

Governing Strategically

Most governors are used to reading through the Ofsted reports of their own school and some to reading those which relate to other schools, but rarely do they peruse large numbers of such reports. Anyone who does and who also reads the annual report that Ofsted produces will be able to see, quite rapidly, that certain patterns show up all too frequently, that some of the same criticisms of governing bodies tend to repeat themselves. A few years ago there was far less emphasis on the efficacy of the governing body than there is today but things change and governors find themselves more in the spotlight than ever before.

Critically, two generalisations can be made. The first is that there is a strong link between the reported quality of governance and the overall grading for a school; 'Good' and 'Outstanding' overall gradings correlate very strongly with favourable comments about the quality of governance and it is rare to find instances of good governance in cases where the school is 'in need of improvement' or worse.

The second point and one of the most consistent criticisms in cases where governance is less than satisfactory is that the governing body is failing to operate strategically and spends (wastes) too much effort in dealing with operational matters.

The Department for Education says that the Governing Body should operate at a strategic level (as a non-executive board) so leaving the head teacher and senior school leaders responsible and accountable to the GB for the operational day-to-day running of the school. The GB should focus strongly on three core functions:-

- Setting the vision and the strategic direction of the school
- Holding the Head Teacher to account for its educational performance and
- Ensuring that financial resources are well spent.

The first of these core functions involves a clarity of vision and ethos and both meeting the statutory duties of any GB and engaging with the groups of stakeholders. The vision and ethos describe the sort of school the GB wants it to be in three to five years time – usually as a relatively short and well-focussed statement such as “Learning Today, Leading Tomorrow” or the rather longer “All young people leaving our care move confidently onto further study or employment having enjoyed our long-standing traditions, achieved their full potential and developed the skills and personal qualities that will ensure future success in an ever-changing international society”. Whether it is succinct or whether wordy is for the GB to determine but most people would favour something fairly short as long as it encapsulates what the GB wants to see happen.

Based upon this vision the GB will set goals and agree the school's development plan, setting targets or Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for each priority both in the short and in the longer term. Most of the business of any GB meeting should be structured around monitoring progress towards these targets or KPIs. At the end of the year there should be a formal review and evaluation of that strategy.

The second function deals with accountability – and must involve regular monitoring of the quality of teaching, achievement, behaviour and safety. Note that governors should not attempt to judge the quality of teaching for themselves – in general they lack the necessary experience to do so – but it is for the Head Teacher to ensure that this is done in an effective manner and to report back to the GB as is deemed appropriate. The GB appoints the Head Teacher in the expectation that they will undertake this, as many other functions, as part of their job description. That same accountability involves strengthening the school leadership in conjunction with the Head Teacher and the Performance Management of the Head Teacher – it also includes making contributions to the school self-evaluation.

The third function relates to financial probity – is the school solvent and is there an effective financial management structure in place. Some years ago the direct management of the school's finances was within the compass of the Head Teacher – but it was always exceptionally unlikely that they had the necessary skills to handle this and, even if they were so competent, it was always going to be a distraction from their primary role within a school; nowadays the majority of schools have a bursar or business manager to handle such functions. The GB should also be able to deal with the effective use of resources such as the Pupil Premium in order to overcome any barriers which might exist to the learning of the children in the school.

Despite the majority of governors being aware of the foregoing it is still not uncommon to find a GB dealing with operational matters. For instance discussing and agreeing a building project might well be acceptable as a strategic action for governors whereas obtaining quotes for the work to be done is essentially an operational matter and should be left for the school (usually for the business manager) to do. Likewise interviewing and selecting senior leaders is a legitimate governor action insofar as such appointments impact directly upon the strategic direction of the school; on the other hand the selection of mainstream teachers is not at all strategic and should be left for existing senior leaders within the school to action.

Governors really ought not to be involved in conducting audits (e.g. for health and safety) but they should nonetheless ensure that such audits are carried out by suitably qualified professionals. If a governor offers to help the school with book-keeping (possibly because this is an area of their individual expertise) then this should not be done in their capacity as a school governor. That same governor might however well help in receiving and discussing a financial audit report.

The monitoring of reports created by senior staff concerning quality of teaching against pupils' outcomes is a legitimate component of the agenda for a GB meeting; this is especially true when these relate to aspects of the school development plan.

Especially when a governor is new to a school it might well be appropriate for them to be involved in a few non-strategic activities but only for the purpose of gaining greater familiarisation with the school and how it operates.

A number of situations are presented below. Why not ask yourself or discuss with colleagues which of them are strategic and which are operational (and are there any which appear to fall between the two):-

- Writing the school prospectus

- Agreeing the Staff Performance Appraisal Policy
- Listening to children read
- Allocating resources to improve reading levels
- Appointing the Deputy Head Teacher
- Attending a parents' consultation evening
- Taking part in staff interviews
- Undertaking a Health and Safety Audit
- Checking the central single record
- Discussing the use of the Pupil Premium
- Undertaking the Performance Management of a member of staff
- Writing tenders and bids
- Discussing the Head Teacher's termly report
- Giving pro-bono legal advice
- Going into class to observe the quality of teaching
- Receiving the audit report of the School Fund

In summary, examine ALL the activities undertaken by your Governing Body and try to eliminate items of an operational nature so that it is better able to focus on the strategic.

Praefectus vulgaris