, there is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in*'. He felt this was relevant to current times. He continued: 'if you're a chair of governors, the National College is now your National College'. Michael Gove wanted a strong relationship between governorship and leadership. Steve advocated distributing leadership across the school, and effective collaboration within a school and across schools. It was suggested that leadership in public life included intellectual capacity, wisdom, creativity, operational understanding, financial expertise, managerial competence, toughness, interpersonal skills; counselling and negotiating skills – and accountability for everything. But if this were so we would never attract people to be headteachers. The only way was to share out the responsibilities. But recent culture had said that we needed a 'hero head' to do everything. The best headteachers distributed tasks and the responsibility. This was where governors came in. You had to trust people to be there to deal with things. Heads needed to have governors so that they could work and make decisions with others. This was necessary across the governing body too. The best heads and the best chairs knew that they were not experts on everything. What was needed was a complete team.

In regard to effective collaboration within a school and across schools, Steve reminded the conference that according to the OECD there was greater variation in standards within schools and across schools in this country than in most other countries. This included variation in teachers within one school. Ofsted's Annual Report for 2011 stated that it was common to find satisfactory schools with outstanding teachers but that, because this was not always recognised, there was no opportunity to learn from one another and from the best. This hindered and undermined progress. A study from New Zealand, which looked at education across the world, noted five things that leaders did:

- 1 leading teaching and learning and the development of this;
- 2 having high expectations;

- 3 ensuring quality teaching;
- 4 resourcing strategically;
- 5 ensuring an orderly and safe environment.

Number one was the most important. This was important to the governing body, who must ask challenging questions about CPD to ensure that this was not just about Inset days but was truly embedded and always done well.

We were in an increasingly autonomous system with great diversity and great accountability. In New Zealand, autonomy had led to greater variation. What was needed was collaboration. Steve quoted Michael Fullan: *'It is the collaborative group that accelerates performance'*. In the past, underperformance was addressed by: closing a school and opening it as a 'fresh start school'; Ofsteding it to death; or putting in a successful head to address the issues. But there were not enough hero heads around – and too often the head's own school suffered as part of this process. Now the plan was to link the school in trouble to a successful school so that there could be collaboration at every level. This had led to National Leaders in Education and National Support Schools. The aim was to help a school in challenging circumstances and gave the school in trouble added capacity and a greater chance to improve. And the National Support Schools, evidence shows, continued to improve. Staff stepped up to the mark and could try out new leadership roles. There could be problems with governing bodies, however. Sometimes they did not see the positives in helping another school. There were two reasons for collaborating in this way: it was the right thing to do; and your school would do well out of it (and you would retain your head teacher longer). Steve referred to the improvement in results (5 A*–C) of standalone academies – 8.8%. The improvement in a chain was almost twice this – 14.1%. Chains influenced more than one school by using the best staff, the best opportunities, and the best governors across schools; and there was the advantage of economies of scale in purchasing. The picture was moving from the local authority and individual schools to chains, collaborations, federations etc. Governors were key in this. No one would tell you what to do: it would be your choice. Steve's advice on collaboration was to work only with people who were doing it for the children.

Steve then turned to Teaching Schools: this new initiative was exciting and scary. These schools would be identified as good schools. They would train new entrants to the profession; lead professional development of teachers; spot and nurture leadership potential; and provide support for other schools needing help. Schools would lead in what had been the job of LAs and universities. There would also be Specialist Leaders in Education: these would be very good at their job but *not* head teachers.

Steve then referred to system leadership for governors. The proposal was to create National Leaders in Governance. This role would involve system leadership, support for other schools and engagement in national policy. NLGs would support, advise and mentor governing bodies that needed help.

Finally, the training programme for chairs would look at: leading effective governance; building the team; the relationship with a headteacher; improving your school; and leading the business. Steve called on chairs to establish distributive leadership across the school and the governing body; to challenge the head about CPD for staff; and to be outward facing and willing to collaborate. And it was as important to consider succession planning for the chair's role as it was to look at this for headteachers; and it was important to develop the talent on the governing body.

It was easy at a time of change to be a victim: but it was important to be proactive and do what was best for the school.

Questions:

Qu 1 (Isobel Freeman: Manchester): if the criteria for training have not yet been set, couldn't training be for all governors, not just chairs?

No, at the moment it is just for current chairs (SM).

Qu 2 (Phil Hand: Cantell Maths & Computing College): There is a legal requirement to appoint a chair and you have acknowledged that a reluctant chair is not an advantage. Some governing bodies have appointed joint chairs and this has been effective.

