

Thinking Ahead

Exploring the strategic role that
headteachers and governors carry
out in partnership

SCHOOL LEADERS

Report

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Introduction

‘Governing bodies have become the strategic leaders of schools’

(*Governing the School of the Future*, DfES, February 2005)

The publication of “*Governing the School of the Future*” marks a pivotal shift in the roles, relationships and responsibilities of school governors. Not only does it describe governing bodies as the strategic leaders of schools, it also sees them as ‘equal partners in leadership’ with the headteacher.

Headteachers might be surprised at this perceived shift, since only three years earlier, the National Governors’ Conference, led by DfES and OfSTED, had observed that ‘...the governing body is not generally seen as playing a leadership role in strategic planning’ and described how a survey had found that school leaders did not regard governors and the business sector as ‘...significant sources of ideas and inspiration’ (DfES, 2002, p.12). To what extent then does the reality of school governance reflect the rhetoric of *Governing the School of the Future*?

As a headteacher when the research began [and now a leadership consultant and School Improvement Partner], I realised from numerous conversations with headteachers outside of this research, that opinions on the role and contribution of governors to strategic leadership and school improvement varied substantially. Indeed, governors’ involvement in the strategic leadership of schools was acknowledged in a DfES (2003) report, *Steering not Rowing* to be a controversial area. However, the positive examples of school governance that I found provided a glimpse into the window of the dynamics and relationships which energised the school and emboldened the teachers and school leaders within them.

This research builds from such positive examples and explores the strategic role that headteachers and governors carry out in partnership in three case study schools. Within these three contrasting primary schools are school governors, who have assumed this strategic responsibility and school leaders, both voluntary in their governor role and professional in their headteacher role, who are working together in equal partnership. The research, although small-scale, seeks through exploration of the cases to:

- Identify similarities which may facilitate this level of strategic operation.
- Describe some of its benefits and barriers.
- Provide practical examples of how the vision might work in action.

Literature Review

The English education system is characterised by its complex pattern of governance for its state schools. The various types of schools – community, voluntary and aided, foundation, controlled, academies, trust, and technology colleges - have each developed their own distinctive governance arrangements. The composition of governing bodies is diverse. Parent and staff governors must be elected whilst others are appointed by bodies such as the Diocese, the local authority or the governing body itself.

Recent research commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Dean et al, 2007) describes how the role of school governors has evolved from being a band of local stakeholders, providing support and links with the community, to a group which is now expected to have ‘general responsibility for the conduct of the school with a view to promoting high standards of educational achievement’ (Education Act 2002, section 21).

Why do we have governing bodies? Developing further the quote at the start of this report, Derek Twigg, past junior minister of education, describes it thus:

“The role of the governing body has changed beyond recognition over the past twenty years. With the introduction of local management of schools and further reforms, governing bodies have become the strategic leaders of schools. They are rightly responsible and accountable in law and in practice for major decisions about the school and its future. Governing bodies are equal partners in leadership with the headteacher and senior management team. We want to see them taking a full part in driving the improvement and culture of the school.” (DfES, 2005, p.2)

Governing bodies must now provide the school with strategic direction, offer support and challenge and act as a critical friend to the headteacher. There are other more specific duties that governors must undertake. These include managing the school’s finance, appointing staff, managing the performance of the headteacher, agreeing targets for pupil attainment and ensuring that the curriculum is broad and balanced. School governors also have responsibility for the plans that are drawn up when a school is placed in a category following inspections of the school (DfES, 2006).

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation research describes this function of the work of a governing body as essentially managerial, that is, the main function is to ensure that “... the school is managed as efficiently and effectively as possible by overseeing the professionals who undertake the detailed work.” (Dean et al, 2007, p.12)

Governing bodies discharge these duties in a variety of ways. A common pattern is that the headteacher is in charge of the day-to-day management of the school, but that government guidance expects governors to act both as critical friends to headteachers and as the strategic leaders of schools. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation research, focusing upon schools in disadvantaged areas, found that many governing bodies felt more comfortable offering support as opposed to challenge and tended to rely upon the headteacher to set the strategic direction of the school. However, whilst this research moves on to focus upon the very real difficulties that some governing bodies experience in discharging their managerial role, the challenge of placing school governors in equal partnership with their headteachers and placing them at the forefront of setting the strategic direction of the school is only touched upon. The report concludes that, in schools in disadvantaged areas, there was an absence of a strong, strategic role for school governors.

