

...BECOME A SCHOOL GOVERNOR

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Introduction

There is a school near you! Whilst the kind of school may differ (Local Authority, Maintained, Church, Academy, Free School) most have a governing board that impacts the education of children. School governance is a significant opportunity, a key and strategic way, to bring about a positive Christian influence for transformation.

Being involved in a local school, leading assemblies and religious education lessons etc. are great opportunities but becoming a school governor, though a daunting role, is a very important one and provides a key link with the community and church. In *Does belief touch society?* (2011) a survey of evangelical Christians suggested that 9% serve as governors compared to 0.7% of the population. This statistic must be greatly amplified to take into account Christians from the much broader church, not least those serving in Church of England, Roman Catholic, Free Schools and Independent Schools.

But, there is room for more governors as many schools boards have vacancies.

Who can be a school governor?

Anyone aged 18 or over. No specialist qualifications are needed and people from many different backgrounds volunteer for the role. You don't need to have a family member at a school, academy or college to become a governor.

Hugh Laurie once wrote:

“It’s a terrible thing, I think, in life to wait until you’re ready. I have this feeling now that actually no one is ever ready to do anything. There’s almost no such thing as ready. There’s only now. And you may as well do it now.”¹

This must be true of anyone becoming a governor. But, if you are a schools worker wondering how you might understand schools better, a church leader who wants to develop a strong working relationship with a school, a parent who is keen to contribute to the education of all the children in the school, or a professional who is intent of making a contribution to education then school governance is for you. It maybe that God is calling, prompting or challenging you to be part of what He is doing in our schools and this is the most strategic way you can do this.

Such a role will require sensitivity, as well as passion and need respect for the views of others. There is no place for people who are focused on single issues rather than the broad range of concerns in a school. Neither is this a platform for evangelism or proselytism. This absolutely is an opportunity to bring a Christian influence to the thinking and decision making that will impact the lives of the whole school community. Interested? Then read on without being too daunted!

Making a difference

Ofsted report that an effective governing body makes a difference and standards of attainment are more likely to be higher. It is therefore not surprising that it has been described as 'a significant educational and community leadership role' (Bath, 2011ⁱⁱ). The evidence is more than anecdotal. Governors are now being motivated and challenged to engage actively in their strategic role, knowing that, for example, "Where governance and the overall leadership and management of a school are good, the school is characterised by its focus and direction"ⁱⁱⁱ. These days an Ofsted Inspection reports on the governance as part of the school leadership so there can be no doubt that the involvement of governors is both a valuable resource and can make a genuine difference.

Categories of Governor (summary)

- Community governor (usually co-opted by the board)
- Parent governor (usually elected from the parent body)
- Foundation governor of a Church School (usually appointed by the local Parochial Church Council and/or Diocese)
- Local Authority governor (appointed by the local authority)
- Staff governor (usually elected by the staff of the school)
- Ex-officio headteacher (because of their role)
- Ex-officio Incumbent (in a Church school by virtue of their role as local Vicar)

N.B. There are variations to this dependent on the Schools 'Instrument of Government' or, the Academies 'Scheme of delegation' from the board of trustees of the multi-academy trust to which they belong.

The role of Governor

All members of the governing board, regardless of what category of governor they are, have three core duties defined in the Governance Handbook 2017^{iv} issued by the Department of Education:

- ▶ Ensuring clarity of vision, ethos and strategic direction
- ▶ Holding executive leaders to account for the educational performance of the organisation and its pupils, and the performance management of staff
- ▶ Overseeing the financial performance of the organisation and making sure its money is well spent.

Where a school is part of a multi academy trust the ultimate accountability for these things is held by the board of trustees, sometimes called directors. In many contexts they will have delegated some or most of these functions to the local governing board of an individual academy.

What exactly is the role?

To bring a professional and independent 'lay' voice to decisions that influences the school's ethos and vision as well as strategic planning. This will mean being involved in senior appointments, overseeing the school budget, deciding on the right way forward, considering the curriculum and thinking about the needs of students and staff. A key part is to hold the school senior leadership team to account for everything that happens in the school or academy.

