



executive summary

governance models in schools

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Background

The Importance of Teaching—The Schools White Paper (DfE, 2010) sets out a number of changes to the education system, including giving schools greater autonomy and the freedom to make day-to-day decisions. The white paper also states that responsibility for school improvement will now primarily lie with headteachers, teachers and governors and, as a result, schools will be held to account by parents and the community for their performance. Other changes set out in the white paper include an increase in the number of schools gaining academy status as well as the introduction of free schools. Together, these developments place a greater focus on governing bodies to support schools to fulfil their statutory duties.

Overall, the roles and responsibilities of governors have changed and developed in recent years. In addition to and in light of these changes and policy developments, the appropriateness of the current governance arrangements, and the suitability of current models of governance for the future, are being examined.

The Local Government Group (LG Group) commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to review the current model of accountabilities in school governance and consider alternative models that may be appropriate for the schools of the future. The evaluation comprised three main strands: a rapid review of literature, online surveys of governors and coordinators of governor services and qualitative case-study telephone interviews with a range of stakeholders.



Key findings

Key principles and components of effective governance are more significant to the governance of schools than the type of model followed. The evidence indicates that an effective governing body can have a valuable impact on school improvement. The majority of governors felt that their governing bodies were effective and coordinators were also positive about the overall effectiveness of governing bodies.

The research evidence indicates that the stakeholder model is viewed as the most appropriate model of school governance, although this model was recognised as needing some improvements to ensure flexibility and fitness for purpose in the context of greater school autonomy.

The evidence shows that governors are currently principally fulfilling monitoring and supporting roles. Additionally, a minority of governors and coordinators felt that governing bodies were challenging headteachers or the senior leadership team, representing the views of the local community, providing strategic direction, and carrying out self-evaluations.

Governors perceived the most important elements for ensuring effective governance to be a productive working relationship between the governing body and the senior leadership team, and an effective chair of governors and clerk to support the governing body.

Key to effective governance was perceived to be governors having a clear understanding of their role (and its limits) and an understanding of the strategic responsibilities of governing bodies. Critical to achieving strategic focus is the quality of the relationships between the headteacher, the chair of governors and the clerk. Governors cited size of the governing body as the least relevant element of an effective governing body.

Further ways identified by respondents to the survey for improving the effectiveness of school governance were better selection and recruitment processes, mandatory induction training (although it is appreciated that current funding pressures may affect the feasibility of this), and better understanding of data.

The majority of governors reported that the governing body took into account how to support all children and young people in the local community. However, coordinators were less confident that governors were doing this.

Other key attributes for governors of the future were, firstly, having an interest in and commitment to the school. Secondly, the ability to recognise, particularly in the more autonomous schools of the future, what type of external guidance might be needed and to access the required support and/or training, if needed. Thirdly, the willingness to develop the skills and knowledge needed in order to provide strategic challenge, for example, by understanding how to interpret data.

The evidence suggests that further training to ensure all partners, including headteachers, understand the strategic responsibilities of governing bodies is needed. All parties would then be aware of the value of governing bodies challenging headteachers and the senior leadership team as part of a more strategic approach to governance.

The majority of governors who had accessed training and, in particular, face-to-face training, felt that it was useful. In addition, the clerk was considered to be a key source of support. Governors reported that they would welcome further support particularly in relation to new developments in education, governance self-evaluation, specific issues (relevant to their role on the governing body), and the statutory requirements and legal responsibilities of governing bodies.

Coordinators identified key barriers to governors attending training as a lack of time, lack of support from employers, an unwillingness to travel and variable encouragement from schools.

Looking ahead, although governors and coordinators were unclear about the full impact of budget cuts, there was an expectation that there would be a decrease in local authority governor support services for schools. This potential change, along with greater school autonomy, was expected to result in schools seeking governor support services outside of their local authority from independent providers and consultants, resulting in greater competition amongst local authorities and other providers.

Implications for policy and practice

The recruitment of governors with the appropriate personal attributes, for example, interest, commitment and skills, is considered more important for effective governance than the type of governance model that is adopted.

Suggested improvements to school governance, in order to meet the principles of effective governance, include a better selection and recruitment process for governors and greater clarity of governor roles and responsibilities. This would contribute to governors having further capacity to play an even more critical role in school improvement than at present.

The skills and knowledge needed for governors to provide strategic challenge need to be further developed and supported, for example, by improving understanding of how to interpret data. Only by acquiring this knowledge, and embracing the need to provide strategic challenge, will all governors fulfil this necessary commitment and play their part in ensuring that the more autonomous schools of the future improve in terms of young people's attainment and wellbeing and their accountability to their local community. Making some elements of training compulsory should be considered, such as ways to provide strategic focus and how to interpret data.

To suit the different audiences, the delivery of training needs to be flexible to meet styles of learning and lifestyles, for example, face-to-face training at different times of day and web-based training or, in the case of headteachers, through current headteachers' training. It is possible that headteachers could acquire further appreciation of the importance of governors' strategic input through greater emphasis being placed on this in their current training. All parties would then be aware of the value of governing bodies challenging headteachers and the senior leadership team as part of a more strategic approach to governance.

Networking opportunities should be further considered as they represent effective ways of sharing and disseminating good practice and information. Furthermore, with reduced funding for local authority governance support services, it is worth considering ways for neighbouring schools in a locality to reduce duplication of effort, replicate and share effective practice, and think of creative ways to do so.

It is likely that schools will have to reconsider the way they access governance support services as it is expected that local authorities' governance support services will change. Furthermore, it is probable that there will be a transition period before other suppliers of governance support services emerge. So the need for governors, clerks and headteachers, in particular, to work creatively and proactively in partnership to ensure that effective, strategic governance is realised should be prioritised.

Methodology

Online questionnaire surveys of governors and coordinators of local authority governance services were carried out between October and December 2010. In total, 1591 governors (out of a potential 300,000 respondents) and 62 coordinators (out of a potential 150 respondents, according to the National Co-ordinators of Governor Services (NCOGS)) completed the surveys. The surveys were informed by three exploratory interviews with experts in the field and a rapid review of recent literature on governance models carried out between August and September 2010. Additionally, 24 case-study telephone interviews were conducted with coordinators, chairs of governors and governors in order to provide more in-depth detail to complement the survey data.

Reference

Department for Education (2010). *The Importance of Teaching - The Schools White Paper*. London: DfE. [online]. Available:<http://www.education.gov.uk/b0068570/the-importance-of-teaching/> [20 April, 2011].

Further information

For more information about this report visit www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/LGMS01/ or email Tami McCrone at t.mccrone@nfer.ac.uk.



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