

# What School Governors Really, Really, Think

## Introduction and Summary

Those of us who are school governors know our own Governing Body (GB) and, perhaps, we assume that all GBs are the same, but we have no evidence to prove that. As a governor for both a Primary and a Secondary school I know how the two GBs vary, but are all Primary School GBs like mine? And are the Secondary ones like mine? I suppose one way of finding out is to ask to visit schools when there is a full GB meeting. A lovely idea, but totally impractical with around 750 schools in our Local Authority (LA). The Rowntree Foundation did some research on a few GBs in 2007. Their results were rather damning, so I decided to conduct an ESGA Survey of Governors' Perceptions by means of a questionnaire to be sent to a sample of Essex School Governors.

In Essex we have around 8,200 governors, so I felt that to obtain a statistically valid result at least 10% of those governors should be asked to complete the questionnaire. As Essex is a mixture of urban and rural areas, some more affluent than others, I hoped to get a reflection of what governors actually thought about their own role. The survey was anonymous and confidential, this has meant that both excellent GBs and less effective ones show up in the responses, but there is no way of identifying individual schools. Nonetheless some very interesting data is now available. The just under 41% response from the 820 sent out, is very pleasing.

The complete results are given in the Annex to this report and are analysed and discussed in the main body.

The analysis reveals some disquieting evidence, such as some 35% of responses indicated that less than 60% of Governors complete their first 4 year term. Furthermore whereas some 64% received Induction Training some 78% do not complete the expected one module per year and 48% are not trained with the School Staff. The indication that 20% of GBs have 'cliques' is similarly worrying, GBs must work as a team but only 70% always do.

However, in general the survey shows that the majority of Governors do feel competent to provide oversight and governance for their Schools and a very gratifying 88% consider that the Headteacher values their contribution to the welfare of the School and its children.

There is much in this survey to provide encouragement and guidance for both School Governors and those concerned with Governor Services and School Governance. The results provide a counter to those who would promote the line that 'School Governors do not know what they are doing and do not make a valuable contribution to schools'.

In conclusion I would recommend a greater effort on the part of schools to ensure that every Governor receives the basic induction training followed by an annual training module. Furthermore we should institute an organised and recorded process of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) leading to recognition by the award of the title SG (School Governor) after completion of a full 4 year term of office.

Joyce Woodham BSc, Adv Dip Ed Cantab, Secretary Essex Schools Governors Association

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## Method

I was able to buy from the LA a random 820 names and addresses of governors in Essex. The questionnaire and a stamped, addressed envelope for the questionnaire to be returned to me were sent to all 820 names. Each questionnaire had 43 questions, all of which were aimed at discovering each governor's own perception of how their GB worked.

Although a number of people checked the papers before they were sent out, I admit that there were some errors. For example, I had not written 'PTO' at the end of the first page so some people did not see the questions on the back. Also a couple of questions were a sort of double negative, but the responses made it quite clear what each person thought.

## Results and Discussion

For the complete tabled results reference should be made to the Annex to this report.

Although it is not possible to identify individual GBs there are areas which some schools need to address. For example, new governors were generally made welcome by the Headteacher on their first visit although 7.2% were not. And 9.6% were not made welcome on subsequent visits. That fact is in line with the Chairman not welcoming 8.1% of the responses. Additionally 49.4% were not made welcome by the Link Governor, nor a 'Buddy'. In view of this I find it surprising that we have so many governors in post. Our vacancy rate is a mere 9% compared with the national average of between 11% and 13%.

However confident one is, it is quite an ordeal to go into a room of between 13 and 18 strangers who mostly know one another (although 39.5% of the respondents said that they did not know the names of their colleagues). Having to go into such a meeting without prior information, such as a staffing structure plan (37.4%) or a school induction pack (27.8%) makes it a totally overwhelming experience for them. I believe that this links in with 35.3% governors saying that 60% or less of their governors complete their 4 year term of office.

In Governor Training there are also weaknesses, with an average score of only 3.1 on a scale of 1-5 with 5 being the highest. LA Induction training was completed by 63.8%, but 77.8% of governors said that 75% or less of their GB took a single module each year. But this did not prevent 79% of governors having the confidence to challenge Key Stage Results, 89.5% Attendances and 90.1% Behaviour. This ties in with the confidence to challenge the Head (87.1%), the Chair (87.7%) and issues of uncertainty (81.1%).

When asked if the GB worked as a team 63.5% said, "Always" but 36.5% said, "Sometimes". Doing training with staff was 52.1% and without was 47.9%.

Sources of information such as Gateways (89.8%) and the ESGA Newsletter (79.9%) are received and 85.9% said that they could access the Governor Services web-site but only 64.4% could access the ESGA web-site. This latter figure is probably due to a lack of publicity on our (ESGA) part.

I think that it reasonable to assume that governors, would, in the main, attend the three full GB meetings each year. 41.3% reported that attendance was between 81% and 100% but 58.7% said that attendance was less than 80%. 69.5% considered that apologies were always valid, 29.9% said, "sometimes" and only 0.6% said that they were "never valid"!

