

Faith and Society Files: Church and School - School Governors: Making a Difference

In every city, town and village school governing bodies are one of the key opportunities for Christians to serve God in their community. This File offers information, tips and support for those who are serving as governors.



In every city, town and village **school governing bodies** are one of the key opportunities for Christians to serve God in their community. The benefits to the school are just one part of the picture. Being a governor can be life changing! It will certainly be 'an education', develop experience and gifting and give the satisfaction of knowing that other people's lives have been enriched.

The church has been described as 'a community which bears cheerful public witness to the fact that there is a different way to be genuinely human'¹ and that cannot simply be done behind the walls of the church building. School governing provides a place to work out Christian values and ways of understanding things in the context of making a difference for the sake of every boy, girl and family that are *the school*. Perhaps Christians understand more than most that a school is not merely bricks and mortar but a cosmopolitan body of unique beings that our faith tells us are created in the image of God.

A Christian is ideally placed to offer his or her vision and influence within a school. This is a real opportunity to express a practical and heartfelt concern for the children, families and staff that are the 'school community'. Whilst looking for any opportunity to share the good news, there is also much work to be done with compassion, bringing justice and potentially, transformation to the work of the school as a whole. This is what a school governor can be part of.

1 Bishop N T Wright in a lecture about 'God and Government' on 10 February 2010

From the community

Governing bodies are made up of a wide range of people who represent both the school and wider community. Each individual governor will have different beliefs, values, views and experience to contribute to the work of the whole governing body. Just as the body of Christ, the Church, is described in 1 Corinthians 12 as being made up of different gifts, talents and experiences so is the school governing body. Each can play their part - the Christian in the power of God's Spirit.

There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men.

1 Corinthians 12: 6



www.prayforschools.org

A governor can contribute to discussions that affect all kinds of activity including the use of the annual school budget. Christian governors will want to encourage an emphasis on such things as:

- an effective and holistic education rooted in enabling children and young people to flourish mentally, emotionally, physically and spiritually as they approach adulthood
- personal achievement for every child rather than expecting everyone to perform to the same 'standard'
- an education that equips them not only for the world of work but for life itself
- a school that emphasises and provides opportunity for such things as creativity.

However governing bodies work under the principle of **corporate responsibility**. This means that no governor has any individual authority, nor can an individual governor make promises on behalf of the governing body, or take decisions except where such power has been delegated. The Christian governors values and God-centred thinking will be invaluable in helping the governing body to make a decision, whether or not the Christian governor is comfortable with the decision that is reached.

Supporting the school

Through their involvement in the school, governors are able to relate to and know the staff and develop relationships that can help when difficult decisions need to be taken. At times when the school experiences pressure from outside, e.g. during an Ofsted inspection or when facing adverse press, governors can show their support in practical ways. Many Christian governors have stories like the one who says: *"The staff still talk about the governors' rota for making coffee at break time and the very welcome cream cakes at the end of the Inspection."*

There are many opportunities to support a school during the year. Attending special events like Sports Day, school productions as well as assemblies, presentations and parents' evenings can demonstrate a commitment to the school and give a flavour of what happens in school. As one Christian said: *"When I retired (as a governor), I was very encouraged that the Headteacher recognised two particular qualities in me: that I was always interested in the whole child and that I had a genuine interest in all the staff and had supported them through personal difficulties and pressures"*.

The three key responsibilities of a governing body are summed up as:

- **Setting Strategic direction** - making decisions on the priorities for school improvement;
- **Ensuring Accountability** - holding the headteacher to account for the quality of education provision and standards of achievement;
- **Monitoring and Evaluating school performance** - receiving and discussing reports from the school and other statutory bodies, monitoring progress, evaluating data and giving account of the school to the parents, community, Local Authority (Diocese where appropriate) and the government.



The whole governing body is often defined as the **critical friend** of the headteacher and therefore the school. This concept is defined as *"A critical friend offers support, constructive advice, a sounding board for ideas, a second opinion on proposals and help where needed. But a critical friend may also challenge, ask questions, seek information, improve proposals and so seek to arrive at the best solution."*²

To fulfil these roles it is helpful if individual governors, in addition to their termly whole governing body meetings and any committees they are on (usually each governor will serve on one or two committees), can:

- experience the school at work;
- undertake formal visits as delegated by the governing body and in accordance with their 'School Visits' policy;
- build relationships within the school community;
- support school events.

