



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Research and Information Service Research Paper

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## School governors

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This paper provides an overview of a number of issues relating to school governance, including the extent to which Boards of Governors carry out a challenge function, a perceived tension between achieving both representation and an appropriate mix of skills across a governing body, training and development for governors and alternative models of school governance.



## Key Points

- Governors play a key role in school improvement, and make up one of the largest voluntary workforces;
- Effective governing bodies have clearly defined roles and responsibilities, good communication with the principal, an effective chair and regularly monitor performance data;
- The role of Boards of Governors as a 'critical friend' is a key aspect of good governance; however there are concerns that many governing bodies do not carry out this function adequately;
- There are mixed views on the extent to which achieving community representation is important, and the evidence highlights a tension between this and the extent to which there is an appropriate mix of skills and experience;
- Governors in Northern Ireland and elsewhere do not tend to be fully representative of the wider population;
- The literature suggests that the recruitment and selection of governors could be reviewed and made more formal;
- It has been proposed that some aspects of training for governors, particularly induction training, could be made compulsory in order to support more effective governing bodies;
- Revised or alternative models of governance may be of interest in regard to the debate on sharing and collaborating in education here;
- The current approach could be described as a stakeholder model, while other proposed models include a corporate model, and models that separate the scrutiny function from more general discussions around the school's vision and aims;
- Governance in federations may be of particular interest, particularly where two or more schools combine to form one school on separate sites, with a shared Board of Governors but retaining individual committees for each school; and
- Consideration could be given to areas such as the challenge role of governing bodies, the importance of community representation, recruitment, training and development and revised or alternative models of governance.



# Executive Summary

## Introduction

Governors play a key role in school improvement, helping to provide strategic direction to principals and carrying out a range of duties and functions. They make up one of the largest volunteer workforces in Northern Ireland. There are a number of different categories of school governor, seeking to ensure representation across the main stakeholders.

## Promoting good governance

The research identifies a number of characteristics of effective governing bodies. These include having clearly defined roles and responsibilities, good communication between the principal and the governing body, an effective chair of governors and the regular monitoring of performance data.

The role of governors as a 'critical friend' to the principal or senior leadership team is an important aspect of effective school governance. However, there are concerns that many governing bodies find it difficult to carry out this challenge function, instead preferring to accept proposals from the principal rather than taking a lead role and helping to shape decisions.

## Representation and skills

There are mixed views on the extent to which community representation on a Board of Governors is important, and the evidence highlights a tension between ensuring representation across a board as well as achieving an appropriate mix of skills and experience. Research has shown that governors in NI and elsewhere do not tend to be representative of the wider population.

## Recruitment, training and development

Some of the research suggests that current recruitment and selection processes could become more formal, for example drawing on professional bodies and community groups. It has also been suggested that better recruitment and selection processes would help candidates to understand the requirements of appointment and ensure that appropriately skilled governors take on the role. Linked to this, there have been proposals elsewhere to make some training for governors compulsory to ensure that they are well equipped to discharge their duties.

## Models of governance

Recent debates on greater sharing and collaborating in education may have implications for our Boards of Governors in the future. As such, it may be useful to consider revised or alternative models of school governance, and how they might work in practice.

The current model in use in schools here could be described as a stakeholder model, whereby the governing body represents a range of interests including parents, the school and the employing authority. While research shows that while this model is viewed as the most appropriate for schools, a number of improvements have been suggested including mandatory induction training, a greater willingness by governing bodies to challenge the principal and better recruitment and selection processes.

Other proposed models include a corporate model, with both executive and non-executive members, and models that separate the scrutiny role from the 'deliberative forum' (discussions on the direction governors would like the school to take and on the school more generally) of a governing body.