When asked questions on finance 35.6% said that they had heard of FMiSS (Financial Management information for Schools System), whereas 64.4% had not. This may be due to the fact that FMiSS is being introduced in phases in the Primary Sector. More positively 95.8% knew that funding is based on pupil numbers/ages and 65.3% knew that we have a new formula, 34.7% were not aware of that. 63.5% said that the Finance sub-committee had a monthly spread sheet whereas worryingly 36.5% said that they did not.

On being asked if they knew the meaning of LDG (Local Delivery Group) 48.2% did, 51.8% did not, the meaning of TASCC (Teams Around Schools, Children and Communities) was known by 45.8%, but by 54.2% not. As to the location of the nearest Children's Centre 42.2% knew, 57.8% did not, similarly the location of the nearest Extended School facilities 52.4% knew, 47.6% did not.

Governors' opinions on the size of the GB were very interesting in that the average size now is virtually the same as the optimum size i.e. 14.3 for current and 13.7 for optimum

Finally, when asked if the Headteacher valued the work of the GB 88.3% were very certain that he/she did.

### **So what does all this tell us?**

Despite the general perception that governors are complaining of being overworked, not one governor mentioned this. One or two remarked that they needed governors with financial skills (e.g. accountants) but all secondary schools have Bursars; primary schools could work together in a group and share the cost of such a skilled person. (This is already being done in some parts of the county where schools share the cost of someone like Jason Walmsley in supporting their kitchen staff).

So, apart from a couple of such comments, all the others seemed confident in having the necessary information to fulfil their financial responsibilities, notwithstanding that 36.5% of Finance Sub-committees did not receive a monthly spreadsheet. This discrepancy may hide a tendency for GBs to overlook their financial responsibility or to accept oral financial reports at face value.

Being a school governor is not rocket science and governors have shown in this survey that they have the necessary knowledge and skills. Obviously if you don't know what you don't know, then you don't know what you should know. This is where the Headteacher and senior staff must take responsibility for ensuring that governors have the information to fulfil their strategic role. No-one can act strategically without the relevant knowledge. And it is here, where the official training (LA resourced) and the informal CPD (Continuous Professional Development) link together.

Every time a governor goes into the school they acquire more understanding of how the school 'ticks'. Attending only three Governing Body meetings a year can not, in any anyway, provide the governor with the knowledge of how to act 'strategically'. Governors who work full time find it difficult to visit the school during the working day, but many activities take place in the evening or on a Saturday.

Governor training taken with staff has obvious advantages for both staff and governors. When people work together on any kind of exercise a greater understanding of the others involved potentially predicts better working relationships.

Every time a governor visits the school they should acquire more skills. The skills of seeking relevant information, of setting up working relationships and moving the whole school forward are transferable skills either to the world of work or the Third Sector.

One result I found very disappointing was that approx. 20% of GBs have 'cliques' on the GB. This links in with the 36.5% of GBs not always working as a team. The DCSF (Department for Children, Schools and Families) is very keen on training for the Chairs. Unfortunately this training has been discontinued in Essex due to poor take-up. I did this course and found that there was a strong emphasis on, "What to do" rather than, "What to know".

A good chairman must have many skills e.g.

- C - competence
- H - be helpful
- A - to advocate
- I - be inspiring
- R - be reflective

These skills are not taught by a powerpoint presentation but could be learnt effectively if Chairmen had regular meetings with each other on sharing experiences of, "What to do". To get some structure into the meetings there could be a themed input from either Governor Services or ESGA. This idea is to be implemented by Governor Services in Essex in the next academic year.

Many of the problems incurred between schools and their GB are personality issues and a lack of adherence to the kind of protocols I set out in my Memorandum of Understanding between Heads and Chairs; (can be seen on ESGA web-site; [esga.org.uk](http://esga.org.uk)).

There is no doubt that the survey shows that Governors mostly enjoy their experience. Rather more thought given to Governors' needs by the Headteacher and the senior staff could prevent the wastage of Governors not completing their 4 year term of office.

Governors and school staff working together can only be of benefit to the children in the school. A high turnover of staff is not good for a school, similarly, disenchanted governors cannot be good ambassadors for their school, so it is in the schools' best interest to foster, and keep, an effective GB. Schools, by their very nature are closed communities, so the input of ideas and perceptions of the local community need to be part of the school's targets.

The environment in which schools operate is constantly changing. Ten years ago no-one knew what ECM meant (Every Child Matters). Now, in Essex, as well as TASCCs and LDGs we have CYPSPs (Children and Young People Strategic Partnerships), this breakdown of central organisation is having a massive impact on education and its joint working with social care for children. The theory of de-centralising and providing support for children at a place near them is a concept which has been widely accepted.

The difficulty is in the provision of resources. Schools can no longer claim that their 'raison d'être' is to educate children on a narrow curricular base. The ideals of ECM are much wider. If we want to improve children's lives we have to accept that academic achievement is not our sole purpose. As a nation we fail badly in comparison to other countries on a range of criteria. Obesity, teen-age pregnancies, even the sheer enjoyment of childhood scores lower than our statistical neighbours. As governors we need to be aware of this and use our skills to try to improve the lives of the children in our care.

