

NATIONAL GOVERNORS' ASSOCIATION

March 2011 Conference Short Report

Wednesday 2 March 2011

Lancaster Hotel, London

School Improvement

This second NGA conference for those professionals who work with governors proved once more a full and successful day. Some speakers used PowerPoint presentations and these are available on the NGA website, through the e-newsletter.

NGA's Chief Executive, Emma Knights, opened the conference and welcomed delegates before introducing the first speaker, Cllr Rita Krishna, Cabinet Member for Children's Services in the LB Hackney and a member of the LGA's C&YP Programme Board.

The local government role in School Improvement – Cllr Krishna spoke of the work NGA and LGA had done together in the run up to the Education White Paper and stressed that this work would continue through the passage of the Education Bill and beyond. The White Paper and the Bill did not give great detail about the roles of local authorities and governors, but this was an opportunity therefore to define the new roles for ourselves. She welcomed the way the strategic role of LAs was set out and the position of champions of standards. They were in a strong position to do this and only elected councillors, working with headteachers and governing bodies, could achieve this aim. Cllr Krishna reminded delegates that schools had more autonomy than the press ever outlined – testament to this was the *Guide to the Law for School Governors*, with its 200 pages or, if you followed all the links, 5000 pages, underlining just how wide the autonomy and responsibility was. The LA role in school improvement was to be champions of children and parents and the promoters of excellence. Schools should become responsible for their own improvement. They would choose their own support. However, it was important that the type and level of support should best suit the local situation. Of course, cuts would impact on matters as the education budget was only protected in relative terms – and provision would cost more and would be threatened if large numbers of schools went elsewhere to seek support. At the LGA/NGA workshop in December governors had expressed concern about the rapid pace of change before new provision and arrangements were in place. Relationships between schools and LAs had to be a partnership in which there was brokering of relationships, provision of challenge and commissioning of support. Schools needed to be involved in what was needed and how this was provided.

LAs were to be champions of educational excellence in all schools, including academies and free schools. They would have the power to refer schools to Ofsted and to the Secretary of State. One thing that was important to know was the 'soft' areas of provision and this would be more difficult for LAs to judge. LGA would ask for formal thresholds for judgements and seek to work more informally to ascertain this 'soft' data.

Questions:

- Luca Salice (Camden): Although academies are supposed to be part of the partnership of schools, other schools resented aspects of their operation especially admissions. *In Hackney there was a mixed economy as the borough was short of schools, so academies were embraced. There was always a perception regarding academies' intake, but this was not the case in reality.*
- Brian Patterson (Dudley): The LA always had, and still need, a role in good school leadership, but financial constraints meant this was reduced, so it was difficult to address issues. We need as many exemplars of good practice across the country as possible to

share with others. *Good value was reliant on good relationships. These were already there and should be built upon. We need strong relationships at local level.*

- Unknown: We have a new school: schools feed into this sixth form. We are concerned about the pupils who are excluded and at PRUs in the future. Will schools now have to deal with the pupils? *Heads will need to work together to see what the best provision is.*
- Stephen Adamson (Norfolk, NGA Vice-Chair): With state funded schools inside and outside of the 'state' sector, and loss of SIPs' compulsory role, so there is less direct contact with schools – is there a danger that LAs can only look at data to assess schools? *In LAs there has always been a lot of soft knowledge too, and this may be maintained. If governors see problems they need to seek help or refer issues.*

The second presentation (*see slides*) – *The Schools Commissioner's role in supporting schools to improve* – was given by Dr Elizabeth Sidwell, CEO, Haberdashers' Aske's Federation and Schools Commissioner designate. Dr Sidwell confessed she usually spoke to headteachers so had to ensure she was aiming at governors. She spoke about the Federation, the large number of schools it encompassed and how it was established. She shared the information that the Federation had made provision for all its primary pupils to have a free lunch. She believed much could be achieved by a strong Head and strong governing body. Turning to her new role, as Schools Commissioner, she would be working with the DfE, Heads, schools and governors to ensure that pupils got the education they deserved. There was a DfE team who would work with her and with LAs on schools that were below the 'floor'. She looked forward to more academies, and to the Education Bill so that there could be more independence and opportunities to innovate, with help for instance from the Education Endowment Fund.

