

“Whose School Is It Anyway – Experiences from the USA”

[The National Governors’ Association conference in November 2012 took as its theme “Whose School is it Anyway” – what follows consists of the Chair’s Introduction and the presentation given by Regina Paul, Vice- President, Policy Studies in Education, New York and is included to enable DAGB members to note similarities and differences between the UK and the USA systems].

Stephen Adamson, Chair of NGA, opened the conference with a welcome to delegates, and, referring to the theme of the Conference – ‘*Whose school is it anyway?*’ – he reminded delegates of the play, “*Whose life is it anyway?*” and commented on the appropriateness of this as governance was a way of life. Stephen then quoted Hargreaves and Fink: “*The hardest part of sustained leadership is the part that provokes us to think beyond our schools and ourselves*” (*Sustainable Leadership*), and HMCI, Sir Michael Wilshaw: “... *without strong and effective governance, our schools simply won’t be as good as they can be*”. (*NGA Policy Conference, June 2012*) and commented that our role was essential – ‘*No pressure there then!*’

There was often comment on governance not being good or effective enough, but, in visiting governors across the country, he saw enormous numbers of governors who understood and were committed to their role, and embraced it to improve schools and to work with the senior leadership to turn schools from not very good to good. Stephen felt we should talk less about challenge in our role and more about solutions. This was more positive and was what we should be looking for.

The key-note speaker, Regina Paul, explained the US system of School Boards: these were responsible for a varying number of schools in a school district. The School Boards were elected groups of lay people, who worked with the School Superintendent for the group. Regina worked with school leaders and school boards on curriculum, and on other responsibilities, and how best to fulfil these. The issue was often that school boards did not embrace their responsibilities. Her argument was that they must do this, and make their governance role clear, or someone outside would impose decisions on them. This imposition would come from State government, as in the USA education was a state responsibility, not a national/federal one. It was essential that school boards took control, and that it was not left to the Superintendent to take control.

Regina used a clock face as a diagram to show an overview of responsibilities, the ‘Policy Clock’. (*Using a standard clock and identifying 12, 2, 4, 6, 8 and 10 o’clock*). The clock illustrated the six key decision points (with their associated documentation) in the operations of the school district. Clockwise the goals and objectives (*12 o’clock*). guide the choice of policies (*2 o’clock*) that will shape the schooling required to produce the learning called for by the goals and objectives Those policies frame the regulations (*4 o’clock*) that will further shape the schooling. The schooling will be described first in operations documents (*6 o’clock*) and then in process reports (*8 o’clock*), and those results will be compared to the goals and objectives, thus closing the circle.

Anti-clockwise, unsatisfactory product reports (*10 o’clock*) require a look first at process reports and then at operations documents to find flaws that require corrections in the schooling by modifying regulations and/or policies to increase the likelihood of accomplishing the goals and objectives. School boards should be concerned with the upper half of the clock face -- Goals and Objectives (see note 1), Policies (note 2) and Product Reports with Standards (note 6). The lower half of the circle – Regulations (note 3), Operations Documents (note 4) and Process Reports with Standards (note 5)-- fell within the authority of the Superintendent.

Regina explained that teachers felt there was too much testing. She asked how often governing bodies received reports on progress and results – and pointed out that once a year was not enough to ensure that problems were identified and action taken. She spoke of the importance of setting high goals and illustrated this with the tale of a Superintendent who had asked the group of school principals to look at the previous test scores and draw a line where they wanted results to be the following year. He encouraged them to be optimistic. He then had their aspirations published in the press. There was general alarm – but the schools met these aspirational targets. She finished her presentation by taking questions.

Qu.1 (Comment) (Graham Briscoe, Hayesfield Girls' School) governor at a school and at an FE college: Thank you for the presentation and I recognise the 'Carver Model', which is used at FE colleges. I am interested in this as FEs have been out of LA control for some time.

Qu.2 (Jo Wakeham, Cornwall Governors' Network): There is a problem in the UK in recruiting governors. When recruited, these are usually parents, and often unemployed. In the US are parents involved in school boards?