“In principle, governors are responsible for the strategic oversight of the school, leaving day-to-day management to head teachers. In practice, they may be drawn into day-to-day issues, or feel unable to chart a strategic direction without the detailed professional knowledge to which heads have access. By the same token, since heads control day-to-day decision making in the school, it is relatively easy for them to extend their influence into areas that perhaps should be negotiated with, or left entirely to, governing bodies.”

(Dean et al, 2007, p.16)

Defining Strategic Leadership

Lost Boy: Injuns! Let’s go get ‘em!
John Darling: Hold on a minute. First we must have a strategy
Lost Boy: Uhh? What’s a strategy?
John Darling: It’s er ...it’s a plan of attack
(Peter Pan, 1953, Walt Disney)

There is little consensus as to the definition of strategy, either in its generic sense or when applied to different professions. The Oxford Dictionary describes strategy as “...a plan designed to achieve a particular long-term aim.”

The word ‘strategy’ derives from the Greek word *strategiia* meaning ‘generalship’. The word is formed from ‘stratos’, meaning army, and ‘ag’, meaning ‘to lead’. In both military and business contexts, strategy has come to mean the overall plan for deploying resources to establish a favourable position.

Tactics are the schemes for specific action. So, for instance, tactics might be the battlefield manoeuvres, whilst strategy is concerned with winning the war.

Strategic decisions share three common features:

1. They are important.
2. They involve a significant commitment of resources.
3. They are not easily reversible.

How is strategy made? Henry Mintzberg (1994) identifies three types:

- Intended – conceived by top managers.
- Realised – the actual strategy that is implemented.
- Emergent – decisions that emerge from the complex processes in which people interpret the intended strategy.

For many organisations, it is a combination of a deliberate design, through a series of meetings and planning, and emergence, which is the result of multiple decisions at many levels. The more stable the organisation, the more strategy can be designed. Organisations whose futures and environment are less certain, can only hope to establish a few strategic guidelines. The rest must emerge as circumstances unfold.

Many school leaders will identify Hamel and Prahalad's (1994) view that strategy is forward looking and is focusing not only on the organisation as it is now, but it will be in the future. They identified that one common feature of highly successful what companies is 'strategic intent'. An example of strategic intent would be the aim of the Apollo programme i.e. to put a man on the moon by the end of the decade.

Hamel and Prahalad identified that, when resources are scarce, then ambition, innovation, risk-taking and continuous improvement are characteristic. They advocated that strategy should be less about working within the framework of resource allocation and should be more about stretch and resource leverage. Many of these ideas are both familiar and challenging to school leaders. In particular, how the work of corporate strategy can be translated into educational settings?

One of the most respected writers on strategic leadership in schools is Professor Brent Davies. In his work, Davies differentiates between leadership and management, between operational target setting activities, and longer-term futures thinking and strategic development.

"Strategic leaders are concerned with not just managing the now but setting up a framework of where the organisation needs to be in the future, setting a direction for the organisation. The position of strategic leadership is driving the visioning process of moral purpose and future direction whilst maintaining the day-to-day operation of a school."
(Davies, 2004, p.19)

However, strategic leadership in schools continues to be described in terms of school development planning, with the emphasis placed upon long-term vision. Sir David Winkley, representing the National Primary Trust Innovation in Schools, reminded governors that they needed to have a sense of direction and a corporate sense of where they are going (Winkley, 2002). He listed four critical components:

1. Destination.
2. A map of how we're going to get there.
3. The vehicle.
4. A drive.

Strategic Leadership and Governance

Sir David Winkley described how a common feature in cases of exceptionally well-led schools was that... 'all have strong and involved governing bodies or chairs of governors who are making a major contribution to school strategies' (2002, p.12). He also described a key role of governors as creating '... a 'protective veil' which encourages innovative thinking' (2002, p.9).

Barber, Stoll et al (2003) suggest that the most important way in which the governing body can carry out its strategy-setting role is through the school development plan.

However reservations about the abilities of both headteachers and their governing bodies to fulfil this strategic role have often been voiced. For instance, Dame Pat Collarbone (DfES, 2002, p.21) has recommended that there should be further exploration of ways of articulating and then disseminating greater realism and clarity about the role of the governing body. She stated that headteachers' and governors' training should focus more clearly on the governors' role in strategic leadership. There should be more joint training in this area for headteachers, school leadership teams and governors, particularly chairs of governing bodies. At this conference, syndicate discussion recommended that there should be a definition of partnership which would equip the governing body with the tools to move forward.

