

School governors – three ideas to reinvigorate the job

Headteachers are supported and monitored – but school governors should get training and other forms of backing, argues **Estelle Morris**

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The need for strong and effective leadership in [schools](#) is well understood and widely discussed – but that conversation is usually about headteachers. Improving quality in this group is taken very seriously: we are awash with initiatives to support heads, remove those who are unsuccessful, deploy the strongest where they can have the greatest impact and make sure succession plans are in place. There is a sense we know what needs to be done. Yet strong school leadership is about more than the headteacher: it is about governing bodies as well. It seems to me we don't talk enough about school governance. The forces that have changed the role of the headteacher – greater accountability and autonomy, together with the demand to raise standards – have probably triggered an even greater revolution for governors. The shift in power over the last 30 years from local authorities to schools means the largest volunteer force in the country has had to transform itself from "friends of the school" to a body capable of running a multimillion-pound key public service.

Governing bodies are now responsible for setting the strategic direction of the school, overseeing the finances, holding the head to account and determining the school's vision and ethos. The importance of these powers ought not to be underestimated – failure in any one of them can be far-reaching. The current allegations about governance at four schools in [Birmingham](#) bring the potential for problems into focus.

However, despite the best efforts of many governors, we don't see the same rigorous approach to improving governance that we see to improving teaching and learning. The powers that exist to intervene in under-performing governing bodies are rarely used; training is under-resourced and good practice insufficiently shared. Transferring so much responsibility to governing bodies without providing the resources, infrastructure and support is bound to cause problems. Many governors feel overworked and struggle to keep up with the changing demands placed on them. Some governing bodies – often those serving disadvantaged communities – can't fill places. The vacancy rate for governors is about 11% compared to 0.1% for teachers.

There has been innovation. The sponsored academy model pioneered by the Labour government owes its success as much to its model of governance as anything else. Essentially, the sponsor, who has significant control of the governing body, brings skills and capacity to the task, hugely bolstering a school's ability to improve. The Conservatives' "stand-alone" [academies](#) make little change to governance – and that will be a weakness in the long term.

Yet the chains that are growing from sponsored academies have their own limitations. They often import people with specific skills at the expense of those with local knowledge and the individual differences in member schools can be hidden behind the face of the trust's corporate governance identity.

For too long we seem to have lacked the will or drive to try to make the best governance the accepted standard in every school. It's easy to see the reason. There are 300,000 good men and women who take on this role for no reward other than supporting their local school. It is the best of citizenship and something of which to be proud. Adding structures and regulations seems at odds with the voluntary principle but every school needs good governance and more needs to be done to make sure it is in place. I make three suggestions.

First, let's grasp the nettle and require governors to undergo some sort of training. Second, we need to resolve the conflict between providing a local voice and offering strategic leadership. Both are important and one shouldn't be traded against the other. Third, ask whether it is reasonable for schools to be allowed to "go it alone" as far as governance is concerned. Being required to establish some sort of alliance with other governing bodies might give them the capacity they need.

We could not manage without those people who are willing to take on the responsibility of governorship. We owe them our gratitude but we also owe them the conditions and support that will give them the best chance of succeeding.