How much time does it involve?

A typical school governor will spend at least six to eight hours a month on their duties. Taking on extra responsibilities will need a greater time commitment.

The right person

The Governance Handbook^{iv} states that “All boards, however many schools they govern, need people with skills appropriate to the scale and nature of their role; and no more people than they need to have all the necessary skills to be effective.”

This ‘skills based’ approach is often interpreted as having practical ability or professional experience that can serve the cause of good governance. Whilst these are important, a more Christian informed approach may also consider appropriate qualities such as character and personal strengths (strategic planner, communicator, empathetic, quick to act, learner, dependable, to name but a few). Using spiritual gifts and having wisdom are particularly crucial in the governance of a church school.

The duties of governing bodies need people who ask themselves ‘how can my faith have an impact in a school where I seem to be the only Christian around the table?’. Schools are a context where such a positive contribution can serve to enrich and benefit staff, pupils and the community in which the school exists. However, as one person amongst others, your views and beliefs need to be submitted to the cause of ‘serving the common good’. This is identified as ‘corporate responsibility’ where the guidance states that no governor has individual power or authority unless directly delegated to him or her by the whole board. This includes the Chair, who can only make decisions where not to do so would disadvantage a pupil or the school.

Someone about to be, or already serving as, a governor may find it helpful to explore the impact of discovering what it means to be serving God, individually and collectively. Miroslav Volf suggests that:

“Christian practices are such that a Christian normative vision is part and parcel of what these practices are... Practices are essentially belief-shaped and beliefs are essentially practice-shaping.”^v

As a governor understanding what makes for a God-honouring education will grow as you grasp issues once thought beyond you and it may even help develop new skills. As a volunteer seeking to give to education, governors gain much more. Perhaps this encouraging suggestion may help:

“Whatever ministry we exercise, it is not, first and foremost, ‘ours’ but God’s, initiated and sustained by him. Human agents may come and go. It is the God of resurrection who works decisively, irresistibly, to fulfil his promises.”^{vi}

Contributing a distinctively Christian inspired and inspiring leadership role is a huge opportunity. It is beginning to be perceived by some as being a ministry – lay ministry for those not ordained. This might be informed by a sense of calling or a vision to achieve greater things. Underpinning this vision is a challenge:

“Spur yourself on with a ridiculously large vision of how things could be: one that is beyond human imaginingone that is for ever drawing on the talents and abilities of those involved...”^{vii}



Priorities in governance

Christians involved in school governance may find it helpful to reflect on these priorities:

- ▶ **People more than performance** – human flourishing will trump all attempts to purely focus on data and achievement, important though they are;
- ▶ **Interdependence instead of independence** - Interdependence has more biblical resonance than independence. Building stronger and more fruitful relationships within a group of schools must surely be preferable to creating barriers and reliving the competition of recent decades. This is an opportunity across schools committed to sharing the burden of responsibility equally.^{viii}
- ▶ **Strengths as well as skills** – St Paul identified “For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function” (Romans 12: 2-4). Whilst practical skills are vital, discovering spiritual gifts and character is a uniquely Christian way of building a team.
- ▶ **Responsibility more than duty** – there are a plethora of legal and recommended duties that make up the business of governance. Focusing more on responsibility that is not limited by duty will enable governance to thrive and all in the school community to experience positive outcomes.
- ▶ **Faithfulness hand in hand with achievement** – in a climate of performance-driven agenda (which have their uses) there are many attributes that might outweigh or even enable the very best for everyone involved. It was Jesus who said “Someone who is faithful in a small matter will also be faithful in a large one.” Luke 16.10 (T Wright version, 2011).

The Chief Inspector of Schools wrote in 2015: “Governors who devote too much time and attention to the marginal issues (like the school uniform, dinner menu or the peeling paintwork in the main hall) instead of focusing on the core issues that really matter – the quality of teaching, the progress and achievement of pupils and the underlying school culture”.