The link between effective school governance and the quality of leadership and management has also been OfSTED, which in the publication *The Work of School Governors*, concluded that:

"...there is correlation between the quality of governance and the quality of leadership and management. Where governance and the overall leadership and management of a school are good the school is characterised by its focus and direction. Governing bodies in these schools are frequently described as having a very clear vision of the direction of the school and as having an effective and efficient working arrangement with the leadership of the school where each clearly understands the relationship with the other and complements their efforts." (DfES, 2002, p.16)

In 2001 a joint DfES/OfSTED consultation took place with the theme *Steering not Rowing*. The phrase had been taken from the book *Reinventing Government* by David Osborne and Ted Gaebler, in which they note that the word 'government' derives from Greek word meaning 'to steer'. In this context then, strategic leadership represented steering and the actual delivery of services was the rowing.

The view of the consultation was that the government should invest in a programme of training that would enable governors to focus on three roles:

1. Operating strategically.
2. Securing accountability.
3. Being a critical friend.

The preparation for governors to fulfil their new strategic leadership role appeared to be in place and this would not only improve the quality of leadership and management, but would facilitate schools discovering their own solutions and paths ahead. In the section *From Hierarchy to Participation*, participants were reminded, "Never tell people how to do things, tell them what you want them to achieve and they will surprise you with their ingenuity" (DfES 2002, p.5).

The concept appeared to be that a strategic approach would be adopted "...where the governing body would set a policy that met the needs of its particular school, while the operational leadership decisions within the school were the responsibility of the headteacher, reporting to the governing body" (DfES 2002, p.9).

“The word ‘governance’ was esoteric, not used very often in common language. Governors were part of the strategic leadership of schools but for some headteachers that statement was controversial. ...’they should be part of the group that set the direction and therefore led the school into the future. Strategic leadership was about looking forward, outwards and upwards seeing the future and exciting others. The governing body had a huge motivational role to play in the school...There was a need to think about the future and take account of what was going on outside: socially, technologically, environmentally, economically, politically, educationally and spiritually.” (DfES, 2002, p.27-28)

Whilst it appeared that the government and its advisers had a clear view about the new role of school governors as setting the strategic direction of their schools and standing as equal partners in leadership with the headteacher, this message had filtered through to few schools on a practical level.

This research set out to identify a small number of schools where these dual roles were partially or fully in place. It aimed to identify common features within these schools that facilitated their working in this way and to explore some of the barriers and share successes.

Methods

The research took the form of semi-structured interviews with headteachers and a small sample of governors from three contrasting schools within two local authorities. Whilst each school was very different in its size, composition and location, they were all sited in areas that had above average income levels, and where employment rates and educational achievement was also above average levels.

The smallest school, a voluntary aided rural primary school had just over 100 pupils on roll and had previously been grant maintained. The governing body had 16 members. A significant proportion of pupils were out of catchment and this impacted adversely on the recruitment of governors since they also had to travel to attend meetings.

The second school was a large voluntary aided junior school with 400 pupils on roll situated in a city. The governing body had 16 members.

The final school was a large mixed primary of just under 500 pupils. This was situated in a semi-rural area and was a community school. The school had experienced some difficulties in leadership and had been in special measures and subsequently had a notice to improve. This had recently been lifted following the relatively recent appointment of a new headteacher. This governing body had 14 members.

The headteachers had been in post between two and twenty-two years. All had worked with a number of governors during their headships and had seen their governing bodies develop and evolve during this time. Two heads were male and one was female.

A common feature of these governing bodies was that they had survived significant change. These included amalgamation, failed OfSTED inspections, change of status and dealing with school leaders in crisis.

The research focused on how the school governing bodies functioned, how the partnership between the headteacher and governing body played out in practice and how this led to the governing bodies fulfilling their role as the strategic leaders of their schools. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the headteacher and at least one governor; all Chairs of Governors were interviewed.

Key areas explored through semi-structured interviews were:

- What evidence was there of governors fulfilling their strategic role?
- What was the impact of this?
- What were the barriers and how were they overcome?
- Why were the governing bodies working in this way and how did they get there?
- What frameworks were in place? Were there common approaches/models?

School leaders were also asked to describe, or sketch, their operation and organisation in relation to governance.

Main Findings

Despite the contrasting nature of the schools involved, there were some striking similarities in both the characteristics of the governing bodies and the ways in which they operated, which affected their strategic role. These included the structure and composition of the governing bodies, the role of self-evaluation, recruitment, communication, partnership and risk-taking.

Structure and Composition

Governors and headteachers were asked to sketch a diagram showing the structure of the governing body. Two of the governing bodies drew hierarchies showing a group of 'leading governors'. In addition to the chair and headteacher, these were chairs of the personnel and finance committees. These governing bodies shared the view that a smaller group of governors was sometimes needed to make rapid decisions or give feedback to the headteacher. They agreed that these governors were the ones who made significant investment in terms of time spent either in school or on school business. Ensuring that all governors were involved was achieved by electronic communication and the fact that all governors were part of at least two committees and so met regularly with one another.

