

KEY GUIDES



Effective School Governance

Mark A'Bear

dsc

directory of social change

'This is a book that should be read by every governor as part of the training regime adopted by all schools across the country.'

Professor Sonia Blandford, Founder and CEO, Achievement for All and Professor of Education and Social Enterprise, UCL Institute of Education [from the foreword]

'Effective governance is a vital part of a good school. Yet whilst there is a whole structure for training school heads and leaders, volunteer governors too often don't get the information, advice or support they need. This handbook can play a vital part in filling that gap. It gives relevant and up-to-date information in a way that is easy to access and easy to understand. All school governors will find something of value.'

Baroness Estelle Morris, Chair, Strategy Board, The Institute of Effective Education and former Secretary of State for Education and Skills

'This is a must read and not just for new governors. It is an amazingly forthright and practical read and doesn't bog you down in unnecessary detail.'

Huw Evans, Independent Education Consultant, Realising Learning

'Mark A'Bear goes beyond the theory and gives practical guidance and examples on how to become a truly effective governing body.'

Sylvia McDonald, Former Education Services Manager, Wokingham Borough Council

'I have seen Mark, first hand, transform our school into a thriving, professional organisation with a clear focus on how to achieve our future goals. How wonderful that his wisdom can be shared with others in this book!'

Francois Walker, Headteacher, Whiteknights Primary School

'A very useful book written in a very approachable way. As a new Chair I found it very user-friendly and I was able to dip in and out as required.'

Karen Mitchell, Chair of Governors, Granville Sports College

'*Effective School Governance* is a very good introduction to the subject. It offers guidance on both becoming and the responsibilities of being a successful governor and, in clear and concise language, addresses all the key educational issues affecting schools today. It helped me, as a new Chair, to clarify how our governing body should operate with clear direction and enable it to be more effective and productive.'

Sotos Mandalos, Chair of Governors at Hillside Primary School

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For my wife, who has supported me and my commitment to school governance since she first said 'I think you should become more involved in the education of our children', and without whom I wouldn't have got through the difficult times.

About the series

This series of key guides is designed for people involved with not-for-profit organisations of any size, no matter how you define your organisation: voluntary, community, non-governmental or social enterprise. All the titles offer practical, comprehensive, yet accessible advice to enable readers to get the most out of their roles and responsibilities.

Also available in this series:

Charitable Incorporated Organisations, Gareth G. Morgan, 2013

Charitable Status, Julian Blake, 2008

Effective Fundraising, Ben Wittenberg and Luke FitzHerbert, 2015

The Charity Trustee's Handbook, Mike Eastwood, 2010

The Charity Treasurer's Handbook, Gareth G. Morgan, 2014

Minute Taking, Paul Ticher and Lee Comer, 2012

For further information, please contact the Directory of Social Change (see page viii for details).

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About the Directory of Social Change

The Directory of Social Change (DSC) has a vision of an independent voluntary sector at the heart of social change. The activities of independent charities, voluntary organisations and community groups are fundamental to achieve social change. We exist to help these organisations and the people who support them to achieve their goals.

We do this by:

- providing practical tools that organisations and activists need, including online and printed publications, training courses, and conferences on a huge range of topics;
- acting as a 'concerned citizen' in public policy debates, often on behalf of smaller charities, voluntary organisations and community groups;
- leading campaigns and stimulating debate on key policy issues that affect those groups;
- carrying out research and providing information to influence policymakers.

DSC is the leading provider of information and training for the voluntary sector and publishes an extensive range of guides and handbooks covering subjects such as fundraising, management, communication, finance and law. We have a range of subscription-based websites containing a wealth of information on funding from trusts, companies and government sources. We run more than 300 training courses each year, including bespoke in-house training provided at the client's location. DSC conferences, many of which run on an annual basis, include the Charity Management Conference, the Charity Accountants' Conference and the Charity Law Conference. DSC's major annual event is Charityfair, which provides low-cost training on a wide variety of subjects.

For details of all our activities, and to order publications and book courses, go to www.dsc.org.uk, call 08450 777707 or email publications@dsc.org.uk.

About the author



Author Mark A'Bear MBE has been a school governor for 18 years at five different schools, and for much of this time a governor at two schools concurrently. Mark began his school governance journey at Polehampton Junior School in January 1997. By September 1997 Mark was elected as Chair of Governors, working with his team of governors to bring about rapid school improvement.

Similar to many governors, Mark followed his children from primary school to secondary school, joining the Kendrick School governing body in 2000 where he stayed for 12 years.

During this time Kendrick remained an outstanding school and Mark chaired the premises committee leading a strategic review of the school environment and contributing to the GovernorMark award as well as academy conversion.

