

Sir Michael Wilshaw - Creating a step change in school accountability: Equipping parents and governors with the information needed to assess school performance

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We know governance in schools is important – the Select Committee is meeting this morning on just this issue. In fact, I'd argue it's never been more important in our education system.

And I say this for two reasons:

- Firstly, the performance agenda has never been stronger. Schools are subject to sharper accountability for pupil outcomes. And, as a result, governors have a much greater role to ensure that a strategic direction is set by the headteacher to deliver good results.
- Secondly, we have an increasingly autonomous school system – which gives governing bodies more power and responsibility than ever before.

Consequently, Ofsted is now reporting on governance in much greater depth. Every section 5 report now includes a separate paragraph on the quality of governance.

In the best schools, inspectors see visionary leadership by the head and a strong leadership team. But they also expect to see effective oversight by the governing body. Good governors focus on the central issues which lie at the heart of school improvement - the quality of teaching, the progress and achievement of their pupils, and the culture which supports this. These same issues are, of course, the ones that Ofsted focuses on in our inspection framework.

The best governing boards get the balance right between support and challenge. They ask the right questions, whether they are governors in a maintained school, an individual academy or part of an academy chain. Indeed, in my annual report I emphasised that focused governance in academy chains was making a profound difference to previously failing schools (Dan Moynihan).

But good governance isn't universal. Most of the 6,000 schools that aren't good not only have weaknesses in leadership, but also governance. As a result, more than two million children are missing out on a good education.

Let me read you some examples of weak governance from our recent reports:

- 'Governors have not provided an acceptable level of challenge and have not held the leaders and managers to account. This has contributed strongly to the school's decline since the last inspection.'
- 'Governors do not pay enough attention to issues related to students' achievement.'

- ‘The governing body has not paid enough attention to ensuring that the Pupil Premium funding is used effectively to improve the achievement of those students eligible for support.’
- ‘Performance management systems have not been scrutinised closely enough by governors.’
- ‘In recent years members of the governing body have been too accepting of the school’s view of its performance. Until the local authority intervened they were unaware that pupils’ achievements and the quality of teaching were inadequate.’
- ‘For too long [governors] have not had enough information to enable them to monitor patterns in pupils’ achievement, oversee improvements in teaching or make confident decisions on salary progression.’

So let’s be clear - poor governance focuses on the marginal issues and not the important ones. In other words, too much time spent looking at the quality of school lunches, and not enough on attainment in maths and English. Poor governance is either too accepting of the status quo or too unsupportive of the head who is trying to make a difference.

In the worst cases, I’m afraid, governors can be rather like the jury that was dismissed from a high-profile trial last week: ill-informed and not able to make good decisions.

So the question I am asking today is this: do our national arrangements for governance need reform?

While there have been dramatic changes in schools and local authorities over the last 20 years, we’ve seen only very modest developments in governance – especially in the maintained sector.

In my view, if we’re going to transform the quality of our education system, we have to do much more.

I believe three things can make a difference:

- Firstly, we need a more professional approach in some governing bodies, especially in our most challenging schools, often serving the most deprived communities.
- It is not good enough, and often too late, to introduce professionalism into school governance when a school fails. The first sign of decline should trigger intervention by the local authority, academy sponsor or the Department for Education with additional professional appointments being made.
- Of course there will always be a place for the volunteer and those from the community who want to support their local school. That will always be the case. But where there is a lack of capacity and where there are few volunteers without the necessary skills, we need to consider radical solutions. I have said it before and I will say it again, we should not rule out payment to governors with the necessary expertise to challenge and support schools with a long legacy of underperformance.

- I want to therefore issue a challenge both to the public and private sectors today: are you encouraging your best people to get involved in school governance? If not, why not? For example, all large and medium sized companies could insist that their senior and middle managers join the governing bodies of local schools. I believe Rolls Royce strongly encourage their managers to do this.
- Secondly, given the increasing complexity of school organisation, we need to make sure governors are given the appropriate training.
- Many members of governing boards are people with valuable skills who want to contribute a great deal, but are constrained by their lack of knowledge.
- With the spread of academies and the reduction of local authority funding, we have to ask whether the right structures are in place to support governor training.
- Thirdly, governors must have accessible information and data in order to ask the right questions and make the right decisions.
- The best governing bodies know exactly how well their pupils perform across the curriculum and whether they are making sufficient progress in relation to similar schools. Not all governors do know this.

Ofsted is raising expectations of governance, but is also doing much more to help.

- The difference in our approach since September is already becoming clear – a quarter of all schools in the first two months of this academic year received a specific recommendation on governance, including the requirement for external review.
- This is very much part of our determination at Ofsted to do more to support and challenge underperforming institutions through inspection, monitoring and the dissemination of good practice.
- We've started running seminars and training sessions for governors as well as headteachers for those schools which require improvement.
- And because we know it is essential that governors receive information in a comprehensible form, I am announcing the introduction today of a new School Data Dashboard.
- This is an online tool which will be submitted to Chairs of Governors and headteachers providing a clear picture of how the school is performing in relation to similar schools with the same intake profile.

I'm going to hand over to Richard Brooks to demonstrate the dashboard for you.

[RB demonstrates tool]

This dashboard raises the stakes. Many governors already know their school well. But for those that don't, there are now no excuses. Inspectors will be critical of governing bodies who, despite the dashboard, still don't know their school well enough and don't take the necessary action in good time.

I want to finish by saying something about local authorities and their relationship with governing bodies.

I am quite clear that local authorities still have a vital role in driving school improvement – they are statutorily obliged to ensure good provision for all children in their areas, no matter what sort of school they go to.

The best local authorities use their powers effectively. Yet my Annual Report found that since 2007, nearly half of local authorities have not put any Interim Executive Boards in place, and 70 LAs had not issued a single warning notice. This is unacceptable. That is why we have announced our intention to inspect local authority school improvement functions. (Portsmouth)

Because the data dashboard will be available to schools and be in the public domain, I expect local authorities to use this data to support their intervention programmes and to act decisively on underperformance. This is something we will be looking at very carefully in our forthcoming programme of local authority inspections and any future inspections of academy chains.