Questions:

- Robert Moreland (Kennington): Are you saying that big is beautiful? You didn't mention admissions or admissions rules. I am concerned about pastoral care in such a large institution. *No, big is not beautiful, but it allows economies of scale. We have a split site and we made that an advantage; we have a house system to break down size and have year heads. There are high-level people across the school, who do know their pupils, and Ofsted commended the pastoral care. In admissions, we follow the Code. I am a believe in comprehensive education*
- Pat Lopez (Plymouth): How did you fund the free school meals? *We made savings by bulk buying across the schools.*
- Ian Jerome (Lewisham): Standards are important but you mentioned 'branding' – how important is PR/marketing? *Branding is important and we're fortunate to have the Haberdashers' name. Find something special to your school and use it.*
- Angela Dunkerley (N. Lincs): A plea that, despite all the pressures on LAs, governors need access to all the support they need to carry out the role. *I'm concerned that I can't think of an answer, but I will take this back to DfE.*

The final speaker before the refreshment break was Dame Yasmin Bevan, Executive Principal of Denbigh High School and Challney High School for Boys, and a National Leader in Education. Dame Yasmin – *School-to-school improvement and the role of the National College* – spoke about the use of National and Local Leaders in Education (NLEs and LLEs) and Teaching Schools. The impact of NLEs and LLEs had been recognised in the White Paper. She explained Teaching Schools and school-to-school support – a collaborative system that was self-sustaining and that led to good teaching and good outcomes for children. And finally, Dame Yasmin shared the criteria for becoming a Teaching School and the role of Specialist Leaders in Education (SLEs). (*See slides for detailed information.*)

Questions:

- Helen Fiorini (Bromley): How do teaching schools tie in with the academies agenda? Must schools in partnerships become academies? *No requirement to change status to become a*

teaching school. Existing partnerships are not the same as teaching school partnerships. Of course, teaching schools can apply to become academies.

- Jim Conway (Dudley): National College – where do governors fit in? *I omitted governors as I was asked to speak about Teaching Schools, but I believe the National College will be training governors.*

The second half of the morning began with Anders Hultin, Managing Director for School Improvement at Pearson. He spoke of the gap between English standards of attainment and international comparisons (PISA data). The gap seemed to be caused by the measuring of different things, or that other countries had better systems that moved attainment further. Here there was an emphasis on what was learned, on facts: elsewhere it was on how to apply learning. As the labour market had moved and skills needed had changed, it was necessary to look at future needs and to create a curriculum that reflected this. McKinsey had produced research on how national school systems improve, and how much intervention was needed for improvement depending on the state of any system. It looked at what was needed at school level, at the need for excellent leadership, behaviour, teachers' ownership of their classrooms and curriculum. It needed common values for leadership to be strong; and a shared culture based on the aim of making children independent learners. Pearson wanted to be a mediator, to help schools improve and to develop. *(See slides for full details.)*

The final speaker of the morning was Lord Hill, Under-Secretary of State for Education. He expressed his gratitude to NGA for all its work on behalf of governors, and the work of all governors. The governing body was the key body for school improvement. The White Paper and the Education Bill were both important to governance, giving governing bodies flexibility, emphasising training for Chairs, and the importance of a professional clerk. Ministers wanted schools to have greater autonomy and wanted to give greater trust to frontline professionals, and the best performing systems combined autonomy with a good framework of accountability. One way to freedom was through academy status – there were more academies opening all the time. The Government also looked to reduce bureaucratic burdens and Lord Hill invited delegates to send him any ideas. DfE wanted to provide more data, so performance tables were important but so was knowledge that schools helped children from all backgrounds. Moving to the new E Bacc, Lord Hill felt this was a good measure of what schools were achieving. The Pupil Premium would help disadvantaged pupils, as would the Education Endowment Fund. Teach First numbers would be doubled and primary schools would be eligible for the first time. Finally, there was school-to-school collaboration, NLEs and LLEs and Teaching Schools. *(See NGA website for text of speech.)*

Questions:

- Unknown (Cheshire): With the reduced inspection visits, the loss of SIPs and the abandonment of the SEF, governors are concerned about how standards will be monitored. *Ofsted was trying to be more proportionate, but would carry out risk assessments and continue with thematic surveys. Also parents could raise concerns with Ofsted, and LAs should be able to identify issues and ask Ofsted to visit. The SEF had never been compulsory. What was needed was good self-evaluation but not within the constraints of one framework, such as the SEF.*
- Judith Bennett, (Oxfordshire and NGA Hon. Sec.): In regard to the E Bacc, would it not have been better to allow schools to know what would be the focus of the E Bacc so that they could consider this in their curriculum decisions, rather than imposed it retrospectively? *It was supposed to be just a snapshot to show where schools were in relation to certain subjects.*

(Emma Knights advised at this point that the NGA summer conference would have as speaker the author of the OECD report.)