In April 2010 Mark was asked to join the interim executive board at Shinfield St Mary's Junior CE Junior School. He became Chair of the Interim Executive Board (IEB) in September 2010 and with a small team of governors succeeded in taking the school out of special measures in less than 18 months. Staying with the school for another two years, Ofsted then rated it as good.

A colleague from the IEB invited Mark to join Whiteknights Primary School in September 2013. He was co-opted onto the governing body and two minutes later elected as Chair. Whiteknights has since been on a rapid improvement journey, moving from 'requires improvement' to 'good' at the last inspection.

Now at Lambs Lane as well as Whiteknights, Mark is supporting another school that requires improvement. At the same time he is a National Leader of Governance with the National College for Teaching and Leadership and coaches, mentors and supports chairs of governors.

In the business world Mark was a Northern Europe Education Manager with Adobe for four years from 2010 and Education Strategic Partner Manager at Microsoft from 1997 to 2010. During the majority of this time Mark worked with educators and education professionals, adding to his knowledge of the sector.

Foreword

This is an exciting, challenging and rewarding time to volunteer to be a school governor – in short, your local school needs you!

My own experience as a governor over a period of three years involved a change of Headteacher (twice in two years), a reduction in local authority support, the introduction of the new primary curriculum, the end of levels in pupil assessment, Special Educational Needs Reforms (Children and Families Act, 2014) and much more.

As a governor, I enjoyed working in a team, supporting the Chair and Vice-chair and participating in various sub-committees. The level of commitment demonstrated by fellow governors was humbling; one governor had been involved for over 40 years, others shared their valuable experience and knowledge over a shorter period. All were focused on improving educational outcomes for every pupil, whilst ensuring that the school was a good community for every child, their teachers, leaders and parents.

Our main function was to check that things were done well ... something that is reflected throughout *Effective School Governance*. This book is exemplary in providing guidance, examples and detail where needed. I value the sense of 'doing things right' in a steady methodical manner. At no point is there any feeling of pressure or demand in the way each area of governance is explained.

Set within a context where the educational landscape is changing at an unprecedented pace, this is a book that should be read by every governor as part of the training regime adopted by all schools across the country. With changes to local authority roles, the responsibilities of governance in supporting the whole school, including the governing body, are increasing; the breadth and depth covered in this book provides the necessary references to support all aspects of the role.

My own experience as a governor ended with reconstitution, all but two of the governors stood down to allow for new ideas, fresh ways of working and leadership. Our connection with the school remains – engagement with governance has had a lasting effect on us all.

I recommend the role and this book to you.

Professor Sonia Blandford

Founder and CEO Achievement for All

Professor of Education and Social Enterprise – UCL Institute of Education

Preface

If ever anyone doubted the speed of change within education, the March 2016 budget and the announcement that every school will become an academy by 2020 is clear evidence of it. Whether that particular intervention comes to pass and whether other ones next month, next year or any time in the future continue to shift the educational framework, it makes very little difference to the main messages of this book.

Good governance doesn't change. It is fundamentally about dealing with people and, in particular, getting the best out of them. Whether it be pupils reaching and exceeding their academic targets; the staff body and governors striving for excellence; parents, volunteers and the local community engaged with supporting the school; or inspectors, advisors and suppliers all having their involvement, it is all about people. A school may have a few hundred pupils, but the total school community could well be over 1,000 for most schools. That is a lot of individuals with a stake in your school and in its effective governance.

It's great as a governor if you have strong organisational skills, a finance background or a lot of time on your hands but, when you think about governance from a people perspective, the need for a set of soft skills such as good communication, problem solving, negotiating, building relationships, strategic thinking and administration is clear. Not everyone can possess all these skills, which is why there is a structure for co-opting governors with specific knowledge and experience to create a team with a blend of talent. If you are thinking of becoming a governor, but question whether you currently have these skills, don't worry: they're the ones that you'll learn along the way or get from your fellow governors.

Throughout this book the aim is to provide practical guidance to help you be an effective governor. It is based upon 18 years of experience, often in challenging circumstances. The book draws upon real case studies and examples from a number of schools across the country; however, not every situation will be covered. The very nature of school governance is that it constantly changes and so, even after 18 years of being a school governor, I learn something new every day.

An additional objective is to help governing bodies think and operate strategically. It is all too easy to get dragged down into the 'weeds' of financial spreadsheets or other operational aspects of the school. Ideas for

streamlining and raising the level of governance are presented throughout the book, often using case studies or personal examples.

There is undoubtedly a lot to learn as a new governor; indeed, even the most experienced of governors continue to learn and hone their skills. The acronyms, educational language, data, finances, and policies can all be taught with training or picked up in meetings. The harder skills are the softer ones that are necessary to get the best out of individuals, groups and the whole school community.