The federated model provides a useful insight into other ways of working, particularly in the case of 'hard' federations where two or more schools combine to form a single school on separate sites, sharing a single governing body while each school has a joint committee with delegated powers. This model may be of particular relevance if schools here begin to collaborate more formally.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has provided an overview of a number of important issues pertaining to school governance today, including the relationship between the principal and the Board of Governors, a tension between achieving both representation and skills across a governing body, training for governors and potential new ways of working. In light of these issues, consideration could be given to:

- The challenge role of governing bodies, in particular what actions could be taken to support Boards to adopt a 'high challenge, high support' approach;
- The importance of community representation within governing bodies and how Boards of Governors might be supported to achieve a balance of representation and skills;
- Recruitment processes, training and development for governors: for example, whether some aspects of training should become mandatory; and
- Alternative or revised models of school governance, particularly in regard to the debate on shared education and the potential implications of this for governing bodies.

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## 1 Introduction

There are over 11,000 school governors across Northern Ireland,<sup>1</sup> making it one of the largest volunteer workforces. Governors play a key role in school improvement through helping to provide strategic direction to school principals and carrying out a broad range of statutory duties.

This paper considers the types of school governors in Northern Ireland, as well as their roles and responsibilities. It looks at a range of issues including the relationship between the principal and the Board of Governors and tensions around achieving a balance between representation and skills on a governing body. It also explores training and development for governors as well as alternative models of governance.

## 2 Categories of school governors in Northern Ireland

The composition of Boards of Governors varies depending on their management type, and there are a number of different categories of governors. The aim of this is to ensure representation of all the main stakeholders, namely professional educators, parents, the Education and Library Board (ELB) and the Department of Education (the Department). The categories are as follows:<sup>2</sup>

- **Department of Education Governors:** the Department recruits governors through public advertising and a network of organisations;
- **ELB Governors:** typically a member of the ELB or someone invited by them on the basis of having an interest in education and the particular school;
- **Transferors:** nominated by the three transferor churches;
- **Trustees:** nominated by the legal trustees of a privately owned school in accordance with the scheme of management to represent those who own the premises (all voluntary maintained and many Voluntary Grammar Schools);
- **Foundation Governors:** represent those who originally established the school through private funds and also reflect the school's ethos;
- **Parent Governors:** parents or guardians of a child registered at the school and elected by other parents of children attending the school;
- **Teacher Governors:** permanent teachers in the school elected by their colleagues; and

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<sup>1</sup> Education Minister response to an Assembly Question, 7<sup>th</sup> June 2010

<sup>2</sup> PricewaterhouseCoopers (2010) *School Governors: The Guardians Of Our Schools* Bangor: Department of Education

- **Co-opted members:** Any Board of Governors may co-opt up to three people from the local business community to bring additional skills; however co-opted governors do not have a vote.

An OECD report in 2007 outlined the composition of Boards of Governors by school management type, as illustrated in the following table. The numbers in the following table may be doubled or trebled, however the proportions of representation do not change.<sup>3</sup>

**Table 1: Composition of Boards of Governors by school management type and phase**

	Controlled schools			Maintained		Voluntary Grammar	
	Primary Secondary	Nursery Special Grammar	Primary Secondary Integrated	Nursery Primary Secondary Special	Grant Maintained Integrated	With 85% Capital Funding	With 100% Capital Funding
DE	-	2	-	-	4	3	2
Foundation Governors	-	-	-	-	6	4	6
Parents	2	2	4	1	4	1	1
ELB	2	3	4	2	-	-	-
Teachers	1	1	2	1	2	1	1
Transferors	4	-	2	-	-	-	-
Trustees	-	-	2	6	-	-	-
Principal	1	1	1	1	-	1	1
Total voting members	<b>9</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>

<sup>3</sup> OECD (2007) *Improving School Leadership: Country Background Report for Northern Ireland* Paris: OECD

### 3 Roles and responsibilities

The role of Boards of Governors has changed in scope, with governors now ultimately responsible for a wide range of aspects of finance and school and personnel management. Boards of Governors have a range of statutory duties, particularly in regard to setting the strategic direction for the school and taking corporate decisions in relation to the statutory functions of the Board of Governors. Table 2 provides an overview of the areas where their roles and responsibilities lie; many of these tasks are carried out in conjunction with the principal.<sup>4</sup>