The afternoon began with an excellent presentation by Tom Winskill, Ofsted HMI. Tom said that Ofsted was currently wrestling with what the new framework would look like. He then drew attention to the 2009/10 HMCI Annual Report, published in November 2010, which looked at 20 outstanding primary schools 'excelling against the odds'; twelve secondary schools 'excelling against the odds'; and twelve outstanding special schools 'excelling through inclusion'.

In the national picture there were four challenges: moving schools from satisfactory to good or outstanding; developing a culture of continuing improvement; achieving consistency in teaching right across schools; and the issue of school outcomes being related to advantage – although there were school that excelled in challenging circumstances. The issue was that the children were in the challenging circumstances and the best schools recognised the symptoms and provided support through the bad experiences and helped children to achieve. We must not detach ourselves from the needs of the child.

On the journey to achieving excellence, the Head should drive and lead improvements; very high standards must be set and communicated to people so that they shared them and felt ownership. It was important to take people with you; to lead by example; to involve pupils and parents so they were engaged and committed; to set and demonstrate high standards in teaching and learning; and to know the school inside out. One should look at the curriculum and the pupils' school day experience; monitor and evaluate every aspect; ensure staff adopted and adhered to consistent approaches to T&L, school policies and behaviour. Above all the staff 'needed to be on the bus when the school embarked on its journey to improvement.

Tom then went through the key features of outstanding primary and secondary schools (see slide presentation). He then spoke about system leadership, and finished by considering what to do next: read the 2009/10 report and use it to frame questions to support self-evaluation and improvement; consider the barriers to improvement and the challenges to overcome and ensure that these were addressed.

Questions:

- Fred Manning (Nottingham City and NGA East Midlands Regional Director): Since 1999 and becoming a unitary authority, Nottingham City schools have been at the bottom of league tables. I agree with all that is on your slides, but they presuppose the Head is on board. But if this isn't the case the governing body and staff have a problem. *It's crucial that the Head is on board. If not the Head must be challenged, and then governors must work with the LA to overcome the situation by concentrated effort.*
- Mostyn Lewis (London): You focus on primary and secondary schools, not special, but much of this is relevant to special schools. Is there a model for special schools? *The basic principles are the same as for primary and secondary schools. In fact the same things apply to all schools – nursery, 6th Form, all. See the report about 'Twelve outstanding special schools'.*
- Unknown: What of the variations in the Ofsted frameworks in regard to governors and the inspection of governing bodies? *In the new framework the governing body will be part of the assessment for Leadership and Management, though not a separate category as at present, but there will be account taken of the GB and its responsibilities and how it is fulfilling these.*
- Unknown (Wandsworth): When will the new framework, and the loss of the SEF, come into practice? There has been talk of 2011. *The new framework should be introduced in January 2012. The SEF was never compulsory and the current framework for it will be withdrawn from September 2011.*

The next session of the conference was a panel discussion, before which there were two short presentations by Rick Muir of IPPR and Sir Alasdair Macdonald, Head of Morpeth School.

Rick Muir spoke of the challenge of narrowing the gap, of the need for a focus on Early Years provision and the importance of not just focussing on failing schools, as these

numbers had fallen considerably. It was important to improve teaching, but it had to be recognised that you couldn't always spot at the beginning who would prove to be a good teacher. There was a need to look at good CPD, peer support and peer learning. The Pupil Premium would provide support, but not enough, and there was no way of knowing if it would be spent on the children for whom it was destined. Again increased autonomy would not lead to improvement if it were not linked to accountability. Competition and more parental choice could lead to more variance in equality. There should be a focus on disadvantaged schools. Finally Rick was concerned that the E Bacc would not help, nor would the abandonment of the Education Maintenance Grant.

