

What governing bodies should expect from school leaders and what school leaders should expect from governing bodies

Introduction

This is the second edition of a joint paper between the National Governors Association and the school leader unions. It aims to improve the effectiveness of school governance; underpinning it is an expectation that governing bodies and school leaders will jointly develop effective working practices which are mutually supportive and respectful of each other's roles and responsibilities.

Since the first edition in 2008 much has changed in the structure of the school system in England and in particular increasing autonomy of schools increases the need for effective accountability. Effective governance is essential for the health and success of any organisation. In any sector when an organisation fails there has been a failure of governance. Therefore if we wish to prevent any school failing its pupils, we need to ensure that governance in schools is strong.

Effective governing bodies are prepared and equipped to take their responsibilities seriously. This means they must have:

- the right people round the table;
- an understanding of their roles and responsibilities;
- a good chair;
- professional clerking;
- good relationships based on trust;
- a knowledge of the school – the data, the staff, the children, the parents and the community
- a commitment to asking challenging questions; and
- the confidence to have courageous conversations in the interests of the children and young people

School leaders in return must have:

- an understanding of governance, including an acknowledgement of the role of the school's accountable body;
- willingness to provide information in the most appropriate way in order that the governing body can carry out its role;
- a willingness to be challenged; and time to devote to ensuring professional relationships are established with governors

1. Governance and management

Governance is strategic and management is operational. This distinction between governance and management needs to be clearly understood by all, so that governors are not asked to, and do not try to, involve themselves in day to day management.

Governors are there to govern, not to carry out other work on a pro-bono basis. School leaders must not be micro-managed. The governing body should concentrate on matters related to strategy and school improvement, delegating to school leaders those tasks which are operational (for example, drafting policies, making judgements about teaching quality and recruiting and developing staff below senior leadership level). The agenda of governing bodies should be driven by the strategic planning cycle.

2. Developing and supporting the governing body

Skills audit: We recommend all governing bodies carry out a skills audit of governors to inform both the training programme and what skills gaps needs to be filled: NGA has a skills audit for school to use or adapt.

Recruitment: When the school is advertising for new governors, the role and level of commitment and responsibility should be explained along with any skills that the governing body is particularly seeking.

Induction: Governing bodies and school leaders should expect all new governors (including staff governors) to undertake both school based induction and professional induction training paid for by the school. This expectation should be set out in writing in advance of the appointment and agreed to as part of the Code of Practice signed by each governor.

Continuous professional development (CPD): Governors must be willing to participate in relevant training, both internal and external and there must be an appropriate budget commitment for training. Governors need to have ways of learning what is good practice and to meet with governors from other schools: this can also enable collaboration between schools.

Expenses: Governors' out of pocket expenses should be reimbursed as per an agreed policy.

Reviews of performance: A governing body should evaluate its own impact and also set up a process for reviewing the contribution of individual governors.

3. Effective ways of working

Clerking: The clerk to the governing body must be properly qualified and remunerated and capable of servicing and advising the governing body with independence. S/he should be employed to carry out this role with a separate job description and a specific contract, with sufficient time to manage the business of the governing body and CPD to ensure s/he is able to advise governors of forthcoming changes in legislation.

Chairing: the headteacher and the chair of the governing body should communicate regularly at mutually convenient times, while understanding that the chair is unable to take decisions on behalf of the governing body (except in very limited situations). The chair should seek external support when necessary and be encouraged and prepared to join the National College for Teaching & Leadership's development programme for chairs of governing bodies, paid for by the school. It is considered good practice for a chair to serve no more than six years in the role at one school (under normal circumstances).

Code of practice: We recommend each governing body adopts a code of practice which sets out the expectations placed on governors and is signed by governors. This code includes the expectation on confidentiality of sensitive or personal information. NGA has a model code for schools to adapt.

Size and composition: Over the past two years more flexibility on the composition of governing bodies has been introduced and the structures, including remits of committees, should be reviewed to ensure effective ways of working are in place.

Meetings: It is the joint responsibility of school leaders and the governing body to ensure that meetings are well planned, at appropriate intervals, with manageable agendas that are appropriate to the remit and driven by school improvement. Papers must be provided seven days in advance of meetings. The headteacher is present or is represented at full governing body meetings. Governing bodies must have regard to the work life balance of school leaders when arranging meeting times and school leaders should have regard to governors' work and other commitments.

Delegation: Governing bodies have considerable freedom regarding the delegation of work to committees or individuals, and should delegate as many tasks as required to ensure full governing body meetings focus on strategic priorities. Business should not be repeated in different forums and matters discussed by committees should be consistent with their terms of reference.

Policies: Governing bodies should only decide the principles guiding school policies and should delegate drafting of the remainder of policies and all procedures to school leaders. Governing bodies must ensure school leaders have the expertise or access to the relevant expertise externally to carry out these responsibilities and other delegated to them.

Appraisal of the headteacher: The governing body must appoint an external adviser to support the governors carrying out the appraisal and ensure they are fully prepared.

Duty of care: The governing body must remember that it has a duty of care to the headteacher, including ensuring that the head has a reasonable work-life balance. The governing body's role is both to support and challenge as a critical friend to the headteacher.

4. Understanding the school and engaging with stakeholders

The governing body monitors the work of the school and holds the headteacher to account for the performance of the school. It is vital that it receives the information required to carry out that role promptly; the governing body is primarily reliant on school leaders to provide this, but should also seek-external advice and verification where possible.

School self-evaluation: Governing bodies must be centrally involved in all stages of the strategic planning cycle, the review of the previous year and the setting of the priorities for the coming year. It can be very useful for a governing body and senior leaders to hold an annual joint strategic planning session.

Attainment data: The RAISEonline summary report of the previous year's attainment should be discussed by governors and access to the full data given to at least one governor. NGA provides a briefing for governors on understanding RAISEonline.

Current information: Senior leaders should provide the information necessary to monitor progress against annual development priorities, targets and budgets: this will include information on progress of groups of students, quality of teaching, staff performance and financial information.

Surveying pupils, staff and parents: The governing body has to understand the needs of these three groups and must make every effort to obtain their views. This can be done in a number of ways including parent and student councils, written surveys, or focus groups.

Visiting the school: Visits during the school day provide important opportunities for governors to better understand the school and the learning environment and to undertake their monitoring role. School leaders should welcome governors to visit the school, both formally to monitor agreed priorities and developments and less formally to broaden their knowledge of the school. Visits should be arranged in accordance with an agreed protocol which is communicated in advance to governors and school staff involved in visits. All parties need to be sensitive to the pressures of the school calendar and governors' other commitments.

Feedback from Ofsted: Recognising that Ofsted inspections take place at very short notice governors should make every effort to be available at the school and as many governors as possible should attend the feedback sessions at the end of an inspection. School leaders will support governors' requests that these sessions are held at the end of the working day to enable governors to attend.

Reporting to the community: The governing body must ensure it reports to interested parties and the wider community. This can be done in large part through the school's website, but other forms of communication should be considered.