

Resource 1: The governing body / Board - an example

The governing body, in most schools, is in some ways analogous to a board of directors who are responsible to shareholders for the efficient running of the organisation, but not directly involved in management. They see that things are done, but they don't actually do those things themselves.

It's important to get this relationship clear, because it can go wrong. Here are some of the ways this can happen:

Governors – as a body, or as individuals within it – sometimes try to take on the direct monitoring or management of professional activities within the school. For example, a governor committee might decide to assume responsibility for timetabling decisions, or the allocation of staff to teaching groups. Or a governor may visit a classroom and act in an inspectorial way, reporting on the perceived competence of a teacher. Neither of these is a correct reading of the governor-school relationship.

From the other side of that relationship, it may be that a head takes decisions which properly belong to the governors, or too easily assumes the governors' agreement to a course of action that actually requires governing body discussion. For example, a head may discuss major building changes with an architect without first talking to the Board. This is wrong, as it's potentially an area of great expense and Governors/Board members will wish to be assured that the details are properly worked out in line with school policy.

To take another hypothetical example, let's say The International School of Erehwon's governing body begins to worry about the effectiveness of the school's provision for children with special educational needs. From that point, the following chain of events might occur:

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A governor asks at a meeting of the governing body, 'Do we have a policy on special educational needs?' The answer is that there probably is one, but it's considerably out-of-date, and everyone, governors and staff, have been remiss in bringing it up-to-date and making sure it works. The governors make a decision that there shall be a new special educational needs policy, which takes account of the school's statement of values. They form a special educational needs committee, made up of governors and specialist teachers.

The committee meets to decide on the main features of the policy. The specialist teachers are asked to provide the details of how it might work in school, reporting back to the committee at agreed intervals. At these meetings, the governors ask questions and make sure they understand and approve of what's being proposed.

When the policy is constructed to everyone's satisfaction, it's approved by the committee and the governing body itself.

From that point on, the governors satisfy themselves that their policy is working. They do this by fact-finding visits to school and by taking presentations from specialist teachers at their meetings. However, the governor is not an inspector. The governor is not there to judge – or evaluate – what happens in the classroom, or in any sense to pronounce upon the competence of a teacher. To use the well-worn phrase, they act as critical friends, not just to the teachers but also to the pupils whose interests should be their main priority. Once the policy seems to have settled down, they content themselves with putting it into the cycle that periodically brings up areas of the school's work for review.

These examples show how the relationship should work. It's subtle in many ways, and there are some hazy boundaries that can't be set down in black and white – governors can't always disengage entirely from the nuts and bolts of school life, nor can professionals consult governors on too much detail – so it's vital that everyone concerned understands and supports the basic principles.

We'll return to this kind of process as we go on, because it's one of the fundamental structures through which the governors carry out their own role in the self-evaluation process.