

10 features of a successful governing board

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Introduction

Successful governing boards are a vital element of strategic school improvement and development; they have a positive impact on the outcomes for pupils and relationships with key stakeholders, and secure the achievement of the school's agreed vision and values.

This article identifies the 10 features of a successful governing board and shares examples of how successful governance can be secured.

A successful governing board:

Keeps pupils at the forefront

A successful board remembers at all times that they are governing for the benefit of pupils, who they recognise as their key stakeholder. They seek to hear from and talk to pupils regularly about their views, experiences and aspirations. Pupils' views may be sought during pupil voice sessions linked to governor monitoring visits, through questionnaires and by attending key school events and speaking to pupils. Successful boards respond to pupils' issues and concerns, and commit to sharing actions taken to respond to these. A useful way for governors to achieve this is by always asking themselves: "if we make this decision, how will it benefit the pupils?" – if no benefit can be identified, then the decision should be carefully considered.

Celebrates success

Successful boards are able to recognise and celebrate success, including their own and that of pupils and staff. In celebrating successes, the governing board must always remain authentic, and also ensure they recognise the small and bigger successes and achievements. It is also important that the board communicates any recognition – a short note of thanks or a

round of applause in an assembly can go a long way. Celebrating the success of the governing board and wider school demonstrates that the governing board is engaged, attentive and appreciative; this can lead to increased motivation and enthusiasm, and boost individuals' confidence and self-esteem, whatever their role in school.

Is self-aware

A successful board undertakes regular self-evaluation and crucially acts upon what it finds. A [Governor Development Plan](#) can be helpful for governors to identify and record areas requiring attention and development. Governors may have decided that it is appropriate to commission a governance health check, or a full external review of governance, because it is recognised that external and impartial advice would be helpful. A successful governing board is aware of its own standard of performance and knows what it needs to do next. It undertakes a regular [skills audit](#) and appoints new members to support the skills matrix and does not appoint members to reflect the board that is already in place. It also ensures that it undertakes effective succession planning.

Networks

A successful board looks outwards as well as inwards, and not only knows its own strengths and challenges, but also actively participates in networks within the local community of schools as a way of developing knowledge and new ways of working. Networks are used to support and grow governance, develop collaborations, share efficiencies and promote the school within the local community. A successful board will share its own successful practice with other governing boards to secure positive outcomes for all pupils.

Is committed to developing to improve and evolve

A successful board realises it is greater than the sum of its parts and that everyone has equal voice and valued contribution. It recognises the importance of the critical relationships between the governing board, senior leaders and the clerk to governors. If these relationships are not nurtured, the chances of the board functioning successfully are low. The key elements of maintaining these relationships are:

- Clarity of roles and maintaining an understanding of the difference between strategic and operational responsibilities, agreed accountabilities and an understanding of boundaries whilst having a joint moral purpose.
- Respect by building trust over time. This takes effort, but enables people to speak freely – it also enables governors to move out of their comfort zone and take on additional challenges to develop their practice.
- Striking a balance between support and challenge is important to maintain successful relationships. Challenge is a key element of effective governance and a successful board
- Frequent and open communication. A successful board communicates well, is inclusive, shares issues openly and avoids exclusive relationships.

A successful board is concerned for the wellbeing of the school leaders, staff and pupils.

Lives its values

A successful board understands that the first core function of governance is to ensure clarity of vision, ethos and strategic direction. A successful board refreshes their visions regularly, plans ahead and promotes these values through the way they undertake governance.

A successful board also adheres to the [7 principles of public life](#), often referred to as the 'Nolan principles' of selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership. It is vital that the governing board ensures that these principles are reflected in the [Governing Board Code of Conduct](#) and takes time to reflect on their practice by reviewing the code of conduct regularly.

A process for identifying and managing potential conflicts of interest and business interests should also be in place, alongside a clear understanding of, and respect for, confidentiality.

Understands Ofsted

A successful board is aware of the inspection framework that the school is judged against, and is clear of the progress being made towards development points – progress towards addressing any weaknesses identified from school performance data, and progress towards implementing the outcomes of any internal or external reviews. It realises the importance of being 'Ofsted ready', but is clear that being so is not the driving force of the school or governing board. Working towards an Ofsted 'action plan' should not be the sole focus of governance, and there should be a balance between understanding what governors need to know about Ofsted and the needs of the school community.

Complies but is not compliant

A successful board complies with relevant legislation, guidance and governing documents, but does not do so without questioning.

Governors ensure that there are members with the skills, knowledge and systems in place to ensure that budgets are monitored and interrogated, health and safety guidance is adhered to, compliance records are checked, the school website updated regularly to ensure it remains compliant, and policies are adopted in line with the specified schedule. Successful governing boards ensure that safeguarding underpins everything within school and remains a priority and focus for all.

Never stops asking questions

A question is a request for information that can lead to knowledge, a change of practice or the discovery of an issue that needs resolving. Successful governing boards understand the importance of being able to identify appropriate questions to challenge, and are professional yet consistent in their use of questions in the pursuit of excellence and the best outcomes for pupils.

Is brave

Governing boards who are brave are successful because they do not take the easy option, or shy away from difficult questions or decisions. They maintain a clear understanding of the reason behind their challenge and decision making, and they maintain clarity of the vision and values of the school, and the strategic plan to achieve objectives set. Successful governance is not easy governance, but the rewards are worth the hard work and commitment needed to achieve it.

Bibliography

Committee on Standards in Public Life (1995) 'The 7 principles of public life'
<<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-7-principles-of-public-life/the-7-principles-of-public-life--2>> [Accessed: 28 June 2017]