To achieve this, a governing board will need a significant focus on the following activities:

- ▶ **Strategic planning** – determining the vision, ethos and termly (or annual and sometime 3 -5 years) plans
- ▶ **Performance Management** – monitoring the outcomes of the processes for all staff and a panel of governors undertaking the Performance of the Head Teacher (In an Multi Academy Trust this will not usually be delegated to the local governing board)
- ▶ **Data, finance and targets** – pouring over spreadsheets and other data reports will provide information about how well the school is doing in educational performance, financial probity and in reaching targets agreed and set by the governing board.
- ▶ **Monitoring, observations and reports** – in order to hold the school to account it will be important for governors to visit the school and see the evidence that plans and policies (eg. behaviour, marking, safeguarding etc) are being followed. This is different from making judgments about educational expectations and outcomes which can be provided by reports from internal and external professionals.

Vision

Whilst it might be an expectation that a Church school would have a broad vision for their children, a governor of any school can bring that perspective to the discussion. John Cox points out:

“One of the dangers of attainment targets has been the narrowing of educational focus so that all effort is put into gaining the best possible results in a narrow range of core subjects. Such subjects may be very important but should not be at the exclusion of other areas of learning which develop the ‘whole person’ - intellectual, physical, emotional, spiritual and social.”^{ix}

Values

Christians who are governors might be informed by values such as:

Koinonia – quality of relationships, fellowship, union, partnership

Hope - sustaining energy particularly through difficult times

Justice – giving all what is right and deserved

Honesty – essential to human life and at the heart of all relationships

Service – a servant attitude at the heart of how we work together

Theology of Governance

One biblical text that has provided a reflective opportunity is: “...chase after **justice, faith, love** and **peace**; you’ll be in the company of all who call on the Lord from a pure heart.... And the Lord’s servant **mustn’t be a fighter, but must be gentle** to all people, **able to teach, able to bear evil without resentment, able to correct opponents with a meek spirit...**” 2 Timothy 2, verses 22-25 (Wright, 2011).

Thinking about how the highlighted words might inform and motivate a Christ like approach to governance can be a rewarding and helpful exercise.

In 2016, the Church of England developed a vision for its schools that might be a useful way of exploring the role of governance from a Christian perspective. This provides a fresh and theologically developed set of ideas that might inform an individual serving as a governor in any school – whilst requiring sensitivity in how this is ‘lived out’. The vision is derived from the words of Jesus:

‘I came so that everyone would have life, and have it in its fullest.’
(John 10:10)

and is summed up in a memorable statement as:

‘Deeply Christian, Serving the Common Good.

This is intended to embrace the spiritual, physical, intellectual, emotional, moral and social development of children and young people. It offers a vision of human flourishing for all, one that embraces excellence and academic rigor, but sets them in a wider framework. This is worked out theologically and educationally through four basic elements permeating this vision for education:

Wisdom, Hope, Community, and Dignity.’^x

Governance will involve spreadsheets, policies, data analysis, staffing issues, parental complaints and a host of other responsibilities. You will spend time grappling with decisions that impact the lives of all in the school. You will sometimes have an understanding of the bigger picture that can’t be shared. You will have to respond to government initiatives and policies. It will be worth all of the attention to details and commitment if one teacher is able to teach better and one children has been able to learn. Of course it will impact many more.

And you too, will find the interplay between fellow governors and the development of skills and understanding, that will make a difference far beyond the school. Being part of a team with such visionary possibilities is exciting and life changing. As one writer describes it:

“Instead of independence it is much healthier to live interdependently..... We walk through life together rather than on our own. We build bridges to each other’s islands. We learn from each other, we encourage each other, we support each other, we care for each other, we have fun together, we build memories together and we help each other to grow. We realise we are stronger and better as two or more than we are on our own.”^{xi}

Finding your place and getting involved

Having begun to consider getting involved in school governance, the next step can be daunting. There are variations in the processes involved dependent upon the school, diocese, or multi-academy trust (MAT). For example, in the case of an academy that is part of a MAT there may be (not always) what will be known as a Local Governing Board or body, or sometimes as an Academy Council (and other names). In this instance there will be a scheme of delegation that defines what responsibilities that particular group has. Have a look at their website which ought to contain documents that describe this. For most other schools, the Governance Handbook^{iv} I have referred to above informs the role of a Governing Board.

