

The essentials of effective governance

All boards, whether in the maintained or academy sector and no matter how many schools they are responsible for, have three core functions:

- **Ensuring clarity of vision, ethos and strategic direction;**
- **Holding the headteacher to account for the educational performance of the school and its pupils, and the performance management of staff; and**
- **Over seeing the financial performance of the school and making sure its money is well spent.**

The core features of effective governance also apply at any scale and in any context, and are common to good governance practice in the charity and corporate sectors. They include the importance of the board having:

- The right people with the necessary skills, time and commitment, and sufficient diversity of perspectives to ensure internal challenge, all actively contributing in line with clearly defined roles and responsibilities under an effective chair and an explicit code of conduct, and with active succession planning;
- Clear governance structures with tightly defined remits, particularly in relation to functions delegated to committees or other bodies;
- Clear separation between the strategic and operational in terms of the role of the board and its school leaders;
- A positive relationship between the board and its school leaders enabling robust constructive challenge on the basis of a good understanding of objective data particularly on pupil progress, staff performance and finances;
- The support and advice of an independent and professional clerk and, in the case of academies, company secretary;
- Robust processes for financial and business planning and oversight and effective controls for compliance, propriety and value for money; and
- Processes for regular self-evaluation, review and improvement including; skills audits, training and development plans, and independent external reviews as necessary.

Forming or joining a group of schools can help create more effective governance. The board that governs the group gains a more strategic perspective and the

ability to create more robust accountability through the opportunity to compare and contrast between schools. The boards that decide to join a group are relieved of the burden of ultimate accountability and many welcome responsibility for financial and other corporate functions being carried centrally, leaving them freer to focus on pupil progress and attainment. Common governance also lays the foundation for a range of other benefits for pupils, staff and budgets.

When a board decides to grow the number of schools it governs, it might try to develop its existing governance model to form a small MAT or federation of two or three schools, but growth beyond three schools usually represents the first real need to overhaul governance arrangements. Likewise the governance structures of a small MAT will start to become stretched at around 6-7 schools and by 10 a further overhaul will be needed.

In order to transition to academy status or grow successfully from a single school into a small MAT or federation, and onward into a large MAT, the board should commission a robust independent review of its effectiveness and readiness for growth. The All Party Parliamentary Group for Governance and Leadership's [Questions for boards](#) and [MAT boards](#) to ask themselves provide a helpful framework for doing this. As the organisation the board is governing becomes larger and more complex organisationally and financially, governance can and in some cases must change in a number of ways:

1. **Culture:** it is important to generate a professional ethos across the entire governance structure and a culture of one organisation and away from any sense of 'my school/ your school'.
2. **Skills:** an increasing number of pupils and schools are impacted by the quality of the individuals on the board, and there is hence an increasing imperative for the board to act professionally and actively recruit, develop and retain high calibre board members and an effective chair with the necessary skills to govern and lead the increasingly complex organisation and oversee its growth.
3. **Executive oversight:** there is increasing opportunity, and possibly need, for the board to discharge some of its functions of governance and oversight through a central professional executive team – starting with an executive principal and finance director, and with further growth extending to a chief executive officer.
4. **Structures:** there is an expanding range of options for how to design governance structures and levels of delegation. As the need for additional tiers within non- executive and executive governance structures grows to

avoid unwieldy spans of control, there is an increasing need for absolute clarity on the role and remit of each part of the structure and the relationship and reporting arrangements between them – including, for example in a MAT, between the role of a local governing body (LGB) and an executive principal in holding a school-level principal to account.

5. **Processes:** there is an increasing need for the board to be professional in the way it conducts its business. It needs more standardised and robust systems and processes for governance and oversight, including systems for reporting and analysing school performance data; for financial planning, management and control; and for HR and other business processes. It also needs to ensure more standardised teaching and school improvement methodologies are in place across its schools based on proven pedagogies.

6. **Risk:** increasingly, boards need a more sophisticated understanding of financial, organisational and educational risk; its assessment and its minimisation – and this in turn highlights that increasingly the board must be strategic, that it must focus on priorities and that it must manage by exception.