Legally you must appoint a chair. You could distribute the responsibilities and so share the leadership indirectly (CJ)

Qu 3 (Andrew Walker: Bucks): You have not mentioned staff governors and they are in need of support. Also my school is a National Support School – shouldn't governors be used to support other schools too?

Staff governors are very important. They need great clarity about their roles as staff member and as governor. Research is being embarked upon in regard to staff governors (CJ)

It is important for governing bodies to support others schools. The National College's new remit should help encourage this (SM)

Qu 4 (Stan Terry: Oxfordshire): In the National College's document *Leading Governors*, you list various kinds of schools – academies, federations, free schools – what about ordinary community schools? Also you speak of governors serving and representing local communities, but how can this happen in an academy chain?

Amongst the new models, standalone schools are unlikely to be as successful as groups. Collaborating is important. Governors, even in a federation, can still have local responsibilities. It depends on the model chosen (SM).

Qu 5 (Brian Patterson: Dudley): You've talked about the relationship between headteachers and chairs. How much difference does the age of the head make to the relationship?

The age issue needs to be drilled into in the dataset. It may be important to ask if the chair appointed the head or if the head has worked with a succession of chairs (CJ).

Clare then introduced Les Walton, Chair of YPLA and founder of Northern Education.

Les talked about his background and then the many changes to education in each successive year. He entertained delegates by looking at some developments in relation to events on the world stage. LMS, CTCs and GM schools arrived at the same time as the Russians left Afghanistan; Polytechnics changed their status as the Berlin Wall fell; FE colleges were incorporated at the time the Maastricht Treaty was signed; and academies arrived in 2002 as Russian and American astronauts began to share the space station.

Les spoke about the roles of the head and the governing body, illustrating a policy framework by four overlapping circles. These were labelled organisational effectiveness framework, policy development framework, leadership and competencies, and quality standards. To illustrate the activity of the board of governors and the headteacher a slide displayed a clock face. A dividing line split the clock from 9 across to 3. At six points on the clock, activity was labelled: at 12 was 'set goals and objectives'; at 2, 'policies'; at 4, 'regulations'; at 6, 'operations documents'; at 8 'process reports with standards'; and 10 'product reports with standards'. Above the line sat the board's activity, and below the line the head's activity. Les pointed out that in the last 25 years successive Governments had treated governors as standing below the line and headteachers above the line. This was the wrong way round. He wondered why the National College had not included governors from the start – why train headteachers 'here' and governors 'there'?

Les expanded his ideas from his four overlapping circles and suggested that these created a framework for thinking. In looking at organisational effectiveness framework, he pointed out that systems were only of use if there was a purpose in the system. If the system did not have clarity and one did not look at the whole picture, the result would not be useful. You needed to have a checklist: systems, structural, curriculum, statistics – and you had to consider the climate in which you were

working. In leadership and competencies you needed a full range of skills. You needed to ask what your default style was and you must relate to the context and act accordingly. You needed quality standards but you could not rely on these entirely.

Finally, you needed a shared vision; you needed to establish clarity about roles and division of activity. Successful leadership needed flexibility, clarity of direction, an ability to assess the climate, as well as standards. You needed to know your key priorities. Highly effective governing bodies dealt with policy but also should dip into the operational when invited. You needed to look at what you were trying to affect and the most important thing was to be concerned with progression – and this included the pupils' love and joy of learning, and the keenness of young people to continue into the achieving of a good future life.

Clare Collins then summed up the conference before its close. She felt pride in the day because of the good speakers who had all made an effort to tailor their presentations to the audience. She thanked Chris James who was staying until the end – and for now being a governor. She liked Chris's quote that chairs should have 'elevated vision' and it was very interesting to hear the division between heads and chairs in their views of challenge, data and the role etc. Steve Munby had presented us with some new quotes. She was pleased that the National College had a role for governors now and she was confident that governance was now more firmly in NPQH core modules. Les Watson had been most entertaining and his policy clock was very interesting. Clare admitted that she still struggled with what was below the line and what was above. The Governance Review should have positive outcomes. She was confident that governors could do it all.

Clare ended by thanking exhibitors, sponsors, staff – and NGA members for attending today and wished everyone a safe journey home.

Judith Bennett
Oxfordshire Association of School Governors

(We are grateful to Judith for providing this article which was extracted from a longer write-up of the NGA Conference and AGM in November. Judith was formerly Chair of NGA and is still a member of its Board)