A second governing body felt that it operated in a collegial way, but had 'key' governors who would help to steer the school. These governors were co-opted governors who had a long history of working with the schools.

"These governors have a better grip on the school as a whole – they see the big picture and not just the detail. It would be practically impossible to involve the whole governing body at this level of discussion and decision-making." (Headteacher, small rural school)

Another school drew its governing body structure as a series of concentric circles, with an 'inner circle', which included the headteacher at the centre and a small number of experienced and long-serving governors. The need to grow new governors into these roles and the associated need for a planned approach to succession were the obvious disadvantages of this model which the school identified as possible pitfalls of this approach.

"We are revising our committee structure to enable the inner circle to network more with other governors, as people can feel quite disenfranchised. You can't involve everyone all of the time but, in a sense, I don't think that there is anything wrong with that. The 'onion model' of a Governing Body where there are some people are on the inside and then others are on the outside can work well. There is a danger that some people would rather be on the inner ring. Some people are quite happy to remain on the outer ring and that's fine. I was happy to be on an outer ring at the infant school and have moved to the inner circle here. But we are aware that we are not going to be governors forever and we need to start to draw people in and growing expertise. This model of school governance is rare but I think that it is down to the headteachers to encourage it. At my previous school which was more formal, the head only had a relationship with the chair of governors." (Governor, junior school)

Claudia Wade had warned at a National Co-ordinators of Governor Services conference in 2002, "Small cliques must not be allowed to have all the power. Corporate activity protects community decisions" (2002, p.9). However, the schools in the study found that a model of involving all governors in decision making was neither practical nor desirable. Leadership by a smaller, experienced group of governors in partnership with the headteacher was an approach which all three schools adopted and both governors and headteachers felt that this model was to be recommended. In one school, the Chair of Governors was not part of this group whilst another school had the chairs of committees as the key members of the team. Having this 'inner-circle' of experienced and committed governors working alongside school leaders in areas of leadership and management was key to the partnership experience.

"We need a small group of governors who can be committed to the job, and it can be very hard for them to maintain the high profile role if they are working. It becomes much easier when people retire and have more time to give and share their experience and expertise. I would hope that these experienced governors are not perceived as a clique. I think that they are seen as senior governors who are there to help the school move forward and mentor other governors. Everyone is encouraged to play their role as they perceive it and to the best of their ability." (Headteacher, small rural primary school)

Operation and Partnership

The schools in the study had governors and headteachers which had a clear understanding of each other's roles and remits. In two schools, these roles had evolved over a number of years and there was an implicit understanding and appreciation of which areas of the school's work should be led by governors or the headteacher. These schools were characterised by a relatively relaxed and informal approach to strategic leadership and the headteachers viewed governors as supporters and people to bounce initial ideas against, or provide objective views. This trust relationship facilitated dialogue which was very honest and open.

The third school was led by a recently appointed headteacher. In this school, there had been more formal discussion regarding the methods of working and, in particular, the strategic role of the governing body. This school had also introduced some formal opportunities for staff and governors to work in partnership on vision, strategy and 'bigger picture' ideas. This involved training days being regularly set aside for working parties to be formed and report back their findings. Governors were invited to attend these days and there was good attendance. On the whole, governors did not involve themselves in the day-to-day management of the school whilst retaining a keen sense of their own accountability for teaching and learning.

The reasons why those interviewed had initially chosen to become governors varied. Every school had a relatively large governing body and most had no vacancies. Those governors interviewed were advocates of the model of strategic partnership and said that this approach meant they felt valued. They were pleased that their skills and expertise were being put to good use and said that they would feel much less inclined to become involved in school governance if their role was relegated to attending meetings and being the passive recipients of information.

A second similarity between the governing bodies studied was a real commitment to develop the governors that they already had whilst positively seeking out new potential governors which they could 'grow.'