Finally, this survey shows that governors are confident in their role but would like the outside world to acknowledge their contribution. In short they want respect. This, to a lesser degree can be done within the school, but should also be recognised by the wider community and beyond the LA, National Governors Association (NGA), National College of School Leadership (NCSL) and the DCSF.

Any idea of paying governors is unrealistic both in terms of cost and the voluntary nature of their work, because if they were paid it would negatively alter the relationship between the GB and the school. Recognition could be given as a title e.g. SG (School Governor) to those governors who have completed a term of office and can show the extent of their commitment to the school e.g. the number of hours given in support of the school.

Being a school governor is one of the most worthwhile voluntary activities because we are putting our faith in the future of our children and of our country.

## Annex – Complete Results

Subject	Question	Item	Yes	No	Years	Percent	Item
School	Type	Primary Service	267	****	2216	76.3%	Primary Sector Response
		Special Service	11	****	66	3.1%	Special Sector Response
		Secondary Service	72	****	345	20.6%	Secondary Sector Response
Information	Newsletter	'Gateways' 4/yr	300	34		89.8%	Receiving Gateways
		'ESGA' 3/yr	267	67		79.9%	Receiving ESGA Newsletter
	Website	Governor Services	287	47		85.9%	Accessing Governor Services
Induction	Welcomed	ESGA	215	119		64.4%	Able to Access ESGA Web
		First visit	316	18		94.6%	Welcomed First Visit
	Induction Pack	Subsequent	302	32		9.6%	Not Welcomed Second Visit
		Received	241	93		27.8%	Did Not Receive Induction Pack
	Welcomed	Useful	222	112		66.5%	Found Pack Useful
		By Head	310	24		7.2%	Not Welcomed by Head
Chair		307	27		8.1%	Not Welcomed by Chair	
Quality	Staffing	'Buddy'	169	165		49.4%	No Mentor/'Buddy'
		Structure Plan	209	125		37.4%	No Knowledge of Staff Structure
		Competant to Question	Key Stage Results	264	70		79.0%
	Attendance	Attendance	299	35		89.5%	Able to Question Attendance
		Behaviour	301	33		90.1%	Able to Question Behaviour
		School Meal Take-up	274	60		82.0%	Able to Question Meal Take Up
Finance	FMSiS	Heard of	215	119		35.6%	Unaware of FMSiS
	Funding formula	Pupil No/Ages	320	14		95.8%	Aware of Formula
		New Formula	218	116		65.3%	Aware of New Formula
Personalities	Finance Sub Ctte	Spreadsheet	212	122		63.5%	Able to Monitor Finance
		Head and Chair	Too close	43	291		12.9%
	Attendance	Cliques	Not close enough	29	305		8.7%
On GB			68	266		20.4%	GBs With Cliques
Know Names		Colleagues	202	132		39.5%	Not Knowing Their Colleagues
Confidence	At GB Meetings	81% to 100%	138	****		41.3%	High Attendance
		80% or less	196	****		58.7%	Low Attendance
		Validity of Apologies	Always	232	****		69.5%
	Sometimes		100	****		29.9%	Apologies Sometimes Valid
	Never		2	****		0.6%	Apologies Never Valid
	Completed 4 year term	61% to 100%	216	****		64.7%	High Level of Completion
60% or less		118	****		35.3%	Low Level of Completion	
Can you challenge		Head	291	43		87.1%	Challenge Head
	Chair	293	41		87.7%	Challenge Chair	
	Uncertain issues	271	63		81.1%	Challenge Uncertainties	
GB as a Team	Always	212	****		63.5%	GB Always Work as a Team	
	Sometimes	122	****		36.5%	GB Sometimes Work as a Team	
Training	LA Induction Received	76% to 100%	213	****		63.8%	High Level of Induction
		75% or less	121	****		36.2%	Low Level of Induction Training
	Module/Year	76% to 100%	74	****		22.2%	High Number of Modules/Year
		75% or less	260	****		77.8%	Low Number of Modules/Year
	Training	With Staff	174	160		52.1%	Trained With Staff
Acronyms	Adequacy	1-5 (5 top)	****	****	1023	3.1	Average Training Adequacy
	Meaning	LDG	161	173		48.2%	Do Know the Meaning
		TASCC	153	181		45.8%	Do Know the Meaning
Locations	Nearest	Childrens' Centre	141	193		42.2%	Do Know Location
		Extended School	175	159		52.4%	Do Know Location
Size of GB	Now	Number 10-20	****	****	4772	14.3	Average Current Size
	Optimum	Number 10-20	****	****	4590	13.7	Average Optimum Size
Value of GB	GB contribution	Valued by Head	295	39		88.3%	GB Valued by Head
Replies			334			40.7%	Replies from 820 Sent Out
Totals		Yes/No/Years	9898	3478	2627		