

School governors' roles should be a national priority

LES WALTON on the changing role of governors – and how the Government is playing down one of their key functions



► The Trojan Horse affair in Birmingham led to weighty reports – and a renewed focus on the role and influence of school governors

THE new Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, said earlier this year: "A perfectly healthy man can contract a lot of ailments if he starts suffering from diabetes. Bad governance is worse than diabetes."

The week after I was appointed headteacher, the chair of governors visited the school and announced that he had changed his name by deed poll to Baron Maximilian Wolfgang von Metz. My understanding was because he liked BMW cars.

As a young, new headteacher I was now dealing with one of the critical aspects of school governance: the relationship between the executive and the governing board.

My chair then asked me to announce the name change in the school assembly. My response was: "I don't think that is a good idea." I was concerned about the impact such an announcement would have on the school.

In the end we came to a compromise. I announced the chair would be called Mr Metz. We had clarified our roles; we had made clear the boundaries which lie at the heart of good governance in any organisation.

The impact an outstanding chair and governing board can make on the performance of an organisation should never be underestimated. This is now increasingly being accepted in the education community, but why is it so important?

The growing autonomy of individual trusts and academies means that clear, effective and strong governance is essential. This is because with increasing autonomy, comes increasing accountability.

The changing context and emphasis on autonomy and accountability requires a new breed of governor who can create and deliver towards continual improvement; lead effectively; drive out fear of failure; remove barriers to learning and make everyone within the school and community feel that they are part of the whole school development and transformation.

An effective governor will be clear about his or her responsibilities and will fully understand the big picture, steering a clear line between the board and the executive. Truly effective governance is a heroic act.

Last month Lord Nash, the Under Secretary of State for Schools, wrote to all chairs of school governors saying there is a need to recruit, induct and continuously develop high calibre governors with relevant skills and experience.

In the North Education Trust we have been developing a model of non-executive directors from business who can support individual schools. This step has been supported by the North East Chamber of Commerce and the Institute of Directors as well as the National Governors Association.

A big blockage to employer engagement with school governing boards is the concern about the amount of time required. We recognise that business leaders need to have clarity about their commitment.

It is expected that the "Non Executive Governor" will provide five days' equivalent of support plus attendance at governors' meetings (possibly three main board meetings) for one year and attendance at a one-day training programme.

Lord Nash also stressed that the schools' governance should focus on three core strategic functions – setting vision, ethos and strategic direction, holding your school leaders to account for the performance of pupils and the performance management of staff, and ensuring your school's finances are well spent. I would also emphasise the very important job of overseeing public money.

However there is a lingering question in my mind.

Many people still view the role of a governing body in a school as one of improving the education of the young people whilst at the same

time, representing the community – whether it be the parent community, the local community or other key stakeholders in the school.

However, the aspect of 'community representation and engagement' is not so prominent in this age of Ofsted-driven school improvement.

This lack of focus on community engagement was highlighted at a conference in 2013 when Michael Gove and Lord Nash spoke on governance. Gove was very clear about the need to have a very small governing body primarily made up of 'business leaders'. Lord Nash repeated the message.

When it was my turn to speak I presented a different model. I agreed that there is a need to have a small group of 'expert governors' focusing on 'school improvement' and also involve business expertise.

However, no school is an island and therefore we need to have the means by which governing bodies engage with key stakeholders, such as parents, students, the local authority, the local community, health, business, the faith community and so on.

The Trojan Horse Affair in Birmingham reminds us that the role and functions of a school governing body, including how head teachers relate to governance and how governance relates to the community, should now be a national priority.

Many years ago I remember a governing body appointing a headteacher by randomly picking names which had been put in a tea cosy. We have come a long way since then. As Narendra Modi reminds us – good governance is at the heart of a healthy society.

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