"Well, there are obvious things like a fireman has joined the health and safety committee, but there is a real attempt here to grow governors. There are some skills that are transferable and others that must be learned. There might be things about chairing committees and understanding how schools work which need to be learned and which cannot be brought in from the outside." (Governor, urban primary school)

“There are two sets of skills that you need to be a governor. There are the technical skills and the soft skills – the process skills. It is useful to have someone on the personnel committee who has a background in human resources, but it is actually more useful to have people who have been used to working with a range of people in a range of contexts. It’s very helpful to have an accountant on finance, but we actually need people who can make sense of data, relate to how it is used in a classroom, and then come back to us with their ideas.” (Governor, large rural primary school)

One common feature was that the schools and their governing bodies were very reflective and saw self-evaluation as an integral part of their work. Although this aspect is developed more in a later section, it is highlighted at this point as it served to determine a level of operational activity on the governors’ part but with the intention of releasing the headteacher to be more strategic. In a sense this was also a strategic decision. They were constantly looking at ways to improve and realised that one very important function that they could discharge was to take over some of the more operational aspects of the school’s work, thus releasing the headteacher and leadership team to fulfil an increasingly strategic role.

“There we were, sitting as a committee and going through the 24 tasks – you know, the bit that says ‘Does this need my skills as a teacher?’ and if it doesn’t, the person doesn’t do it. And then we realised that headteachers are doing an awful lot of work that doesn’t require their skills at all – and many of these areas we can cover ourselves. For example, one governor leads the health and safety. I don’t mean that we have meetings about health and safety – I mean that we get involved with the actual audits and practical day-to-day matters. We walk round with the LA advisers and we plan what we need to do and then we meet with the head. It dawned on us that we were responsible anyway and so it made sense to do things ourselves and reduce the headteacher’s workload at the same time.”

(Governor, urban primary school)

Another example of this was in the way in which the finances were governed in one school. Governors wanted to create a situation in which the headteacher could look strategically at what was needed in school – creating a range of scenarios for discussion and approval in terms of staff deployment, resources and other projects. Once these had been agreed, the governors themselves, in partnership with the school’s business manager, took over the day-to-day maintenance and management of the finances, enabling the headteacher and key governors to have strategic oversight of developments.

“We want the headteacher’s focus to be on the key areas of teaching and learning – that’s what is really important in terms of running a school, and that’s what we can’t really help with so much. And so, the headteacher will plan what she needs to run the school – staff, curriculum resources – that sort of thing. And the other committees will all have their say too. And then, the finance committee is presented with this list and our job is to practically make it happen. We monitor the expenditure and plan when things might happen. Sometimes, it becomes obvious that we won’t be able to fulfil every item on the wish-list, and then we meet with the headteacher and she prioritises. We tease her about being profligate with the finances – we know that she could spend the budget several times over. But this way means that she just has to think about the why and the wherefore and we concentrate on the how.” (Governor, rural primary school)

Delegating whole areas of responsibility to governors could be perceived as potentially threatening for headteachers as it is sometimes associated with a loss of control. However, headteachers in the study described the process more in terms of freeing them up to focus on the more important, bigger issues whilst one headteacher described the position as ‘liberating’. For this to happen though, it was important that governors had some areas of skills and expertise themselves and had a clear understanding of the purpose of this level of involvement, which was to release school leaders to develop the school strategically rather than operationally.

“We look at it this way – we are very blessed with the calibre of our governors. Everybody brings something to the party. We just have too many people who are too good, to have to

find something for them all to do, what a blessing that is!" (Chair of governors, junior school)

In one school, several governors were governors of more than one school and one governor was a governor of three. These governors, in particular, had insight into the similarities and differences between the way in which governing bodies operate. They described their roles in other schools as 'more ceremonial' and 'the receiver of information.' In these schools, governors not only felt that their own skills were being under-used, they felt that they served no useful purpose. It was the schools that demanded commitment and challenge where they felt most rewarded for their work.

"What would be the point of going to a meeting and listening to what is happening – what has already been decided? If the headteacher is going to act as gate-keeper, but we are never allowed through – why waste everybody's time?"
(Governor, junior school)

Having decided to enable the school's senior leadership to operate strategically by removing some of the day to day operational responsibilities, two of the three schools had co-opted additional 'associate governors' to fill skills or expertise gaps, and all were pro-active in identifying potential governors and encouraging people to apply for vacancies. Individual governors would reach out to others, sharing good practice, working with other governing bodies in difficulty or assuming governorship in more than one school. This was seen itself as extending the strategic role of the school and further building capacity within the system. "Growing adults is what gives me the buzz," concluded one chair of governors.

Information and Communication

In every school studied, communication and ensuring that governors and school leaders were well-informed was considered essential. It was argued that it would be impossible for the school to operate strategically unless people were aware of issues and opportunities. Good systems of information existed in every school and extensive use was made of electronic communication. This enabled the governors and headteacher to work effectively together, even if the governors were not able to physically be in the school building. One headteacher had governors who regularly worked abroad, but they were in regular communication with one another.

