

## **GOVERNANCE IN ALL-THROUGH FEDERATIONS**

### **Introduction**

Governors can find great difficulty in visualising how they will carry out their duties effectively and efficiently when an all-through federation is proposed. All good Governing Bodies take their responsibilities very seriously and are likely to feel that they have sufficient to keep abreast of as the Governing Body of one school, let alone as the Governing Body for 2, 3 or more schools. The cross-phase dimension of all-through federations makes this more challenging for Governors as they have to come to terms with a whole new range of issues with which they are not familiar.

Clearly, they need to be engaged in the vision for the federation which will bring significant potential benefits to the children. This is essential if they are to be persuaded that the perceived additional burdens of governing more than one school are to be worth the effort. But, however persuasive the vision, there is a natural tendency for Governors to immediately look at structures for the delivery of their statutory duties and identify potential pitfalls as the schools are brought together.

It is essential that the Governors don't see the effect of federation as a simple multiplication of their current committee structures, operating processes and length of meetings. In considering the structures that they need, they should be encouraged to look afresh at the whole issue of Governance, concentrate on the strategic dimension of their work and look to alternative methods of organisation which will deliver efficient and vibrant governance fit for the complexities of the leadership of learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

In practice, this means that they should look to streamline rather than add, to ensure that the Strategic Leadership Team is spending its time leading education, rather than writing reports for Governors and attending endless meetings. Where 'traditional' meeting and committee structures are used, they should consider whether these are necessary and whether these meetings are engaging Governors in the education of children which is why most of them volunteered. They should also have an eye to the work-life balance of the Leadership Team and make sure that their roles are sufficiently attractive to meet recruitment and succession issues.

Increasingly, schools are looking at new models of governance to meet their needs. In some cases this has led to the scrapping of all committees with the full governing body meeting more regularly to consider and decide on strategic matters rather than repeating and recycling the same decisions through two or more committees before coming to the full governing body. In the cases, the governing body is often itself quite small which encourages greater participation. There is nothing in regulation which enshrines the committee structures commonly found in schools today. These have arisen through custom and practice over many years but may not now be effective and efficient ways of governing schools.

Given the freedom to decide the structures which most suit their own circumstances, it is not surprising that a whole range of models and practices are emerging. What is common to them all is a realisation that structures are not set in stone and can and should be reviewed on a regular basis. This regular review of practice can bring about more streamlined assistance which will clearly focus the governors on strategic matters.

## **Case study**

This is a real example which developed over 3 years ago and from which the Governors have made further developments. At the time, the Executive Headteacher and Governors of this innovative all-through federation considered these issues in great detail over a period of a year. They also had the added possibility that the federation could grow to include other schools and services for pupils.

They wrestled with a number of issues;

- The frequency of meetings in a traditional structure and the time taken in preparation for these
- An increasing focus on procedural or administrative issues in Governors' meetings
- The length of time needed to make decisions
- Lack of engagement of many Governors in meetings
- Difficulties in recruiting and engaging Parent Governors

The Governors were made aware of their flexibilities to break away from the traditional meeting structure and even considered a very radical structure which would be capable of supporting a large federation of 7 or 8 separate units. They then developed a structure for their current circumstances on the understanding that this could be modified and developed further as the federation grew. The confidence to initiate structures and processes which might need to be significantly altered in the future was a key factor in this development.

In essence, they scrapped their two operational committees (Finance and Personnel, and Buildings and Health and Safety) and replaced these with two 'lead' or 'nominated' members of the Governing Body, one for each of the old committees. These met regularly with the Leadership Team (including the Business Manager) to take 'chairs action'. The terms of reference for the committee became the terms of reference for the Nominated Member. This avoided lengthy committee meetings and used only the paperwork produced in the federation for these operational functions. Decisions made were recorded and reported to Governors at the Termly meeting.

They retained a Children's' Committee as the forum in which pupil matters are discussed and decided. This was a popular committee and meetings were well attended for the most part. It was particularly popular with Parent Governors. It was intended that this committee will meet once every half term and follow the traditional pattern of reporting to Governors.

## **Conclusion**

Each model of governance should be developed as a 'bespoke' solution to the needs of the schools concerned. For example, in Devon, one federation has taken the Nominated Governors approach further to encompass a wider range of the activities with each reporting to the full Governors meeting each term. Each Nominated Governor should have a 'shadow' to ensure that there is someone with experience to stand in to cover absence or vacancies. It is also possible to 'twin' new Governors or Associate Members with a Nominated Governor to provide training and experience in a supportive structure to encourage recruitment and retention of Governors. As

long as they aren't called a committee, the efficiency savings remain to create a more streamlined and strategic approach to school governance.

There are significant challenges ahead for governors in the Education Act 2011 and in responding to the wide range of school partnership and leadership structures which are developing rapidly across the country. These trends will require governors to look afresh at their current practices and procedures. The CATS Consultancy Team have developed considerable expertise in this area and will be able to support this process as required.

Such is the demand to make governing bodies aware of the changing national scene that we are planning a series of autumn conferences in 2011 which will look at all aspects of governance across the whole range of school partnership structures. These conferences will be held across the country and further details will be available in the summer.

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