

School Governance in the 21st Century

At a Conference organised in June 2009 by the Children's Services Network and run in association with the National Governors' Association (NGA) and with the Co-ordinators of Governor Services (COGS), delegates were able to hear from speakers who were all involved, at National Level, with work that has been on-going for up to two years into changes in the role of governors as we move into the twenty-first century. Some put forward a viewpoint from the DCSF and others from recent research; however the eagerly-anticipated White Paper on Governance is still not available (at the time of writing, in July) but we were assured that it was "imminent". How closely it mirrors some of the ideas expressed at the Conference therefore remains to be seen.

Clearly it was anticipated that changes are likely; the Childrens' Plan of December 2007 identified that "... families will be at the centre of excellent, integrated services that put their needs first regardless of traditional institutional and professional structures". Could this be interpreted as suggesting "root and branch changes" to the role of governors? Putting things into context, we were reminded that, in todays society there was:-

- A fast-changing world – economically, socially and technologically – and with fungible jobs
- Globalisation – diverse societies – benefits and creative opportunities – challenges securing cohesive and successful society
- Equipping our children and young people to succeed in this (rapidly-changing and challenging) world

In respect of the "Skills for Success" we were told that:-

- Employers believe that the Education system is meeting their needs better – but the challenge is growing
- There is a relentless demand for high level skills
- There are currently estimated to be 3.2 million jobs available for people from the "limited skills" sector – BUT it was projected that by 2020 this figure would have fallen to 600,000 – so that "NO SKILLS – NO PROSPECTS" had to be the mantra.
- The Secretary of State for Childrens' Services, Ed Balls, had stressed that this applied to *every* child and not just to the *average* child.

Governors remain a vital part of the Education system. They:-

- Are not in an Executive role
- Must challenge performance
- Must promote new developments and partnerships in order to improve achievement and well-being.

The Twenty-First Century school, unlike those of earlier times, has a number of special features:-

- There must be closer partnerships (with other schools and other agencies) – they cannot 'go it alone'
- There will be more specialist support for learning problems (eg Teaching Assistants)

- There will be early intervention, calling upon other services (eg Social Services)
- More specialisms in a wider workforce
- More formal partnerships between schools
- A new accountability framework in the future for all schools (not just for academies)

These create a number of parallel duties on governors:-

- Fundamental duties to children, young people and the wider community, under three headings:-
 1. To promote the education, development and wider well-being of the children on their roll
 2. To promote the education, development and wider well-being of all children in their area
 3. To support the needs of the wider local community

There will, therefore, be new expectations of governors (or in greater depth than hitherto):-

- To hold to account the leadership of the school
- To challenge school performance in detail
- To encourage school leaders to:-
 1. Take part in partnerships with other schools
 2. Work with or commission other children's services to meet the needs of their children
 3. To contribute their expertise to other schools and other services – system leadership.
- To consider whether there should be more formal partnerships in the best interests of pupils
- To take action when leadership needs renewing – and consider federations or alternative supportive arrangements.

Clearly we need to think more about the whole of the children's services system rather than just "our" school. Equally we need to focus more on the needs of "our" children rather than just "our" school.

It was noted that some employers were not as helpful as others at giving release to governors during working hours where they needed to attend activities during the school's own working day. The question was raised as to whether some source of funding might not be made available to enable employers to be rather more flexible.

A particularly pertinent aspect was the need to raise the status of governors in the wider community and this brought forward some suggestions:-

- Like it or not, the pecuniary aspects do raise status – for instance by describing the role as being that of a "non-executive director of a five million pound business"
- Governors need to be told how important the work is and be given the resources to enable them to do the job.
- There is a will to engage with more employers to raise that profile and some pilot work is being done.

- Realization by the wider community that schools are substantially responsible for the regeneration of that local community and so must be far more outward-looking.
- Training, at the minimum at an induction level, also serves to improve the status of the job.
- Central Government, first and foremost, must promote this and support it, as must the National College for School Leadership (NCSL).
- Governors themselves can help to raise their status and Head-teachers, too, have a role to play in this promotion.

Thus there were a number of challenges to address:-

- Enabling the vision for local education to extend beyond the individual establishment
- To focus on the real issues of education and learning, not just on the drains or the fences.
- Do we observe cases where the Governing Body meeting seems to be more like the Head-teacher “in control” at a meeting of the PTA?
- Is the role of the Governing Body to be *merely* as a “sounding board” for the ideas of the Head-Teacher?
- Is the work of the Governing Body a 50:50 divide between the Head-Teacher responsible for pedagogy and the GB for accountability, performance etc?
- Or is the Governing Body seem more like a public authority with the Chair in control and the Head-Teacher a member of that body?
- To ensure that the Governing Body is not simply a sanctioning body for the clique formed by the Head-Teacher and the Chair.
- There is positive evidence to show that stronger models of governance do lead to improved performance in school and weaker forms to deteriorating standards.
- Do children actively want to learn? Are they fully engaged?
- Governors need to link their schools into their local community
- Can we find ways whereby Governing Bodies can report to their local community directly?

It will be very interesting to read the content of the White Paper on Governance when made available and to see to what extent it satisfies some (or all) of the issues so far identified.