Every governor interviewed could speak with knowledge and understanding about national initiatives, having attended training or made a point of ensuring that they kept themselves informed through, for example, reading the *Times Educational Supplement* or visiting school regularly. One school stressed the importance of shared wisdom.

"We have a very open culture here and we all know what is going on. When schools don't do so well, it is probably because governors don't really know what is happening."
(Governor, urban junior school)

To ensure that a strategic perspective could be maintained, methods of communication tended to follow a similar pattern. Meetings tended to be highly organised and effective, planned and prepared in advance with clear time limits. Schools had a minimum of three committees – one had seven. Meetings were characterised by information being sent out well in advance and it was expected that governors came to meetings prepared.

One governing body was radically restructuring following the introduction of the Every Child Matters (ECM) agenda and saw change as challenge and stimulating. This restructuring, which saw the formation of new committees under the ECM headings, enabled governors to work in partnership with working teams of staff as the school responded to the changes.

It was this flexibility which governors felt ensured that they were both close working partners with school staff whilst also able to maintain the informed, strategic overview of the school's work.

“Changing titles changes people’s minds. Our structures are not just about numbers and vacancies, they are about how we work and what is important to us.” (Chair of governors, large rural primary school)

Monitoring and Self-Evaluation

Governors’ involvement in monitoring and evaluation was seen as vital if they were to fulfil their strategic function. Regular times for reflection and evaluation were built into the school calendar and all headteachers and governors interviewed agreed that the strategic discussions that ensued following monitoring visits, for example, enabled them to sharpen and focus on the future needs and direction of their schools.

There were several different ways of both monitoring teaching and learning and monitoring themselves. Most had forged links between subject leaders and individual governors’ classroom visits took place once or twice throughout the year. Developments in assessment for learning and pupil tracking had facilitated governor knowledge about standards generally and prompted discussions about areas for future focus.

One school that had just come out of special measures had established some joint staff action teams to address areas of weakness and these teams regularly reported to governors about their objectives, progress towards achieving them and the impact that their work had had on the children. This had been so useful that it was intended to extend this to other key areas of the school’s work. Promoting collaboration between governors and staff, rather than governors adopting a more passive ‘curriculum link’ role was seen as essential in developing longer term views and more creative thinking.

One governing body had established a pattern of meeting with the staff for one training day each year, working together to review the past focus areas and define the focus for the year ahead. These governors would also attend local headteacher meetings if issues were being discussed that could have an impact upon local schools, e.g. reorganisation.

There was a common structure to the way in which these governing bodies functioned. Each one had a strong focus on the bigger picture and understood clearly where the school sits in both the micro and macro climate. The governing bodies and their headteachers had a clear understanding of what is meant by strategic leadership and knew both where the school had been, where it was heading and had planned how they were going to get there.

Strategic Partnership

Whilst all interviewees had a positive view of school governance in general, they found it difficult to express the nature of the strategic partnership. To help, they were asked if they could describe the role of governors in three words from those in the following table:

Objective	Encourager	Challenger
Influencer	Enabler	Committed
Moderator	Supporter	Protector
Innovator	Partner	Facilitator

The two most frequently used words were ‘enable’ and ‘encourage’. Both headteachers and governors agreed that governors were not the engineers of strategy, more that they honed ideas

and steered the course. In the schools studied, this would consist of open forums and discussions in which ideas were tossed around, or mind maps constructed. School leaders were often asked to formally present areas of their work to governors for discussion, reflection and feedback, and a collegial approach to working with one another was seen as important. In one school, governors would assist in the production of key documentation, such as the school development plan. Whilst all agreed that they fulfilled a strategic role, there was a common theme in that the schools themselves identified and conceived the direction whilst the governors planned the journey.

In all the schools, governors were clear about their role as a critical friend to the headteacher. Headteachers valued 'bouncing ideas' against someone that they saw as objective and not part of the school staff.

"Most of the out of the box ideas come from the head, but the governors build on it. Sometimes we can provide a framework within which to develop it, or give a set of processes or skills to make it manageable." (Governor, junior school)

Several governors made comparisons with the schools in which they were now working and previous experiences. One key difference in governance in these schools was the way in which headteachers were prepared to devolve and share their power. It was this that made governors feel valued and worthwhile. Headteachers themselves recognised their pivotal role in distributing their leadership and the degree to which governors could both share leadership and operate strategically seemed to depend significantly upon an individual headteacher's willingness to relinquish control. The importance of establishing a trust-based relationship between a headteacher and governors was seen as instrumental in assisting each to fulfil their strategic roles.