**Table 2: Areas where Boards of Governors have roles and responsibilities**

Area of governance	Roles and responsibilities
Strategic governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Setting the school's vision and aims</li> <li>• Establishing and maintaining the school's ethos</li> <li>• Setting the school's plans and policies</li> <li>• Monitoring and evaluating school performance</li> <li>• Promoting self-evaluation to sustain school improvement</li> </ul>
Corporate governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School performance measures</li> <li>• Curriculum planning</li> <li>• Employment issues</li> <li>• Pupil pastoral care and protection issues</li> <li>• Publication of information regarding the school and its pupils</li> <li>• Managing school premises and relations with the community</li> </ul>
Promoting good governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being a critical friend</li> <li>• Supporting pupils, parents and staff</li> </ul>

#### Promoting good governance

Much of the literature, including guidance from the Department, deals with promoting good governance. Departmental guidance suggests that trust and confidence in the governors are developed when they share responsibility for the work of the school, both bad and good, and take decisions that will lead to improvement in the quality of the education provided. It also notes that the responsibility for governing the school

<sup>4</sup> Overview of the roles and responsibilities of the school Board of Governors [online] Available at: [http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/85-schools/5-school-management/79-school\\_governors\\_pg/schools\\_79\\_governor-roles-and-responsibilities\\_pg/schools\\_79\\_chapter-3-overview-of-roles\\_pg.htm](http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/85-schools/5-school-management/79-school_governors_pg/schools_79_governor-roles-and-responsibilities_pg/schools_79_chapter-3-overview-of-roles_pg.htm)

must be shared by the whole Board of Governors. In addition, the Board of Governors should:<sup>5</sup>

- Support majority decisions of the Board;
- Ensure that the position of governor is not used for personal gain;
- Declare all potential conflicts of interest;
- Protect the confidential nature of school business; and
- Work within the school's scheme of management.

Wider research points to effective governing bodies taking a strategic role in guiding and supporting the school's work and challenging further improvement. Other key attributes and behaviours of effective governors cited in the literature include:<sup>6</sup>

- Clearly defined roles and responsibilities;
- Good communication between the principal and governing body;
- Being supportive of the principal;
- A chair of governors who can effectively lead and manage the governing body;
- A shared and common vision for the school; and
- The regular monitoring of performance data, school improvement plans and targets.

Linked to these findings, governing bodies that are reported as being less effective are found to lack a clear understanding of their role and good quality and relevant information. In such cases it is also likely that attendance and the chairing of meetings will be poor.<sup>7</sup>

### **Relationship between the principal and governors**

The literature highlights the importance of the relationship between the school principal and the Board of Governors, and explores the extent to which governors actively challenge the principal in practice as well as providing a supportive role.

Departmental guidance states that the Board of Governors should give proper weight to the advice and guidance of the principal, and should be involved as an equal partner with the principal and the Senior Management Team. It notes that the governors and principal should have a good understanding of and respect for their separate but complementary roles. With regard to acting as a 'critical friend', the guidance states

<sup>5</sup> *Overview of the roles and responsibilities of the school Board of Governors* [online] Available at: [http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/85-schools/5-school-management/79-school\\_governors\\_pg/schools\\_79\\_governor-roles-and-responsibilities\\_pg/schools\\_79\\_chapter-3-overview-of-roles\\_pg.htm](http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/85-schools/5-school-management/79-school_governors_pg/schools_79_governor-roles-and-responsibilities_pg/schools_79_chapter-3-overview-of-roles_pg.htm)

<sup>6</sup> McCrone, T. et al. (2011) *Governance Models in Schools* Slough: NFER

<sup>7</sup> Balarin, M. et al. (2008) *The School Governance Study* London: Business in the Community

that the Board should ask challenging questions and not simply rubber stamp the decisions of the principal, and highlights the importance of governors ensuring that they have the appropriate information to do this effectively.<sup>8</sup>

