

Thinking Ahead

Exploring the strategic role that
headteachers and governors carry
out in partnership

SCHOOL LEADERS

Report

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Introduction

'Governing bodies have become the strategic leaders of schools' (Governing the School of the Future, DfES, February 2005)

The publication of 'Governing the School of the Future' marks a pivotal shift in the roles, relationships and responsibilities of school governors. Not only does it describe governing bodies as the strategic leaders of schools, it also sees them as 'equal partners in leadership' with the headteacher.

Headteachers might be surprised at this perceived shift since only three years earlier, the National Governors' Conference, led by DfES and OfSTED, had observed that '...the governing body is not generally seen as playing a leadership role in strategic planning' and described how a survey had found that school leaders did not regard governors and the business sector as '...significant sources of ideas and inspiration.' (DfES, 2002, p.12). To what extent then does the reality of school governance reflect the rhetoric of Governing the School of the Future?

As a headteacher when the research began [and now a leadership consultant and School Improvement Partner], I realised from numerous conversations with headteachers outside of this research, that opinions on the role and contribution of governors to strategic leadership and school improvement varied substantially. Indeed, governors' involvement in the strategic leadership of schools was acknowledged in a DfES (2003) report, *Steering not Rowing* to be a controversial area.

This research explores the strategic role that headteachers and governors carry out in partnership in three case study schools. Although small-scale, it seeks to:

- Identify similarities which may facilitate a higher level of strategic operation.
- Describe some of its benefits and barriers to this.
- Provide practical examples of how this vision of strategic partnership might work in action.

Methods

The research comprised semi-structured interviews with headteachers and governors from three primary schools across two local authorities. The schools were a mixture of rural and city and ranged in size from 101 to 600. One of the schools had recently emerged from special measures and each school had experienced significant change and challenge.

Findings

Structure and Composition

Each of the governing bodies adopted a structure which enabled an inner-circle of experienced, committed governors to work alongside school leaders in review and futures-thinking activities. This model was recommended by both the governors and headteachers interviewed.

However, allied to their adoption of this approach, was an awareness of the need for succession planning and the need to build the capacity for strategic planning amongst governors more broadly. This was critical if a culture of dependency was to be avoided.

Partnership

The way in which these governing bodies worked in partnership with the headteacher was aided by a range of practices and specific attitudes, including:

- A clear understanding regarding each other's roles and remits.
- The creation of opportunities for staff and governors to work together, eg on envisioning futures.
- A focus on utilising governors' skills in order to maximise the contribution of individuals.
- Providing development opportunities for governors' skills to grow and, linked to this, planning for succession.
- The promotion of a trust-based relationship that facilitated both honest and open dialogue.
- Governors offering challenge within the remit of critical friend.

- Headteachers adopting a collaborative leadership style in which they saw themselves as part of the governing body, as opposed to a leading individual within it.
- Headteachers possessing a professional confidence so they did not feel threatened by the challenge offered by governors.

Such ways of working supported strategic partnership and gave governors a sense of being valued for their contribution. The role of the headteacher in being prepared and able to facilitate this was highlighted in one statement:

'I have had to develop our relationship by distributing leadership – by sharing a range of ideas about what we could do and placing responsibilities onto them.' (Headteacher)

There were instances where the governing body had disagreed significantly with the headteacher and this had tested the relationship but the elements highlighted above [particularly the last two] had helped militate against this. This had in some cases led to the review of decision-making approaches to be reviewed. In this context, the relative strength of character each party was seen by one governor to be an important factor in the relationship:

'The thing is, a governing body is only as good as the head. Where there is a mismatch, things can be tough. If you have a stronger head than the governing body, that's repairable. But if the governing body is stronger than the head ... well that mismatch must be impossible for both parties.' (Governor, junior school)

Governors as Strategic Leaders

Identified practices employed by governors, which enabled them to function strategically, included:

- Not involving themselves in the day-to-day management of the school unless it was to enable the headteacher to focus more on their core purpose of teaching and learning, eg governors carrying out health and safety related roles.

'We want the headteacher's focus to be on the key areas of teaching and learning, that's what is really important in terms of running a school, and that's what we can't really help with so much.' (Governor, rural primary school)

- Working alongside school leaders in review and futures-thinking activities and offering support and challenges. Headteachers appreciated being able to 'bounce ideas' against those whom they saw as objective and not part of the school staff:

'Most of the 'out of the box' ideas come from the head, but the governors build on it. Sometimes we can provide a framework within which to develop it, or give a set of processes or skills to make it manageable.' (Governor, junior school)

- Enabling innovation and risk-taking, eg governors would challenge local authorities and other policy makers and always evaluate the potential impact of initiatives before taking them on board.

'Risk-taking heads will attract risk-taking governors.' (Governor, junior school)

- Establishing a clear understanding of strategic leadership linked to self-evaluation – knowing where the school has been, where it is going and ensuring there is a clear idea of how to get there.
- Working alongside staff to plan future direction and monitor implementation and impact.
- Retaining a strong focus on the bigger picture – where the school sits in both the micro and macro climate. This was aided by governors maintaining an awareness of such issues as the national agenda, through their own reading and school visits.
- Viewing change as challenge and not being daunted by it, eg amalgamation and change of status.

Although some evidence was provided of governors putting forward ideas and co-working on school improvement plans, both the headteachers and governors of these schools generally agreed that governors were not the engineers of strategy, but rather that they honed ideas and steered the course. In the schools studied, this would consist of open forums and discussions in which ideas were discussed or mind maps constructed. School leaders were often asked to formally present areas of their work to governors for discussion, reflection and feedback.

Whilst all agreed that governors fulfilled a strategic role, there was a common theme in that the schools themselves identified and conceived the direction whilst the governors planned the journey.

Conclusion

This study suggests that it is possible for school governors to function both as equal partners with the headteacher and as strategic leaders of schools. However, according to the evidence located here, the following would first need to be in place:

1. A clear and shared understanding between heads and governors of what the strategic function is.
2. The presence of a small group of governors to act as a strategic steering group.
3. A school climate conducive to collaborative leadership, with trust and mutual respect between headteacher and governors as pre-requisites.
4. A headteacher who is prepared to share all aspects of the school's work with governors and not act as gatekeeper.

Headteachers in this study felt strongly that the support of the governing body empowered them as school leaders and, whilst acknowledging there were issues to resolve in developing their working relationship, they also associated it with an unleashing of new energy and confidence. Indeed, they described how this increase in governor support helped to add dynamism and energy to their school and added that it helped them to discharge their responsibilities as headteachers.

However, even when the partnership between governors and school leaders was balanced and effective, the findings showed that there was unease about casting the governors in the role of the strategic leaders of schools, a role that most interviewees in the study saw as belonging to the headteacher.

This research did not set out to look for examples where governors and headteachers find it difficult to work in partnership, neither did it seek to identify schools which were failing to operate strategically. Rather, it sought to identify ways in which the concepts of the Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners (DfES, 2006) could be translated into practice. Future research might focus on the barriers to schools operating in this way and suggest ways that they might be overcome.

References

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