"Prior to my arrival, this office was a secret garden and there was no thought of where the school was going in the future. I have had to develop our relationship by distributing leadership – by sharing a range of ideas about what we could do and placing responsibilities onto them." (Headteacher, urban primary school)

This headteacher had responded to issues by setting up a number of working parties, with representatives from teaching and support staff and governors, where appropriate. It was the role of these working parties to take forward areas of the school's work, evaluate their impact and then make recommendations to the governing body about what next should happen.

This was seen as highly effective both in building capacity within the school but also in establishing a working and thinking partnership between all school stakeholders.

Sharing leadership with a group of volunteers was not without its problems and there was no doubt that there could be tensions between school leaders and governors when responsibility for deciding future focus and direction was shared.

Where headteachers expressed reservations in this area, this almost always followed a professional disagreement. In two instances, the headteacher had been overruled by the governing body, and this had led to some difficulties. Tensions between headteachers and their governing bodies were brought to the fore when they could not agree and if the power of numbers is agreed to be the arbitrator and the governing body were largely united, then the headteacher could never win. Experiencing difficulties like these had led to headteachers and governing bodies reviewing their decision-making processes, especially when these issues may have strayed into the realms of professional expertise.

One headteacher expressed the issue succinctly.

“In my experience, a strong head could function with a weak governing body. But the other way around would not work.”
(Headteacher, primary school)

This view was echoed and reinforced by the governor in a junior school.

“The thing is – a governing body is only as good as the head. Where there is a mismatch, things can be tough. If you have a stronger head than the governing body – that’s repairable. But if the governing body is stronger than the head ...well that mismatch must be impossible for both parties.”
(Governor, junior school)

The balance of relationship was seen as crucial; it was important that the headteacher perceived the governing body as essentially a supportive body and it is important that there is no mismatch between the two. This balance could be affected if a headteacher lacked confidence; in these circumstances, those interviewed felt that it could be tempting for headteachers to ‘pull in’ and assert authority if they were not confident in their own skills. Equally, it was felt that a school could become very vulnerable if strategic decisions were kept to a very small number of people. There was a perception around ensuring that the group focused on strategy should never be too small as there is the danger that a dependency culture can be created and that the vision and strategic direction is reliant upon one or two individuals for it to be maintained.

Headteachers interviewed said that they felt more confident in the sharing of strategic decisions, and were less afraid to make changes if things did not go as planned. Shared ownership of strategic decisions, and a team-based approach in both formulating and taking them forward was a common factor in each school studied.

“My psyche is such that I am not power-crazed. I would rather share decisions with others before moving forwards. If a group has ownership, you can take initiatives forward and know that you have all tried your best. If you lead from the front you won’t have everyone with you. There will be factions and some won’t follow. Although it is a harder process because you have to be more open and democratic, in the long run, you are building a strong foundation to move forwards – you are giving everyone a voice and you are all singing from the same hymn sheet.”
(Headteacher, rural primary school)

The role of governors in helping to shape ideas was described.

“I think we have a steadying hand on the rudder and we help to steer the head. The strength of a head is that they do need to be very forward looking and do need to be independent. They can recognise the importance of someone saying, “Whoa, hold on, have you thought about? Or “Yes – go for it!” And so there is an encouraging and a steadying role. It was very different to being a governor previously at a different school – it was more traditional. I was only there three years. This was a completely new way of approaching it as far as a governor is concerned and actually, far more interesting.”
(Governor, urban primary school)

Strategic Role

The semi-structured interviews were designed to explore aspects of strategic development. The research categorised the aspects of a strategic approach as it sought to determine the extent of governors foresight, their ability to design a strategic plan, create stretching goals, and work in partnership.

Each school studied felt that the strategic work of the school had little to do with inspection, which was considered by some of those interviewed to be looking backwards rather than forwards. One

governor said that she thought that schools could focus very closely on ensuring that they would receive a positive inspection, but that too much emphasis on what decisions might look like from the outside would hamper schools' ability to take risks and make strategic decisions.

“To say as a school, that we are going to achieve excellence to a point where it is national level - that's the steer we're operating in. There are aspects of this school's work which are outstanding but that's not to say that everything is fantastic. How do we move on? What are the staffing implications because there is a very personal style of leadership. It is very difficult to bed the structures in the school to carry it, to carry it if they left. That's the tension.” (Chair of Governors, urban junior school)

School development planning, and accurate and incisive self-evaluation was seen as crucial. Hamel & Prahalad (1994) describe traditional approaches to strategic development as incrementalist and as an annual planning rain dance. They recommended that organisations should look ahead and create mechanisms by which skills and competences could be developed which would enable innovative thinking to be translated into action. The challenge for each governing body studied was how to reconcile this strategy and 'blue-sky thinking' into the formal structures and documentation that are associated with school development planning.