Research undertaken in 2005 explored the different ways in which individual governing bodies work, particularly in regard to the relationship between the principal and the chair. The research cited four types of governing bodies, as illustrated in Table 3.<sup>9</sup>

**Table 3: Four main types of governing body**

Type of governing body	Description
Deliberative forum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discussions are determined and led by the headteacher</li> </ul>
Consultative sounding board	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The headteacher brings policies and strategies to the governing body for consent and authorisation</li> <li>• Governors authorise decisions but have little role in shaping them</li> <li>• There is discussion but the headteacher decides</li> </ul>
Executive board	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is a partnership between the governors and the schools and especially between the principal and the chair</li> <li>• There may be a division of labour (e.g. Governors have overall responsibility for the business aspects of the school and headteachers assume responsibility for curricular aspects)</li> <li>• In this case, there is likely to be a strong culture of subcommittees</li> </ul>
Governing body	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Headteachers maintain strong leadership but are seen as members rather than leaders of the governing body</li> <li>• Chairs have the main role in agenda setting and leading meetings</li> <li>• The governing body takes overarching responsibility for the conduct and direction of the school</li> </ul>

<sup>8</sup> Overview of the roles and responsibilities of the school Board of Governors [online] Available at: [http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/85-schools/5-school-management/79-school\\_governors\\_pg/schools\\_79\\_governor-roles-and-responsibilities\\_pg/schools\\_79\\_chapter-3-overview-of-roles\\_pg.htm](http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/85-schools/5-school-management/79-school_governors_pg/schools_79_governor-roles-and-responsibilities_pg/schools_79_chapter-3-overview-of-roles_pg.htm)

<sup>9</sup> Ranson, S. et al. (2005) "The Participation of Volunteer Citizens in school Governance" *Education Review* 57(3) pp. 357-371

Research suggests that the deliberative forum and the consultative sounding board are the most common types of Boards of Governors.<sup>10</sup> In particular, it has been suggested that governors find it difficult to challenge the principal, and rarely seek to challenge them or to change their decisions in practice. One author states that this is a result of governors tending to focus on their areas of specialism (such as finance) rather than thinking in strategic terms.<sup>11</sup>

A 2011 survey by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) supports these views, with only 42% of governors (of a sample of over 1500) stating that their governing body often fulfilled the role of challenging the headteacher or senior leadership team. In addition, analysis of the survey responses found that governors in schools where governance was rated 'outstanding' by Ofsted were significantly more likely to say that they were often:<sup>12</sup>

- Providing strategic direction alongside the senior leadership team;
- Actively involved in self-evaluation of the governing body; and
- Ensuring the school helps to support all children and young people in the local community.

### Recruitment

Boards of Governors in schools are reconstituted every four years, in a process taking up to 18 months. Reconstitution involves a number of phases, including advertising for and recruiting governors; consultations with bodies entitled to nominate, including Education and Library Boards (ELBs), Trustees and the Department; election of Transferors representatives from contributory primary schools; consultations with schools and with existing governors on reappointments, elections in schools for teacher and parent governors and the vetting of all new governors prior to their appointment.<sup>13</sup>

Research suggests that governors are recruited in a variety of ways in Northern Ireland, reflecting the range of governor categories. Networks and word of mouth were found to be commonly used approaches to recruitment, and one report suggests that a slightly more formalised approach may be useful, for example, drawing on professional bodies and community groups.<sup>14</sup> This view is supported in a recent report that suggests that the recruitment process for governors should be set more fully in the public domain in order to support increased transparency and diversity.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Balarin, M. et al. (2008) *The School Governance Study* London: Business in the Community

<sup>11</sup> Farrell, C. (2005) "Governance in the UK Public Sector: the Involvement of the Governing Board" *Public Administration* 83(1), pp89-110

<sup>12</sup> McCrone, T. et al. (2011) *Governance Models in Schools* Slough: NFER