In a government document *Promoting Excellence for All* the value placed on the work of the governing body was articulated as: *'Strong governing bodies challenge and support schools to have a clear vision and ethos and provide an excellent service for the children and parents in their communities. They are a crucial component of effective school leadership.'*³

² *Roles of Governing Bodies and Headteachers* (DfEE 0168/2000) September 2000

³ *Promoting Excellence for All*, Department of Children, Schools and Families, 2008, page 11 paragraph 27



Transformation

Serving as a governor can be seen as active Christian service towards *transforming the world*. All Christians are called to be 'salt and light'⁴ in the world. Becoming a *transforming* school governor provides a specific opportunity to exercise this calling.

As a Christian governor you will be able to 'take Jesus' into the school and the work of the governing body, bringing an influence by being present there, as well as through contributions you may make. It will enable you to spend time engaging with people in their own context like Jesus did and by applying your 'Christian mind' to the issues being discussed you will be able to impact decisions made by the governing body.

One Christian governor's vision

As a school governor I seek to SERVE and STRENGTHEN by:

- ◇ giving time and energy
- ◇ contributing, challenging, changing
- ◇ respecting and encouraging staff, children and governors
- ◇ seeking God's mind and honouring him in all that I do.

The impact a Christian can make is possible in whichever kind of school they become a governor of although it may take sometime to earn respect and gain the opportunity to make a real difference. In a church school it should be easier to contribute towards developing a more distinctively Christian character in the school.



Joining a governing body

There are a number of ways onto a school governing body. It is best to approach a school in your neighbourhood and explore with the headteacher what, if any, vacancies there are. The categories of governor that make up the whole body are:

- **Parent governors** - selected by election (or appointment if insufficient people stand for election) and drawn from parents and carers of children at the school.
- **Staff governors** - selected by election from teaching and support staff paid to work at the school
- **Community governors** - appointed by the governing body to represent community interests
- **Local Authority governors** - appointed by the Local Authority (either by recommendation from the school or by contacting the LA Governor Support Service and volunteering)
- **Foundation governors** (not community schools) - appointed by the school's founding body, church or other organisation named in the school's instrument of government
- **Partnership governors** (foundation schools only) - replace Foundation governors if the school does not have a founding body
- **Sponsor governors** - discretionary category appointed by the governing body from individuals who have made significant (financial) contributions to the school
- **Associate members** (not governors) - appointed by the governing body to attend committee meetings and/or full governing body meetings due to their particular skills or experience

The maximum term of office for a governor is four years (even if your child leaves the school during your term of office as a parent governor) and renewable if re-appointed or re-elected (unless as a parent governor your child has left the school).

Top Tips for Christian Governors

- 1 Avoid becoming a single-issue governor who can so easily be irritating to their colleagues and counterproductive. Try to engage in a wide variety of issues and by your hard work and support earn the right to be heard on the things that matter most to you.
- 2 Choose when to speak up, question and challenge and learn to recognise when it is better to remain silent.⁵
- 3 Behave with integrity by reading all the paperwork provided and prepare as fully as you can for each meeting.
- 4 Take full advantage of the training provided by the Local Authority and, in the case of Church Schools, the Local Diocese.
- 5 Provide a link with the local community as well as your church. Christians may well want to develop a number of possibilities including:
 - Encouraging a group of interested people to pray for the school linked with 'Pray for Schools' (www.prayforschools.org).
 - Facilitating churches to provide gifts of books, Bibles and other resources that the school is in need of.
 - Opening up opportunities for local church leaders and/or schools workers to take assemblies and a host of other activities.
 - Creating a link with teachers who may be interested in visiting local church buildings to enhance religious education, history or other lessons.
 - Finding voluntary personnel to help in school, run breakfast and after school clubs and other activities.
 - Linking potential mentors with any scheme being run by the school or helping the church to initiate such a scheme.

⁵ Ecclesiastes 3.7

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Transforming Governing

Transforming Governing is a website created and developed by GOVERNOR Ministries in partnership with the Bible Society. Aimed at growing and supporting a movement of Christians who are School Governors in all kinds of schools, it contains detailed information (of which this Mission File is a summary), briefing papers, a virtual school governor blog, forums and opportunity to plan an evening for Christian school governors locally.

Visit www.transforminggoverning.org.uk

Christian Governor Support

Scripture Union runs events for Christian governors in the southeast which aim to:

- support Christian governors
- offer encouragement and advice
- provide an opportunity for governors to network.
- provide useful information and opportunity to ask questions.
- provide opportunity for those considering becoming a governor.

For more details about these events, contact: Lisa Jones on 01303 893920 or email LisaJ@scriptureunion.org.uk