This book places an emphasis on these crucial softer skills with practical ideas to support both new and experienced governors. There are many publications and websites with policies, statutory guides and formal descriptions of the role. This book makes no attempt to duplicate those publications, but instead gives a different perspective based on the author's 18 years' experience as a governor.

School governance is one of the best environments for personal development; so, as well as supporting and challenging your school to continuously raise standards, there's an awful lot to learn along the way.

Good luck and enjoy the journey.

Acknowledgements

Over the years I have been privileged to work with many dedicated and talented governors. Their advice, challenge and support has been invaluable, improving my decisions and making me a better governor in the process. I would particularly like to thank the governors of:

- Polehampton CE Junior School
- Kendrick School
- Shinfield St Mary's CE Junior School
- Whiteknights Primary School
- Lambs Lane Primary School

Indeed, effective governors work as a team and none more so than the Interim Executive Board at Shinfield St Mary's CE Junior School, where the dedication, commitment and professionalism of that group is an example to us all.

During my time as a governor I have been very fortunate to work with the Education Services team at Wokingham Borough Council who have placed a great deal of trust and faith in my ability. In particular I would like to acknowledge the support of Gillian Cole, School Improvement Officer, Sylvia McDonald, former Head of Governor Services and Vicky Lewendon, Head of Governor Services. The quality of their advice and guidance has been exceptional.

I am grateful to the following individuals who contributed case studies and quotes which help bring the book to life: Mark Taylor, Chair of Governors, Shinfield St Mary's CE Junior School (Chapter 1); Sotos Mandalos, Chair of Governors, Hillside Primary School (Chapter 4); Karen Mitchell, Chair of Governors, Granville Sports College (Chapter 7); Andrew Keefe, Chair of Governors, Mill Field Primary School, Leeds (Chapter 10); Debra Allcock Tyler, Vice-chair, Whiteknights Primary School (Chapter 11); Tony Eames, former Chair of Governors, Evendons Free School (Chapter 12).

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Many thanks also to Professor Sonia Blandford, Founder and CEO of Achievement for All and Professor of Education and Social Enterprise at the UCL Institute of Education for her contribution of the foreword.

I would also like to thank the National Governors' Association for its permission to reproduce the guidance *Twenty Questions Every Governing Board Should Ask Itself* and *Twenty-one Questions for Multi-academy Trust Boards*.

A note on terminology and scope

In this book, unless stated otherwise, references to the 'governing body' encompass the accountable body of any type of school. For a single or multi-academy trust (MAT), this will be the both members and governors (who are both trustees and company directors). In some instances for emphasis this will be made explicit (such as when referring to legal obligations).

Also unless stated otherwise, when 'governors' are referred to this applies to anyone who is in the role of carrying out governance functions (this may be maintained-school governors, academy or MAT governors, or academy-level governors who have had responsibilities delegated to them).

The geographical scope of this book

The principles of effective school governance recommended in this book focus on the soft skills such as communication, problem-solving and team-building. As such these can be applied to any school anywhere. Where regulatory points are noted, however, these apply to schools either in England or those in England and Wales. To find out more about the legal guidance for schools in your region go to:

- England: www.nga.org.uk
- Wales: www.governorswales.org.uk
- Northern Ireland: www.schoolgovni.org.uk
- Scotland: www.schoolboard-scotland.com

1 Why be a governor?

The entire education system relies on the volunteers who work collectively as a governing body for the benefit of the school and pupils. This is one of the most important reasons to become a governor. Indeed, without governors there would be no external strategic leadership or accountability for our schools.

Our education system is constantly evolving and consequently our schools need dynamic governors with high expectations, a blend of skills, a strategic outlook and the ability to act as a critical friend to encourage and drive continuous improvement. As a new governor you can help fill this need by offering fresh ideas, new energies and new perspectives that are very beneficial, even to a school that is already rated as good or outstanding.

New governors often say that the reason they wanted to become a governor was to 'give something back to the community'. And, given a school is often the focal point for the local community, this is indeed a great place to contribute. What they don't usually realise at this stage is what they truly mean by 'giving something back to the community'.

As governors grow into the role, however, the immense responsibility of ensuring that every single pupil within their school has the best possible education and preparation for later life becomes clear. If a school is failing its pupils, someone needs to take charge of driving change and improvement. That responsibility falls to governors, with the support of education professionals and external agencies such as the local authority. And when you get it right, there are very few more rewarding and profound experiences than seeing a school improve and, with it, the life chances of hundreds of pupils.

There's a personal development aspect to governance as well. When my wife said 'I think you should become more involved in the education of our children', I had no concept of what that really meant or entailed. Yet it has been highly rewarding and stimulating. My skills and enthusiasm have been put to the test constantly and, as a result, school governance has done more for my personal development than any training course or experience at work.

The most rewarding thing about being a governor is watching young people develop, grow in confidence and fulfil their objectives.