<sup>13</sup> *Education Minister responses to a Assembly Questions*, 1<sup>st</sup> June 2010 and 11<sup>th</sup> March 2010

<sup>14</sup> PricewaterhouseCoopers (2010) *School Governors: The Guardians Of Our Schools* Bangor: Department of Education

<sup>15</sup> Carmichael, N. and Wild, E. (2011) *Who Governs the Governors? School Governance in the Twenty First Century* London: Wild Search

## Governorships held

Recent research in Northern Ireland found that the majority of governors surveyed held a governor position in one school, with just under a fifth (19%) of governors holding a position in more than one school. Of these governors, 76% held a position in two schools while 21% held a position in three schools. Transferors were found to be most likely to hold a position in more than one school (34%): this is likely to be a result of the requirement that a post-primary governor sits on the board of a feeder primary school.<sup>16</sup>

## Views of the role

Governors who responded to a recent survey in Northern Ireland demonstrated high levels of satisfaction with the role, with 90% describing it as rewarding and 80% stating that they were very likely to recommend the role of school governor to a friend.<sup>17</sup> These views are supported by the wider literature, which suggests that school governors can benefit from a sense of satisfaction, a feeling of pride and the development of the new skills, friendships and networking opportunities.<sup>18</sup>

While a majority of governors in Northern Ireland were found to be satisfied with their role, many respondents to the survey (59%) stated that it is time-consuming, and half also recorded that it involves high levels of bureaucracy. Indeed, the report suggests that the time commitment is a key barrier to becoming a school governor, particularly in post-primary schools.<sup>19</sup>

Again, these views are supported by the wider research, which suggests that governors have a high workload and demonstrate considerable commitment. Research also suggests that the workload can fall to a small number of volunteers, and that almost half of governors give more than 100 hours a year to the role.<sup>20</sup>

# 4 Community representation

## Background

*Every School a Good School*<sup>21</sup> highlights the importance of schools developing links with the wider community, in particular the business community, other schools and voluntary and statutory agencies. In Northern Ireland, the evidence suggests that while governors often believe that their Board is representative of the community, governors

<sup>16</sup> PricewaterhouseCoopers (2010) *School Governors: The Guardians Of Our Schools* Bangor: Department of Education

<sup>17</sup> PricewaterhouseCoopers (2010) *School Governors: The Guardians Of Our Schools* Bangor: Department of Education

<sup>18</sup> Balarin, M. et al. (2008) *The School Governance Study* London: Business in the Community

<sup>19</sup> PricewaterhouseCoopers (2010) *School Governors: The Guardians Of Our Schools* Bangor: Department of Education

<sup>20</sup> Balarin, M. et al. (2008) *The School Governance Study* London: Business in the Community and PricewaterhouseCoopers (2007) *Independent Study into School Leadership* Nottingham: Department for Education and Skills

<sup>21</sup> Department of Education (2009) *Every School a Good School* Bangor: Department of Education

are not wholly representative of the wider population, particularly in terms of their level of education and socio-economic background.<sup>22</sup>

Wider research has suggested that many stakeholders value community representation within the Board of Governors, and that there are concerns about a general lack of diversity among governing bodies in schools.<sup>23</sup> The literature also highlights a tension between representation and skills on governing bodies.

### **Representation and skills**

It is evident that there can be a tension between ensuring representation of different stakeholder groups on a governing body and the skills and expertise required.<sup>24</sup> This tension is apparent in recent research with stakeholders in Northern Ireland who believed that having an appropriate range of skills across a Board was more important than ensuring full representation across Section 75 categories. Nonetheless, some governors taking part in this study believed that community representation could promote credibility and confidence for the Board.<sup>25</sup>

In the wider literature, some authors support community representation on governing bodies, suggesting that participation can strengthen the legitimacy of institutions in the public sphere, and that governance can act as a space for strengthening community participation and engagement in the public realm.<sup>26</sup> Other surveys of governors find that community representation is not a priority for them.<sup>27</sup>

