

## Ten ways to make your Governing Board more effective

Strong and effective governance is a vital component of successful schools. The professional leadership of the school should be accountable to a well informed, engaged, supportive and constructively challenging governing board.

Within the current Ofsted inspection framework, governance is viewed as part of the overall judgement of the leadership and management of a school. Where governance is weak and/or ineffective, this will inevitably pull the overall judgement down. This presents a real challenge to governing boards in terms of the weight of expectation placed upon governors, who are after all a volunteer force. It can also lead to difficulties in terms of the recruitment and retention of governors, particularly in view of the pressures they do not always feel equipped or supported to face.

Through supporting governors across the region in my role as West Midlands Stronger Governance Champion, it is clear that there is a wealth of good governance in place. In looking at what the most effective governing boards do, I have compiled a 'top ten tips for effective governance' in order to share good practice further.

1. **Training:** The most common barrier to effective governance is a lack of training. This can be due to access, availability, quality, or just a sheer unwillingness to attend. Training should be funded, and in my belief, should be mandatory. Where governors make best use of training this is through attending a combination of face to face training sessions, online training modules, and attending local and national governance events. When assigning a particular link governor role, we should ensure that specific training is in place to support colleagues in their role. Governor training should be identified and budgeted for within the school improvement plan, as this will feed into governor monitoring of school improvement priorities. The most effective boards take a collective responsibility for ensuring that an appropriate training and development plan is in place, mapped to identified skills gaps.
2. **Right Skills:** It is important to have the right people with the right skills around the table, and having an annual skills audit in place will support this. Analysis of identified skills gaps should be used to inform governor recruitment, particularly when entering into governor elections or dialogue with any appointing bodies such as Inspiring Governance, Academy Ambassadors and Future Chairs Recruitment Service. Desired skills should be set out when advertising vacancies and governors should only be recruited on the basis of the skills, experience and

expertise they can offer the board. The National Governance Association (NGA) have set out 8 elements of effective governance which they feel covers the right skills/right people around the table. This includes having an understanding of roles and responsibilities, good chairing, professional clerking, good relationships based on trust, knowing the school – data, staff, parents, pupils and community, having a commitment to asking challenging questions, and having the confidence to hold courageous conversations in the interests of children and young people.

3. **Roles and Responsibilities:** Governors need to have a good understanding of their roles and responsibilities, not least in terms of the three core functions of governing boards. Effective boards have a clear understanding of their corporate responsibility and of the strategic/operational split between the board and executive leaders. Having a robust induction process in place for new governors is vital, as is establishing a culture of governors keeping themselves up to date with educational and governance developments through training, online tools, attending governance events and reading relevant publications.
4. **Professional Clerking:** A well trained, independent clerk is a core component of good governance in terms of the legislative advice and guidance being provided. It is bad practice for a Headteacher's PA or equivalent to be taking the minutes of meetings, and this is often an area of concern raised within Ofsted inspections and external reviews of governance. An effective clerk can make a huge difference to the board's ability to challenge the information being presented to them, and can also have a significant impact upon managing and reducing administrative tasks. This is especially important given that many governors are already carrying out their role on top of another job.
5. **Self-Evaluation:** The ability to challenge each other is critical. Effective boards have a process in place for an annual review of the chair's performance, and also have a mechanism in place to discuss the performance and contribution of fellow governors. For colleagues who have made a significant contribution, this can be a useful way of providing thanks in recognition of their efforts. For those who have not, it can encourage them to reflect upon whether their being on the board is in the best interests of the school, and can offer a dignified way out. Allow time to discuss the role of governance at meetings, how does the board's self-evaluation compare with that of the school's in terms of strengths and weaknesses?
6. **Accountability:** It is vital to have a robust performance management system in place, supported by a well trained appraisal panel who have a good understanding of the target and objective setting process and who are knowledgeable about school improvement priorities. Effective boards ensure that

the outcomes of performance management are effectively linked to leadership pay, rewarding good performance and rigorously challenging underperformance.

7. **Learning from Others:** One of the most valuable aspects of face to face governor training is the opportunity to spend time with fellow governors and to discuss practice elsewhere. School to school support is still in a state of development and governance has a pivotal role to play within this. As the educational landscape shifts increasingly towards collaborative working, governing boards have been coming together in local clusters to share training, and to arrange meetings and forums with other governors so as to share best practice and resources.
8. **Stakeholder Engagement:** Effective governing boards ensure that stakeholders, staff, parents, Local Authority, Trust Sponsors, are regularly consulted about their views of the board and of how effectively it is carrying out its role. Governor visibility within schools and communities is central to this, and a lack of governor presence is a commonly identified area for development within reviews of governing board effectiveness. A lack of engagement can hinder the recruitment of governors from diverse sections of the community, and the most effective boards generally tend to have a diverse range of people around the table.
9. **Balanced Relationship:** A well balanced relationship between the governing board and executive leaders is crucial, however good a school is, and is vital in driving up standards. The single judgement in place for leadership, management and governance means that it is in everyone's interest to work together for the greater good of the school. School leaders have an important role to play in respect of working with the board to improve school governance. The best Headteachers are acutely aware that it is in the best interests of the school and its pupils to have strong and effective governance as a cornerstone, and they tend to do everything they can to support this – from ensuring there is a budget in place for the professional development of governors to producing high quality reports on performance data and progress against school improvement priorities.
10. **Strategic Direction:** Whilst we are often consumed with immediate priorities, it is equally important to ensure that we develop longer term aims for the school. Governors and school leaders need to have a clearly articulated and shared vision in place, which is regularly monitored and reviewed and which underpins the school improvement plan. Effective boards have a clear understanding of the school's developmental priorities and the progress being made against these.

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*{Ed: Thank you George for this article and congratulations at the same time on your new “championship” role. For many, more experienced, governors, much may seem to be familiar but we need to note that there is a strong correlation between the quality of governance in a school and its Ofsted category. If everyone of George’s ten tips were actually implemented by every GB would we have any “failing” schools at all? We have discussed with him the reference to the “Right Skills” and jointly acknowledge that there is a need for this to be amplified further in order to define soft skills and exemplars of hard skills – George has offered to produce a further article with this specific focus later}*