Yes, they are all parents, and elections are hotly contested. All are welcome, employed or not. Parents campaign because being on the board is important and an honour. It is often the first step to higher local office.

Qu.3 (Jim Conway, Dudley Association): It is important to get members of a school or FE governing body to take control and understand the role. Could you give any advice?

Get one or two to lead the way and be persistent in pressing for control.

Qu.4 (David Fisher, Brixton): it has taken the governing body five years to move from being kept in a little box and fed little, to a partnership between the governing body and Head and SLT. The question is do people really understand policy? How do you train people to know what policy is and isn't?

This is the role of the NGA, to help governing bodies understand this. They need good models, and once they figure this out they never look back.

Qu.5 (Harry Ewins, Crosby High School): The concern is that governors use performance management to manage schools, and don't set specific enough goals for headteachers.

Until they do Heads can run rings around governors.

Qu.6 (Cynthia Carmichael, Liverpool Governors' Association): Is there compulsory training for governors in the US?

Some states do have training that governors are expected to take up but they cannot insist on this. There is a lot of school board training and it is strongly suggested to members.

Qu.7 (Richard Thompson, NGA Trustee, Hackney Association): We hear a lot about Charter Schools in the US and the argument for the academies' programme often cites Charter Schools as an example.

There are a variety of Charter School models; they are not all the same. New York City has Charter Schools and New Orleans has the most unusual model. But this is not what we usually do. Most schools are public schools. Research in the US shows that Charter Schools are no more effective than public schools.

The following definitions relate to the notes 1 to 6 inclusive contained earlier.

Note 1 – (12 o'clock) Goals & Objectives – these are descriptions of what students must learn in school – what they must know, feel and do. Curriculum goals and objectives are the ends of schooling. They are prepared and proposed by the superintendent and the professional staff and then judged and adopted by the Board. Until they are set, the clock cannot start ticking.

Note 2 – (2 o'clock) Policies – these are general means statements, prepared and proposed by the superintendent and other school personnel and then judged and adopted by the board to guide the superintendent and other school personnel in achieving the curriculum goals and objectives that the board adopted at 12 o'clock. Policies are guides for discretionary action. They must truly guide the superintendent and other school personnel in what to do; and, yet, they must allow discretion in making fine-grained decisions about the detailed means for achieving the 12 o'clock goals and objectives.

Note 3 – (4 o'clock) Regulations – these are detailed means statements for achieving the 12 o'clock curriculum goals and objectives. Regulations are specification of required action directing school personnel as to what they must do. They are prepared and adopted by the superintendent (usually upon the recommendation of other school personnel) to carry out the policies adopted by the board. Regulations are not adopted by the board.

Note 4 – (6 o'clock) Operations Documents – These are the detailed plans, procedures, schedules, announcements and memoranda used daily to operate the schools, pursuant to the policies and regulations. They are designed and written by the superintendent, other central office administrators, building administrators, professional committees and individual teachers as they exercise their authority. Operations documents control a thousand details in the operations of instruction, buildings and grounds, finance, personnel, student activities and community relations.

Note 5 – (8 o'clock) Process Reports with Standards – These are reports designed by the superintendent and other school personnel that tell whether the policies and regulations are being followed and whether the operations are being carried out to standards set by the superintendent. They tell whether the planned processes are in place. Prepared by the superintendent and other administrators to monitor their own activities, process reports can provide distant early warnings of possible failure to reach the 12 o'clock curriculum goals and objectives – warnings that come early enough to trigger corrective action.

Note 6 – (10 o'clock) Product Reports with Standards – these are the reports that tell the superintendent and the board the degree to which the 12 o'clock curriculum goals and objectives have been achieved. Thus they are reports of student learning – knowledge, attitudes and skills – compared to standards recommended by the superintendent and adopted by the board to judge student learning. Product reports tell the board whether the order it placed at 12 o'clock was filled by the superintendent, staff and students.

Note also that the US term “Public Schools” aligns with the UK “State Schools”.

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)