

NGA Winter Conference January 2010

School Improvement Partners

This was presented by Linda Kennedy, an Assistant Director at the DCSF and Di Barnes who is Operational Director at the National College (formerly known as the National College for School Leadership).

The two presenters outlined the proposed changes to the role of the School Improvement Partners (SIPs) as set out in the Government's White Paper "Your Child, Your Schools, Our Future: Building a 21st Century School System" which was issued in June 2009.

The dual aims of the changes are to build on current success and to meet the needs of the 21st Century School. The role of the SIPs will be both enhanced and widened. Not only will they be responsible for monitoring and challenge but they will also have a wider role in brokering school improvement support, increased leverage over weaker performing schools, act as the main agent for performance challenge between schools and their Local Authorities, making decisions about specialist school status and working in close partnership with the school's Governing Body.

The wider role for SIPs will include:-

- Supporting schools so as to improve ECM (Every Child Matters) outcomes for children, focusing on the whole ECM agenda and not just upon achievement.
- Brokering support for schools improvement. Weaker performing schools will have access to more SIP time.
- Increased leverage over weaker performing schools by making part of the schools funding for improvement contingent upon the SIP signing off the schools improvement plan.
- The SIP will become the single mediator between the school and the Local Authority.
- Making decisions concerning Specialist School Status

There will be training provided in order to enable SIPs to undertake the revised role and, in time, there will be both accreditation and re-accreditation for all SIPs to take into account their expanded role.

Quality Assurance will be ensured in a number of ways:-

- Through the reform of Performance Management
- By the introduction of a license to practice
- By reducing the time a SIP remains with a school from five to three years.
- By creating a national register of SIPs in order that they may be appropriately matched to each school
- By giving school governors a greater say in the choice of SIP
- By enabling governors to select a SIP from beyond their own local area.

It is recognised that governors will need to develop a much closer working relationship with their SIP. One suggestion is that two or three governors meet with

the SIP to discuss the annual report to clarify any questions that governors might have. It is also envisaged that SIPs will provide greater information and support to governors.

The National College is committed to working in partnership with Local Authorities, SIPs, Schools' Government Offices and Learners' Strategic Advisors. The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) has asked the National College to provide the relevant training.

The Timetable for the Implementation of the Programme is:-

- January 11th to April 9th 2010 Consultation
- April 2010 to April 2011 Design of the new programme
- April 2010 to April 2011 Design and Implementation of the SIPs National Register
- April 2011 Implementation of the new Re-accreditation programme.

There is online consultation and governors are encouraged to participate.

Phil Revell, former Chief Executive Officer of the NGA, writing in "Matters Arising" in January 2010, welcomed many of the new proposals in the White Paper, particularly the emphasis on the SIP as the single mediator. He felt that the National Database would enable governors to make an informed choice when selecting their SIP.

However, Phil identified some areas of concern. Whilst weaker schools may well receive more SIP time and challenge there is no definition as to what is meant by "weaker" and there is a risk that many value-added schools may become defined as being weak.

Whilst the Local Authority may intervene in disputes between the Governing Body and the SIP, the NGA is concerned lest Local Authorities intervene too quickly "not just on a standards issue, but where the school wishes to establish its own ethos and approach" and so jeopardise the independence of Governing Body decision making.

Phil questioned what would happen to a SIP if the school should fail. Since the Head and governors are held responsible in the event of school failure, he identified a need for defining the level of accountability of the SIP at the same time as increasing their powers.

His conclusion was that SIPs require high quality CPD (Continuous Professional Development) and that more Head Teachers, with the support of their Governing Bodies, should be encouraged to undertake SIP training.

Filling the Gap – School Governors' One-Stop Shop (SGOSS) and Northamptonshire County Council

This presentation was given by Steve Aklam, the Chief Executive of SGOSS, Martin Lawrence, the School Governance Advisor for Northamptonshire County Council and Hilde McNeil who had been recruited into governance by SGOSS.

SGOSS has the specific task of recruiting governors to state schools and in return receives support from the DCSF and from employers in order to carry out this role.

Steve and Martin explained the relationship and how the partnership has been successful.

The vacancies in Northamptonshire had been above the national average but the result of the partnership between the Local Authority and SGOSS had significantly reduced governor vacancies (from 20% to 7% for Local Authority governors). There had been 500 SGOSS placements, mostly with high level skills, which have made an impact by strengthening the leadership of governing bodies.

SGOSS had recruited volunteers with value-added transferable skills. They were able to match the skills of the individual to the needs of the school. Furthermore they had been able to dispel many of the myths about the suitability of individuals to become school governors (too old, too young, no previous knowledge of education, no children etc). The idea that there would be competition rather than co-operation with the Local Authority proved groundless; in fact, SGOSS, the Local Authority and the schools had all worked in partnership to fill the gaps.

Initially, some schools had viewed the partnership with a measure of scepticism, regarding them “as an agent of the Local Authority” spying on them. In time this was overcome and the Local Authority was able to introduce new initiatives which would have been, hitherto, impossible without the involvement of SGOSS.

The third speaker was Hilde, who gave her perspective as a recruited governor.

She had no previous experience of governance and had thought she might become a governor “in a nice girls’ school” but found herself as a governor in a primary school, which was in special measures and in a deprived area. The school had leadership and management issues. Despite her lack of experience Hilde soon found herself Chair of Governors. She subsequently took advantage of all the relevant governor training courses that were available. She talked with and listened to the staff and the children in order to identify the cause of the problems. Once changes had been made within the Governing Body and the way they worked, the school was able to move forward.

Martin Lawrence attributed the success of the project to a number of factors:-

- The long term perspective (as distinct from it being just a short-term “fix”)
- The genuine partnership between the County Council and SGOSS
- The shared commitment
- Having determined clear roles and responsibilities
- There being measurable objectives
- The streamlined nature of the process.

The Local Authority appointment process had been streamlined as the direct result of:-

- Integrated working by the SGOSS/County Council team
- The design of specific and appropriate materials by SGOSS
- The use of the website

- Holding local events for information sharing and for recruitment purposes
- The support from local companies in governor recruitment.

SGOSS had also built up good working relationships with local schools which helped in the recruitment of community governors.

It was agreed that working with SGOSS had both merits and demerits. The major aspects which were clearly beneficial included:-

- An increased understanding, to a wider audience, of the work of school governors in general
- An increase in the number of suitable governors recruited
- A far greater positive expectation of success by management

However there were a few negatives (even if these were outweighed by the positives):-

- The process was undeniably labour intensive
- It could be quite complex
- There could be a potential problem of matching supply with demand.

The final word came from Councillor Joan Kilbride (the deputy leader of the County Council) when speaking about “the enormous contribution that SGOSS has made to the schools” when she spoke of the diverse range of contacts and recruitment campaigns which have enabled Northamptonshire to attract hundreds of volunteers to the governing bodies at no cost to the Local Authority.

The actual procedure, as used by SGOSS, involves six main stages:-

1. Volunteers submit printed or electronic application forms to SGOSS
2. SGOSS enters the key information into their database and acknowledges the application
3. SGOSS liaises with the school to make mutually beneficial matches
4. The volunteer is encouraged to visit the potential school
5. SGOSS updates the volunteer on the progress made
6. The Local Authority (or the Governing Body) confirms the appointment.

During the process SGOSS remains in contact with the volunteers until the appointment is made.

Helen Edwards (The Sutton, Dudley Wood and Rosewood schools)