## **5 Training and development for governors**

### ***Current provision***

New governors can avail of induction and post-induction programmes through the ELBs; however this training is not mandatory. Specific courses are provided in each Board area by lead officers and Curriculum Advisory and Support Service (CASS) officers including roles and responsibilities; effective governance; financial management; child protection; health and safety; and the structure of accountability. On occasion, separate and distinctive courses are provided by the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) and the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) for relevant schools.<sup>28</sup>

ELBs have a legislative remit to provide training for governors, however attendance is not mandatory. Sessions are repeated several times to support adequate coverage. In

<sup>22</sup> PricewaterhouseCoopers (2010) *School Governors: The Guardians Of Our Schools* Bangor: Department of Education

<sup>23</sup> Balarin, M. et al. (2008) *The School Governance Study* London: Business in the Community

<sup>24</sup> Balarin, M. et al. (2008) *The School Governance Study* London: Business in the Community

<sup>25</sup> PricewaterhouseCoopers (2010) *School Governors: The Guardians Of Our Schools* Bangor: Department of Education

<sup>26</sup> Balarin, M. et al. (2008) *The School Governance Study* London: Business in the Community

<sup>27</sup> McCrone, T. et al. (2011) *Governance Models in Schools* Slough: NFER

<sup>28</sup> ETI (2005) *Report of a survey: promoting better school governance in the interests of the learners* Bangor: Education and Training Inspectorate



2005, the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) commented that most of the support and training provided by ELBs was generic and did not always take enough account of the individual characteristics and circumstances of schools.<sup>29</sup>

An Inter Board Governor Group (IBGG) comprising representatives of the Boards, the Regional Training Unit (RTU) and CCMS coordinates the approach to training governors across the ELBs. It determines the focus of the support to be given to governors by the ELBs and reviews the nature and scope of training.<sup>30</sup>

### ***Training needs and attendance***

Governor respondents to a recent survey in Northern Ireland were largely confident that they had the necessary skills, experience and knowledge to fulfil their duties. However, the results indicated differences in confidence according to school management type, with 55% of respondents at Voluntary Grammar schools agreeing 'to a great extent', compared to 44% of those at Catholic maintained schools and 38% of those at controlled schools. There was also variation in levels of confidence by governor type, with teacher governors and transferor governors among those less likely to feel that they were well equipped to fulfil their role.<sup>31</sup>

Over three quarters of governors responding to the survey stated that they had been offered formal induction training; of these, 89% said that they had attended the session and most were positive about the induction training they had received.

With regard to post-induction training and support, 82% of governors responding to the survey stated that they had been offered this and most were positive about the training they had received. However, some governors suggested that training could be pitched in a less 'basic' manner, could usefully present case studies and allow for better tailoring to specific contexts.

Many governors participating in the research did suggest that there was scope for improvement within their Board of Governors in particular areas, and indicated that they would like additional support or training in a range of areas including:<sup>32</sup>

- Legal issues;
- Health and safety;
- Data protection;
- Monitoring and evaluating school performance;
- Public relations management;

<sup>29</sup> ETI (2005) *Report of a survey: promoting better school governance in the interests of the learners* Bangor: Education and Training Inspectorate

<sup>30</sup> ETI (2005) *Report of a survey: promoting better school governance in the interests of the learners* Bangor: Education and Training Inspectorate

<sup>31</sup> PricewaterhouseCoopers (2010) *School Governors: The Guardians Of Our Schools* Bangor: Department of Education

<sup>32</sup> PricewaterhouseCoopers (2010) *School Governors: The Guardians Of Our Schools* Bangor: Department of Education

- Communications management;
- Accessing and analysing information; and
- Mediation.

A recent publication from NFER reported a view that some training for governors should be compulsory, including induction training. Making some training mandatory was thought to have the potential to provide governors with a good level of knowledge and understanding in order to discharge their duties effectively; however, there was acknowledgement that this could have the effect of dissuading some potential governors from taking on the role.<sup>33</sup>

## 6 Models of school governance

The ongoing debate on shared education here may have implications for school governance in the future. In particular, if schools begin to share more, for example through federations, governing bodies are likely to have to adapt accordingly.

