
The Role of Parents and Governors

MELIAN MANSFIELD

Every school community is made up of several key partners, each of whom has a significant role in relation to the children. These are parents – who are their children’s first educators, staff – all staff, the local community, the local authority and the governing body which represents all of these and is ultimately responsible for the school. All need to be treated with equal respect since they all contribute to children’s education in different ways. Children are learning from birth – every minute of every day – so their families are very important; they also know their children best. The leadership team and all staff who manage the school in all its aspects are critical to setting the ethos and direction of the school, together with the governing body, which monitors and evaluates progress. Administrative staff, lunch-time supervisors and site managers are as important as those who work with children in the classroom. A successful school is achieved through good relationships between all the partners, a listening ethos where every view is valued, excellent communication, a commitment to promoting equality and countering discrimination, respect for everyone’s rights, particularly children’s, and a belief that every child has talent and will succeed whatever the difficulties.

Many schools work on these principles but too many of those who work in schools do not respect the rights of parents and children and the need to listen to them. The role of governing bodies is not understood by the vast majority of those in the education system, including politicians, civil servants, teachers, support staff and head teachers, none of whom is required to or do attend induction training about the role, training which is recommended although not compulsory for all new governors. Politicians constantly refer to ‘head teachers’, without mentioning the governing body and yet the governing body is the accountable body for the school and the head teacher and staff are accountable to the governors. The 1977 Taylor Report considered that there was not only a need for a managing body for each school but also said that ‘To meet this need we believe that all the parties concerned for a school’s success – the local education authority, the staff, the parents and the local community – should be brought together so that they can discuss, debate and justify the

proposals which any one of them may seek to implement'. Following this report, the 1986 Education Act introduced stakeholder governing bodies for every school with equal numbers of staff, parents, local authority appointees and representatives of the local community. Small schools had a small governing body and large secondary schools a larger one. The Report stated that 'the local education authority is responsible for the provision and efficient conduct of county schools and so must be empowered to prescribe general policies and issue general directions, and must have, if it thinks fit, the final word on any matter affecting the exercise of its statutory duties for such schools; subject to the overriding functions of the local education authority, the governing body should be in a position to determine the lines on which the particular school is organised and run; many day to day decisions must in practice be made by the head and staff of the school'. And this in law is still the case.

The three key roles of the governing body are to be strategic, to act as a critical friend and to ensure accountability. Being strategic involves developing with the head and staff and ideally parents and children the aims and vision for the school, the priorities for the next 3-5 years and drawing up an action plan to achieve these aims – the school's development plan. Priorities will be decided as a result of a self-evaluation process, again involving all the partners and identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the school. This is currently required by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), through answering the questions on a particular form – the SEF – which has to be permanently online so that when a school is told that it will be inspected the inspectors can read it first and then on inspection will identify whether the school has 'got it right' and grade accordingly. Governing bodies should in any case be involved and oversee the process and should review the SEF at least every term – although in law it has to be annually – as developments in the school should be going on all the time. However, the Coalition Government has said this is no longer necessary and are proposing changes to the Ofsted framework. It is to be hoped that self-evaluation will continue as it is vital to ensure continuous improvement. No school or its governors should ever be complacent. Outstanding schools can and do become 'satisfactory' if governors are not vigilant.

The critical friend role is one of challenge and support – celebrating what the school does well and challenging what needs to change. Monitoring what is happening and how decisions are implemented as well as evaluating what difference they have made for the children is a key part of the governing body's role. Both understanding the school's strengths and those areas which it needs to improve and establishing ways forward are critical. Governors need to get to know the school, talk to parents, staff and children, visit classrooms and attend events, read relevant documents and attend training where they can meet governors from other schools. Keeping up to date with what is happening nationally is useful, especially when so many changes are happening, and asking questions is essential. The governing body should work well as a team, enabling all members to participate and drawing on individuals' strengths, and have a

good relationship with the head, senior managers and staff, with each understanding their different roles. The school needs to provide the governing body as the accountable body with the information it requests.

Governors are responsible for school policies, some of which are required by law – child protection, health and safety, special educational needs, race equality, an equalities scheme, behaviour and anti-bullying, performance management. Schools will have many other policies covering areas of the curriculum, school visits, home-school partnership. All of these need to be accompanied by an Action Plan, actioned by staff and monitored and evaluated by governors. This can be done in a number of ways, through individual governors taking responsibility for specific areas, for example special educational needs, meeting the member of staff responsible – the special educational needs coordinator (SENCO) in this case – discussing the policy, looking at the resources, identifying need and reporting to the governing body. Committees will also review a policy, first looked at by staff, make sure it is clear and understandable and describes what is happening. Every governing body needs to have a programme of reviewing policies and ensuring that all staff have appropriate training when a policy is updated.