Sir Alasdair Macdonald admitted that many things he had planned to say had been covered by others so he was thinking on his feet. The current situation, with budget cuts, was likely to widen the gap in levels of achievement. At Morpeth School what happened in the classroom was of great importance, and there was a focus on input and outcomes. However, pupils came with baggage and this created barriers to learning. And if you wanted teachers' efforts to be productive you had to get others things in school right. The school moved to a supportive ethos and what surrounded classrooms. It had been important to get families on board and then pupils wanted to come to learn. There was a focus on supplementary learning, better experiences and raising expectations. They had begun with a group of pupils who were the hardest to reach but who had fair ability. Pupils, who did well in GCSE, would then dropped out of 6th form college. 35 pupils were picked up again and eventually 21 of them went into Higher Education. If you wanted to narrow the gap, you had to do this by looking at what happened outside the classroom. Sir Alasdair's great fear was that, in a time tight budgets, the soft targets would lose out. Perhaps the Pupil Premium should be used for this so that there was a concentration on the 'outside things' and these were placed at the core of what you were doing.

The two speakers joined the panel, other members of which were Chris Montacute (SSAT), Laurie Thraves (LGiU) and Jennifer Allan (DfE). Chris Montacute shared some observations: as a Head you had to connect with students and tweak the expectations of staff; you had to win hearts and minds; networking was useful so you could borrow and share ideas. Laurie Thraves commented that governors had not been mentioned much. Schools were not islands; they were supported by the community, and run by representatives of the community, and parent governors were very important. Governors needed to probe and ask questions. Education was broader than league tables, so Laurie was encouraged by Sir Alasdair's words.

Questions to the panel:

- Richard Gorrington (Wandsworth): There has been much emphasis on teaching, but what is the definition of teaching in people's minds? Learning can take place through electronic devices, through things wider than the classroom.
- Brian Patterson (Dudley): I am not convinced that the curriculum used in the classroom is right for all. More vocational provision is needed.
- Robert Moreland (Kennington): My starting point is what parents ask for at open days is to stretch the boys and the right ethos and pastoral care. The Pupil Premium will have difficulty in stretching to fulfil all needs. We have 25% who would qualify, but the rest of the pupils are only slightly above that.

Rick Muir: The status of vocational education is an issue and has had less investment.

Schools can't compensate for all the ills in the rest of pupils' lives.

Jennifer Allan: Curriculum choice is important and Heads and governors need to look at what curriculum pupils need and challenge all pupils.

Sir Alasdair Macdonald: Curriculum is important and some of the vocational courses in past years were not actually vocational. We need to try something else and to target pupils who really need it.

Laurie Thraves: Yes, we need vocational education but we must also allocate time for work experience.

Chris Montacute: We need to give all pupils the ability to succeed.

- Beth Soule (Suffolk): The E Bacc is a strange animal. The continental version is taken at 18 not 16 and students are not expected to attain the same level in all subjects. The E Bacc is a blanket qualification and not sensitive to individuals. Are there discussions going on about making it sensible?
- Stephen Adamson (Norfolk and NGA Vice-Chair): We only need three designated people on a governing body now, according to the Bill. Isn't it time that Heads were not on the governing body? There would be better challenge if this was the case.

Jennifer Allan: As Lord Hill said, the E Bacc is just a snapshot, not a blanket qualification.

Sir Alasdair Macdonald: I have no strong feelings either way about the Head's presence on the GB. This isn't a problem at my school but if governors asked me not to be a part of the GB it would not be a problem for me.

The conference ended with an address by Lord Puttnam, who spoke about the *Way forward and supporting governing bodies with school improvement*. He confessed himself astonished that so many volunteered to be governors for so little tangible reward. He asked how many of those present were multi-millionaire bankers! (*No hands were raised.*) Governors were the 'better society' in action – not the 'big society'. Lord Puttnam was dismayed that words of Bertrand Russell in 1934 – 'There has never been a government that has put children at the forefront of their education' – still rang true. He had been interested by the question to the panel about technology: if we didn't engage with technology, young people would see education as something distinct from life. It was the case that the young did not trust us; we had stolen their jobs, their pensions, their food and water ... We needed to win back that trust; if we couldn't we couldn't help them or influence them. We needed to get the educational system right; it was *the* priority. This entailed quality of teaching; teacher training, non-negotiable and continuing; and the indisputable importance of the education of women. A world-class education system could underpin a world-class health service, but it could not be the other way around. Governors were well placed to help the education system to be where it should be.

Emma Knights thanked Lord Puttnam and all speakers, and the NGA staff, and closed the conference.

Judith Bennett
04.02.11