

Jim Knight on paid governance

There are more than 300,000 school governors for the 24,600 schools in this country, the largest group of volunteers in the Big Society. They give their time and do their best to support heads and other school leaders as they cope with an ever-growing set of responsibilities. By and large, school governors are great, but the governing bodies are not. They need to be reformed.

Good governance is crucial to successful organisations. It is how senior executives are held to account and supported and, ultimately, how their successors get appointed. Elsewhere in the public sector, non-executive board members tend to be paid, are professionally recruited and go through the Nolan process to avoid political patronage. They are appointed on the basis of skills and competence. By contrast, most school governors are appointed on the basis of who or what they represent. Every governing body has parents and teacher representatives, and local authority governors are often there for political reasons.

The result is highly variable quality. It is naive to think we could ever get 24,600 excellent governing bodies, or have all 300,000 go through a professional recruitment process. But the consequence is too often headteachers spending valuable time managing their governors. The school system thinks of the head as the key leader, and when I was schools minister we didn't even have the ability to directly contact every chair of governors.

This is in the worst tradition of Big Society British amateurism. We should not then be surprised when governors struggle to know what to look for when appointing a new head. Often they look for a candidate who is similar to the departing head, because they do not have the skills or experience to do otherwise.

We have muddled along like this for a long time. For as long as local authorities had a strong role in supporting governing bodies this was just about manageable. But as the government drives more school autonomy, with every school an academy, governors are being loaded with more responsibility. Simultaneously, local authorities' role in education is diminishing. The clear consequence of the move to free market schooling is an urgent need to improve school governance.

The move towards autonomy from local authorities is now unstoppable. The trend is for schools to form themselves into clusters so that they can achieve economies of scale for procurement and specialist staffing. This too should be embraced, and every school should be required to join clusters of 10 to 20 schools, ideally with primary, secondary and special schools within them. This allows for more all-through and more inclusive education to develop.

These clusters should then become hard federations with a single governing body. This means that, rather than trying to have 25,000 governing bodies, we would be aiming at having just 1,500-2,500; each with high levels of skills for supporting and challenging school leaders.

Most governing bodies pay for their clerks. With this reduction in the number of governing bodies, we should also move to paid chairs of governors. This would

mean proper recruitment on the basis of skills and experience. The rest of the governing body should also be appointed for the balance of skills needed.

Many would be concerned that this loses the strengths of every school having their own stakeholder body giving voice to parents, staff, community and sometimes pupils. I agree that it is important not to lose this, and think education should borrow from the health service, where it is not unusual for the chair of the foundation trust to also chair the governors that are elected by the members of the trust. Each school should have a council made up of representatives of parents, staff, local employers and possibly pupils.

One of the oddest things about the move to every school being an academy or free school is the lack of accountability. There is nothing between the school and the secretary of state. If a parent is unhappy with how their child is getting on in school, where should they go? At present it looks like they would have to go straight to Michael Gove. That can't be right and raises the difficult question of what role local authorities should perform in terms of accountability.

The days of councils delivering education through their schools are largely over. However, it is essential that councils retain a clear commissioning role. Here we can go back to Gove's inspiration - US charter schools. They are granted a charter for three to five years by the local school board and are judged on the basis of a contract to deliver their plans, including results. I propose that councils should be given the authority to contract the new governing body to deliver the education in schools in their area for five years. If the council chooses not to renew the contract they should run a school competition to decide who is best to take over. This returns local accountability to councils without going back to the days of them delivering education themselves.

This package of fewer, stronger governing bodies, autonomous but within a clear local accountability structure, can drive self-sustaining school improvement. It should be alongside other reforms to embrace all-through schooling, more parent and pupil voice, and more employer involvement. Disrupting an ingrained volunteer army of 300,000 is not without political risk, but the status quo has been made unsustainable by the move to school autonomy. The future of school governance must therefore be high on the education reform agenda.

Lord Knight is a former schools minister.