However, it should be noted that the mix of people and skills on a governing body is likely to be more important than the actual model in use, and that an effective governing body comprising an appropriate range of skills and attributes can have a valuable impact on school.<sup>34</sup>

### **The current model**

The current model in use in schools in Northern Ireland could be described as a stakeholder model, whereby the governing body represents a range of interests including parents, the school and the employing authority. Recent research found that while the stakeholder model is viewed as the most appropriate model of school governance, it is recognised as needing some improvements to ensure fitness for purpose. Suggested improvements include the following:<sup>35</sup>

- Clarity on the roles of governors from government (particularly in terms of their legal responsibilities and the power they have to fulfil them);
- Access to information independent of the headteacher;
- Mandatory induction training for all new governors (particularly around what effective governance involves);
- Better selection and recruitment process (so that governors understand the requirements before appointment and appropriately skilled candidates are recruited);

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<sup>33</sup> McCrone, T. et al. (2011) *Governance Models in Schools* Slough: NFER

<sup>34</sup> McCrone, T. et al. (2011) *Governance Models in Schools* Slough: NFER

<sup>35</sup> McCrone, T. et al. (2011) *Governance Models in Schools* Slough: NFER

- A willingness by governing bodies to challenge the headteacher; and
- Better understanding of data by governors.

### Corporate model

One paper published in 2011 suggests that a corporate model of executive (teaching and operational staff) and non-executive members would be a useful approach for Boards of Governors to take. The paper states that a good mix of experience is important in preference to more traditional, representative models widespread amongst schools, and proposes an ideal composition for such a Board<sup>36</sup>

- Accountancy (especially for the Audit Chair);
- Academics (to bring a Higher Education perspective);
- Heads or Deputies of primary schools for the board of a secondary school and vice versa;
- Human Resources leadership;
- Surveying/ architecture/ property; and
- Marketing/ media/ fundraising.

### Federation model

A federation is where two or more schools combine to form a single school, and the National College for School Leadership (The National College) believes that federations may become increasingly common. They are often formed to improve standards, for example through formal collaboration with one or more schools having difficulties. There are different possible models of governance for federations, in particular:<sup>37</sup>

- **‘Hard governance:’** a single governing body is shared by all schools in the federation; and
- **‘Soft governance:’** each school has its own governing body but the federation has a joint governance committee with delegate powers.

The National College suggests that rather than simply joining together two separate boards of governors, schools seeking to formally collaborate could usefully reconsider from scratch the way governing bodies are structured, including reviewing the skill sets of governors and determining where roles could be harmonised. It states that this

<sup>36</sup> Carmichael, N. and Wild, E. (2011) *Who Governs the Governors? School Governance in the Twenty First Century* London: Wild Search

<sup>37</sup> Balarin, M. et al. (2008) *The School Governance Study* London: Business in the Community

process could lead to governing bodies sharing responsibility and accountability in new ways.<sup>38</sup>

An evaluation of a federation pilot in England found great variation in the models of governance adopted by schools, but that most schools within the pilot had chosen to form 'soft governance' federations. The report suggests that this indicates that while schools wish to achieve economies of scale, they may nonetheless value their independence and autonomy.<sup>39</sup> One suggested approach to sharing governance across schools while each retains its own identity is described by a recent study, as described in the following paragraphs.<sup>40</sup>

### **Governing Board plus Advisory Council (Collaborative)**

This model is similar to the hard governance federation model, and involves each school establishing an Advisory Council as a deliberative forum (where discussion about vision and aims for the school can take place) with a Governing Board carrying out a scrutiny role across a number of schools. The suggested advantages include:

- Bringing a group of schools under one Governing Board;
- The shared Governing Board arrangement could provide opportunities for strengthening the scrutiny role, for example through local benchmarking of practice and performance;
- Potential to raise the status of governing, as being the Chair of the 'Community Governing Board' could be viewed as a prestigious role; and
- Each school can retain its identity and individuality through an Advisory Council.

