

BEING AN EFFECTIVE PARENT GOVERNOR by Joan Sallis

A role to value

Having parent governors in every school seemed a dream when my children started school, and turning dreams into everyday experience is hard work. At that time only a few LEAs had parent representatives. My LEA was one – after a long campaign. At least we had two per school and they were elected, with equal status with other members. The law then didn't require that, and elsewhere you were lucky to have even one lonely parent 'observer', possibly not even elected, but 'chosen'. Unlikely to be a troublemaker!

Progress

A government committee on which I represented parents in the seventies studied the role and composition of governing bodies, and recommended an equal partnership of all interests, including elected parents. This took another 10 years to become law! Since then every school has had elected parents, in county schools around a quarter, now to be increased to at least a third. Voluntary aided schools, because the providing church has a majority, have had less, but now the proportion has been increased by requiring them to include up to three more among the founders' group – not elected though. Be proud in the role you now have, which many fought for, and remember your voice matters as much as every other.

Moving on

So much for history. Now what is it like for parent governors in reality? To me parents are vital members of the team. They have so much at stake that their concern is sharp and untiring. It isn't just a duty or something to embellish their CV. It matters. It can be immensely rewarding but also has its painful moments. Representing others in something as important as the education of their children is a serious responsibility. Sometimes you may feel inadequate. Yours is such a large, varied constituency; most parents caring passionately about their children's progress and well-being, so expecting a great deal of you but not always aware of the limits of what you can achieve. For a start you can't hope to reach all those you represent, and even if you could they wouldn't all agree. Vocal groups may want to criticise or change some school policy. You don't know how typical they are or how to handle their concerns. At meetings colleagues will mostly treat you with respect, but some may seek to marginalise you if you upset the way things have always been done. Others may not understand your need to communicate with parents, and try to limit it. It's very important that you understand your role and its limits, if you are to be really effective. So first here are some cautions. I bring them in because they often cause difficulty in one's early days.

GOLDEN RULES OF THE PARENT GOVERNOR

1. A representative, but *not* a delegate

You will have to keep in close touch with any school parents' organisations and listen as well as you can to individuals – remembering always that your contacts won't all be typical. For instance you won't encounter many working mothers in the day or single parents in the evenings, and you will probably meet more mothers than fathers. The school gate, the supermarket, the park or the library may be your main sources of news and views. Somehow you have to try to reconcile and make sense of what you hear, but do remember that you are not a delegate. That means you don't have to adopt as your own any opinions, even widely held ones, when you vote. You *are* a representative, which means listening thoughtfully, and reporting to your fellow governors any feelings on vital matters shared by many parents. But when it comes to taking a line at the meeting, you follow your own conviction of what is right for the school and also heed other governors' views. That's the difference between a representative and a delegate.

2. The right time to say your bit

Remember that you must have a 'context' in the form of an agenda item, either reporting parents' views on any relevant item, or asking for something to be put on the agenda later. It won't be popular – and it isn't efficient – to bring in the latest school-gate report. This isn't just rules for the sake of rules, but a way of ensuring colleagues get a chance to think about issues in their own time with proper warning. All good governors' business is like this and you will benefit too by not having things sprung on you.

3. Not the place for *individual* complaints

Parents will inevitably approach you with concerns about their own children, wanting you to take these up with the school. Annabel is highly intelligent and needs more challenging work. Belinda may seem aggressive but is really just hyperactive. Bob is small for his age and wears glasses and gets bullied. Caroline is delicate and shouldn't have to line up when it's cold. But the governing body deals with school policies and it is not the place to take purely individual problems unless the parents have tried direct approaches and then – at the end of the road - made a formal complaint to the governors about the school's handling of the problem. Listen, be sympathetic, tell the parents anything you know which may have a bearing, and then encourage them to go to the class or subject teacher or head. If they are very timid you might go with them, but for moral support, not siding with them. Your role is to help solve problems affecting all parents and make sure the school communicates well with them.

4. Remember the boundaries

You may not be sure where they are, but you certainly will know when you have crossed one! Professionals can be very territorial. The governing body's job is to plan long term for the school, make sure it is well staffed, and spends its budget wisely, and help to construct all the general policies which make it an efficient, caring and fair environment for learning. But it is the job of the head and senior team, not governors, to ensure that individual teachers are in the right roles, right places at the right time, perform well, get adequate guidance and behave professionally. The head manages the space, time, equipment, people, on a daily basis, and must also respond to any inappropriate behaviour or dangerous situation as it occurs. Parent governors are often tempted to trespass on professional territory because of their direct experience, and care so much, but it is not wise.

5. Confidentiality

There are boundaries too on matters of confidentiality. The governing body is a very open institution. Its proceedings are not secret and in general anyone can come in from the street and read its papers. But there are exceptions. Certain items may affect the privacy of an individual teacher, child or family – health, finances, home life, ability or behaviour. These will be classified confidential and you must be sure to keep them so. Be careful too about revealing things you hear on your visits to the school where you are in a sense a privileged person: the innocent things children say about their homes, teachers' small talk. You can report back any decisions which have been made on non-confidential matters, but make sure to do so responsibly. You don't reveal how individuals reacted or voted – you want to feel free yourself, don't you, to act as conscience directs? And so do others. Also be careful never to put any colleague or the governing body in a bad light, tempting though it may be to relate the spicy bits of meetings.

6. No power on your own

No individual governor can make anything happen. The only power belongs to the governors acting together by majority vote. Sometimes you may care very much about an issue but have to accept that you haven't enough support. The chance may come again but meanwhile you have to be brave and patient though you hate disappointing parents. One more warning – do resist the temptation to bring your own children's experience up too often (we all get accused of this), and if you have to go to the school about their problems, ever, don't 'pull rank' as a governor. It makes teachers uneasy. Better sometimes to leave 'family business' to your partner, or at least make it clear that you are there only as a parent.

7. A job to be proud of

I hope I haven't discouraged you with too many cautions. Parent governors are to me the heart and soul of the governing body with a crucial job to do - making schools better places for children and families. There are challenges, but you will overcome them. The job needs a firm sense of purpose, tact, patience and stamina, but the rewards are

immense. For a start, a school is one of the most interesting places in the whole world, and you are privileged to be part of it.

Joan Sallis is well known nationally for her articles in the TES and her books on school governance.

Joan Sallis's latest publication 'The Parent Governor's Book' is available at £8 plus postage from the Advisory Centre for Education, 1C Aberdeen Studios, 22, Highbury Grove, London N5 2DQ.

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