

Governance and Service Quality in Schools

Schools, governors and disadvantage in England

School governors face major challenges in their work to ensure that the school is run effectively in a way that matches the local context. This study investigated how English governors meet those challenges where they are most acute, in schools serving disadvantaged areas.

The study was located in three contrasting areas characterised by social and economic disadvantage. The researchers identified the schools (14 in total) serving the majority of children in these areas and interviewed over 100 respondents connected with these schools. These included 73 governors, together with head teachers, representatives of the local authority governor support services and local authority officers involved in regeneration or community development. Interviews focused on three questions:

- Whose interests do governing bodies represent?
- What influence do governing bodies have?
- What is the relationship between the actions of the governing body and the quality of service provided by the school?

The researchers also asked respondents to talk about particular events and issues which shed light on these questions, and explored these in detail.

The study found that:

- Governing bodies can make a valuable contribution to schools if they have an adequate supply of governors with time, commitment and expertise. However, those circumstances are difficult to create.
- Government guidance expects governors to act as ‘critical friends’ to head teachers and as strategic leaders of their schools. In practice, governors in the study felt happier offering support rather than challenge, and relied on heads to set a strategic direction for the school.
- Governing bodies faced complex tasks. These demanded time and expertise which many governors did not have. They were also constrained by external policy frameworks which limited their freedom of action.
- Governors had a strong sense that they were acting in the best interests of the school and its students. However, they could not always articulate those interests clearly, and did not have a detailed vision of ‘service quality’ on which to base their leadership.
- Membership of governing bodies did not reflect the make-up of parent bodies or local communities.
- In some places, positive steps had been taken by schools to increase the capacity and representativeness of governing bodies. However, more radical changes in school governance may be needed.
- There is confusion about the precise role of governing bodies. The expectations of governors have increased over the years, without any fundamental rethink of what they are for. The researchers conclude that there needs to be a widespread debate on these issues.

The full report, *Schools, Governors and Disadvantage*, by Charlotte Dean, Alan Dyson, Frances Gallannaugh, Andy Howes and Carlo Raffo, was published in 2007 by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and is available in pdf format at:

<http://www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop/details.asp?pubID=899>.