Probably the easiest way of becoming involved is through a contact you may have or encounter. I became a governor of one school after moving to a new town and having been invited to a party by my new neighbours. During the evening a conversation with a teacher from a local primary school uncovered an urgent need for a governor. Before I left, she had written down the school's telephone number on a paper napkin and within weeks I was a governor and, about a year later, Chair!

The first step you take may involve one or more of the following:

- ▶ Approach the local school/academy of your choice and express your interest. This is ideally through someone you know or by making an appointment to meet with the headteacher. Be sure to have prepared a good reason that involves a desire to make a difference to the lives of the pupils, and what key attributes you will bring to the task eg, skills, strengths and experience.
- ▶ Contact your local authority and/or diocese education office and offer yourself as a potential member of a governing board. They should be able to point you in the best direction of a vacancy/opportunity.
- ▶ Use the online service 'Inspiring Governance' the national online matchmaking service that connects skilled volunteers interested in serving as governors and trustees (directors) with schools or academies.

There is no established process for joining a governing board. It used to be said that any fool could join and many did! That is a rather unfair statement and these days' effective governing boards and MATs will have developed their own process. This has partly arisen because of the requirement that people are appointed no longer because of their willingness but for their skills, as explained above. Some contexts will provide an application form, they may have a formal or informal interview with the Head, Chair or designated governor and most will want to understand more about why you want to be considered, your skills, availability and commitment. You should bear in mind that the role is usually is for a four-year term of office and, although technically you can resign at any time, the investment in induction, support and training as well as what you contribute requires continuity and stability.

In summary these will be the various routes onto a governing board:

- ▶ **A parent governor** – is usually elected by the parent body when a vacancy arises. You would be asked to provide a short statement to be circulated and a paper ballot is undertaken on a particular date. There may be a process described in the last paragraph before your name is put forward for election.
- ▶ **Church School Foundation governors** – will be nominated by the Parochial Church Council and/or Diocesan Board of Education. Again, increasingly schools/academies are involved in the selection of those nominated in the same way as suggested above. Foundation governors will need to have a commitment to the church the school is linked to or another local Christian Church (different Diocese have slight variations to their expectation).
- ▶ **Most other governors, trustees or directors will be co-opted by the existing board** (or appointed by the Members of a MAT).

Conclusion

Either you and/or your church may have considered school governance to be a strategic and effective way of serving the local community. It is definitely a valuable learning curve for people involved in long-term schools work. It will lead to understanding more about the education system, the needs of the local school and help identify ways to develop the ways you support them. However it is more than what the church can do for the school. Another important role a school governor can fulfil is to encourage the church to reflect upon its purpose in supporting or working with a school, enable the school to make a contribution to the life of the Church and introduce some of the professional approaches to learning etc. picked up in the school.

You may consider taking up this role for a whole variety of reasons. Perhaps it is because you are responding to a challenge, an opportunity, or the seed of an idea planted in your mind. It might even be that you are the only available person from your church with the talents and experience that fit the need! Exercising a little wisdom and discernment will help you think in a more deeply Christian way and commit to serving the common good through governance. It may be much later it becomes clearer that this is a 'calling from God'.

Over the past 30 years I have seen really positive things happen in schools through decisions of the governing board I have served on. Children have benefited from headteacher appointments, resourcing, monitoring learning and much more beside. As a Christian I have found that my emphasis on relationships has changed attitudes, opened minds and made for equitable decisions.

I cannot more strongly commend the role of school governor to you!

To discover more, check out:

▶ transfrominggoverning.org.uk.

▶ *Church School Governance* by Mike Simmonds (Grove Book – April, 2017)

To find a governance opportunity: inspiringgovernance.org

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