Governors' responsibilities are outlined in the Guide to the Law. They are many and varied and include finance – setting a balanced budget each year and then regularly monitoring how it is being spent, where the overspends and underspends are and where savings can be made – and also of course identifying where money needs to be spent on school development. Governors are responsible for staffing – agreeing a staff structure, being involved in recruitment, adopting performance management and personnel policies and ensuring that proper procedures are followed with regard to sickness, capability, dismissal and grievance. Also, where necessary, they are responsible for setting up a panel of governors to hear an appeal relating to any of these issues and ensuring staff have the training they need. The school building is their responsibility, ensuring its maintenance and improvement, having regard to all health and safety issues, making sure that the school has regular fire, electricity and other such checks and has appropriate insurance. They also have responsibility for the curriculum – to make sure every young person has access to a broad and balanced curriculum and that all children are achieving and getting the support they need. Results of test and exams have to be reported to governors – with an analysis of how the school is doing, comparing this with past performance and with other local and national schools and what is being done about any areas which need improvement – teaching or groups of children who are underachieving.

It is important that governors make themselves visible to all partners in the school – staff, parents and the young people themselves – ideally through a noticeboard with their photographs, information about what the governors do and dates of their meetings and through visits to the school, newsletters, attending training with staff and parents and School Council meetings. Not every governor is able to do all of this of course, and although the

Government states that governors should be allowed paid time off to visit their school, attend meetings and for training, not all employers make this possible and some people have to take annual or unpaid leave. Delegation is essential; different governors have different skills and time availability and this needs to be considered when planning the work of the governing body. Times of meetings need to be when governors can attend, not just when the school wants them. All governors have skills and experience which are useful to the school but too often they are not known by the school or even the other governors because no one asks. Schools too often treat governors as 'amateurs' even though many are professionals and have expertise and knowledge in areas such as finance, law, building, personnel issues, health and safety and have ideas and suggestions which help the school; teachers do not generally have expertise in these areas.

Governing bodies are required to meet at least three times a year but in practice meet six times – at least once a half-term. Most have finance, personnel, premises and curriculum committees or a combination of these to look at issues in greater detail. They can have as many and as few as they wish and can set up working parties and invite others who are not governors to be involved. These committees meet at a time convenient to the members, between the main governing body meetings, and report to the governing body with recommendations for decisions. The head teacher has to write at least one written report a term for the governing body. This needs to contain information relating to all aspects of the school – not just the good news but matters which need addressing. Governors can ask for reports on specific areas, invite teachers with particular responsibility to their meetings and should always ask questions. It is a requirement that all documents arrive seven days before they meet so that there is time to read them. Governing bodies need to be clerked by an independent person, trained in the role of governing bodies, their powers and duties and the procedures which they are required to follow, and not by a member of staff.

Every governing body has parent governors – elected by parents. In 2006 the Government required every governing body to decide what size it wanted to be – any number of people between 9 and 20 – and its size determined how many parents, staff, local authority and community governors it should have. There are now more parent governors on all governing bodies of community schools. However, the governing bodies of Academies as introduced by the Labour Government have the majority of their governors appointed by the sponsor, only one parent and staff governor, and no local authority or community governors. The Education Act going through Parliament this year (2011) proposes that governing bodies should be made up of parents and the head teacher. In many schools not enough parents come forward to hold an election and head teachers may 'invite' or 'persuade' parents they like to become a governor – although this is not their role. It is the governing body's role to ensure that vacancies are filled and to determine how they do this but also to ensure the school community knows who they are and what they do. The head

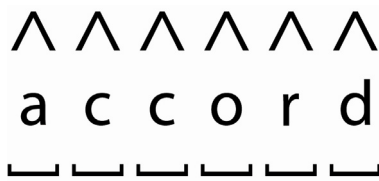
teacher can choose whether or not to be a governor but will always attend the meetings. All governors have a term of office of four years and can stand for re-election or re-appointment.

Many schools claim to work well with both governors and parents but it is by no means always the case. Communication is not always as good as it could be – many letters to parents do not give the information they need clearly and succinctly – and all information needs to be attractive, easy to read, friendly in tone and appropriate for those who have difficulty in reading English. Parents have a right to know how they can communicate with the school, give information about their child and what is being learnt at home.

Schools which work in true partnership with parents are more successful and children do better. Parents want information about what their child is learning, how they can help, their child's progress, any achievements and problems. Parents' knowledge and skills should be known to the school and relationships developed between home and school which are supportive, encouraging and meet the needs of the child or young person. Regular and informal conversations are often more productive than formal meetings between parents and teachers.

Parents are often criticised for not coming to school but there are numerous reasons why they do not. These include fears – just as many teachers have fears of parents – maybe bad experience of their own school, not understanding what is expected of them, not knowing what to expect or ask, feeling isolated and not included, work pressures and childcare problems, not having received the information they needed, worried about what will be said if their child is having problems, lack of confidence and not wanting to meet people they don't know. School buildings are not always welcoming and it is often difficult to find the right entrance or place for a meeting. Parent Teacher Associations can themselves be intimidating if every effort is not made to include all parents. Many parents talk of 'them' and 'us'. Yet parents are vital friends to schools and their views are important to the school and teachers. They can and do help in many ways – in classrooms, on outings, raising funds, contributing their knowledge to curriculum areas, helping teachers understand their child. Parents and teachers working together support children better and both achievement and behaviour can be seen to improve.

Correspondence: melian.mansfield@btinternet.com



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