A common strand was that the headteachers were innovative and the governors then adopted a role of deciding priorities and honing areas of development. One school felt that it had moved beyond this and it was the governors themselves who were able to broach ideas and identify areas for future development. The headteacher felt that this was because they had worked hard to create a culture of professional trust, collaboration and openness.

“I love it when a governor comes to me and says 'Why don't we ...?' Anyone can think outside of the box but it's the relationships that really count. I love other people's ideas, I love other people leading and I love the idea of having a group of people as the ideas-factory.” (Headteacher, urban junior school)

The concept that ideas-sharing is an important stage in formulating strategy was shared by the schools studied. Sometimes, these embryonic thoughts and plans were mapped or jotted down informally.

Sometimes, headteachers experienced misgivings about the direction that governors were considering and that dealing with this required consideration of how governors' strategic thoughts aligned with their own and whether to challenge this from an informed professional perspective.

It was generally agreed that the easiest strategic area to share with governors, or to enable governors to lead, was in the area of the school in the community and in particular, buildings and premises issues. Three of the four schools studied had recently had significant building works and this was an effective area for governors to pool their ideas, consider carefully how this might affect the communities in which they lived and think ahead and beyond the immediate.

Governors in every school felt that they 'emboldened' their headteachers.

“I think that it is fair to say that most of the 'outside of the box' ideas come from the school. (The headteacher) is a very stimulating person to talk to so you start to bounce ideas around. He may have suggested an idea but governors build on it.” (Governor, primary school)

Risk Taking

It was agreed by participants that operating strategically involves an element of risk and entrepreneurship.

“Risk-taking heads will attract risk-taking governors.” (Governor, junior school)

Every school studied saw their governors as risk-takers, prepared to challenge authority and forge their own way ahead. One headteacher said of his governing body, “They all take loads of risks and are brave to do so because it goes against the grain.”

The governors themselves agreed that it was the involvement of an external body of volunteers that led to more risk taking and they felt that they gained strength from their volunteer status. Sometimes, governors reported that they were willing to challenge authority if the decisions being made were not right for their particular schools. Every school studied was innovative and not afraid to take risks. Governors would sometimes challenge Local Authorities and other policy makers and would always evaluate the potential impact of initiatives before taking them on board.

Conclusion

This study suggests that it is possible for school governors to function both as equal partners with the headteacher and as strategic leaders of schools. However, according to the evidence located here, the following would first need to be in place:

- A clear and shared understanding between heads and governors of what the strategic function ‘is’.
- The presence of a small group of governors to act as a strategic steering group.
- A school climate conducive to collaborative leadership with trust and mutual respect between headteacher and governors as pre-requisites.
- A headteacher prepared to share all aspects of the school’s work with governors and not act as gatekeeper.

This research did not set out to look for examples where governors and headteachers find it difficult to work in partnership; neither did it seek to identify schools which were failing to operate strategically. Rather it sought to identify ways in which the concepts of the Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners could be translated into practice.

From these findings, it became clear that sharing models of good practice and establishing a shared understanding of what it means to involve school governors as an integral part of school leadership is important. Even when the partnership between governors and school leaders was balanced and effective, the findings showed that there was unease about casting the governors in the role of the strategic leaders of schools, a role that most people in the study saw as belonging to the headteacher.

When governors and school leaders work in partnership as strategic leaders, the study found that other aspects of the school’s work, such as self-evaluation, were more effective. This was because it became part of a seamless process of looking behind as well as ahead and examining the impact of decisions made throughout the year. Governors felt knowledgeable about all aspects of the school’s work and this enabled them to reach decisions which were informed and well-executed.

The key message is that school leaders in this study benefited from a more strategic relationship with governors and that this might, on the basis of this study, be something for other schools to consider. If doing so, a key message is that processes need to have structure and purpose. When this strategic relationship functions well, schools in the study associated it with the unleashing of new energy and confidence.

Future research could focus upon ways that the strategic relationship between school leaders and governors can be developed, identify alternative ways that this can be played out and explore and make clear the links between strategy, school development and self-evaluation.

“It is sometimes said that schools get the governing bodies that they deserve. Whether this is true or not is difficult to say. What we can say, with some conviction, however, is that governing bodies when they are operating well are capable of ‘making a difference.’”
(Creese and Earley, 1999)

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Acknowledgements

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the schools and their headteachers and the governors who participated in this study.