Potential disadvantages to this model could include establishing two levels of governing with the Governing Board likely to be perceived as having higher status, and a lack of context in which to frame scrutiny for the Governing Board. This could be mitigated by the Board having a strong sense of the outcomes of discussions at the Advisory Council.<sup>41</sup>

### **Other models**

As well as the model described above, a recent study by the University of Bath put forward other possible models that separate the scrutiny role of a governing body from its 'discussion forum' tasks (where governors discuss the kind of school they wish to work towards).<sup>42</sup> These are discussed in the following paragraphs:

<sup>38</sup> *Implications for leadership and governance* [online] Available at: <http://www.nationalcollege.org.uk/index/leadershiplibrary/leadingschools/ecm/ecm-models-leadership/implications-leadership-governance.htm>

<sup>39</sup> Lindsay, G. (2007) *School Federations Pilot Study 2003-2007* Department for Children, Schools and Families

<sup>40</sup> Balarin, M. et al. (2008) *The School Governance Study* London: Business in the Community

<sup>41</sup> Balarin, M. et al. (2008) *The School Governance Study* London: Business in the Community

<sup>42</sup> Balarin, M. et al. (2008) *The School Governance Study* London: Business in the Community

### ***Unitary Governing Board (scrutiny role)***

The governing board focuses only on its scrutiny role in this model, and would forego its role in providing a forum where general matters related to the school and visions for the school are discussed. The authors suggest that this role would instead be provided for by the predispositions of the headteacher and staff, informal consultations and national regulation. The potential advantages of this model include:

- The Board is more likely to be successful in the task of scrutiny as this is a focussed and clearly defined task; and
- Fewer governors would be required, potentially reducing any recruitment difficulties and improving governor quality.

The suggested disadvantages for this model include the school potentially losing touch with the stakeholder group it serves; scrutiny may be undermined due to the lack of a deliberative forum providing context for the scrutiny; and schools being less likely to benefit from community involvement and engagement.

### ***Governing Board plus Advisory Council (Single institution)***

The governing body of a single school would be split into two groups for this model: a Governing Board responsible for scrutinising the leadership and management of the school, and an Advisory Council providing a forum for discussion about what the school should be like. The headteacher could use the Council to discuss, consult on and explain school matters with stakeholders. The key advantages could include:

- The responsibilities of scrutiny and stakeholder discussion are assigned to two different groups, which is likely to enable them to be achieved more effectively; and
- There could be considerable flexibility on the sizes of the two groups to ensure full stakeholder engagement.

The authors state however that the disadvantages for this model could be significant, for example, a problematic relationship between the two groups and the potential for the Advisory Council to become overly supportive of the principal and the Governing Board to become unhelpfully strict and probing.<sup>43</sup>

## **7 Conclusion**

This paper has provided an overview of a number of important issues pertaining to school governance today, including issues around the relationship between the principal and the Board of Governors, a tension between achieving both representation and skills across a governing body, training and development for governors, and potential new ways of working.

<sup>43</sup> Balarin, M. et al. (2008) *The School Governance Study* London: Business in the Community

Consideration could be given to the challenge role of governing bodies, in particular the extent to which they are fulfilling their role as a 'critical friend', and what actions could be taken to support more Boards of Governors to adopt a 'high challenge, high support' approach to governance.

The area of community representation within school governing bodies could also be explored, in particular the extent to which this is important and how Boards of Governors could be supported to achieve an appropriate balance of community representation and the skills and experience they require.

The recruitment and selection processes for governors could be reviewed, as well as training and development, for example, whether some aspects of training should be made mandatory.

Finally, alternative or revised models of school governance could be given some consideration, particularly with regard to the debate on shared education in Northern Ireland, and the potential implications of this for governing bodies.