

## Heads and Governors

by [John Fuller](#)

Anyone who has spent an extended period of time as a School Governor may have found the experience causes pause for reflection. At secondary level, schools have financial turnovers which are in the many millions of pounds, operate within a complex and changing set of regulations and frameworks generated by central and local government, and have substantial staffing levels. In short, they are significant businesses which, if not managed effectively, will fail in their end task of providing a quality education for their students.

Much has been said of the role of headteachers and of fitting them for the task of being chief executive of a highly visible organisation. They have to manage parental expectations, a student body with a wide ability and behaviour range, and staff operating in and out of classrooms. At the same time, government and the LEA keep moving curricular goalposts, funding levels, service support and inspection regimes. If that were not enough, a governing body is required whose origins lie in the mysteries of LEA nomination, local elections among parents and staff, and the quirks of fortune of co-option. This process has attracted the label 'local accountability', but in reality it is one which is in the main unplanned and external to the school. If it works well, this is more by chance than design.

When this process is completed and a governing body created, there may or may not be included in its members those with the skills needed to support the school. Obtaining a chairperson from the group of unpaid volunteers is often hampered by a lack of willing individuals as it can be a thankless task with a focus on involvement in the tacky bits of the organisation and the frictions encountered between the governing body and the local authority.

A governing body's membership of around 20+ indicates that it is unlikely to be the most efficient body. Groups of four to six are a better number for decision-making purposes. Experience of committee structures in local authorities supports this perspective, and the widespread movement to such structures is recognition of the difficulty of achieving successful outcomes with too large a committee.

So is there a solution to this perceived anarchy? Let us not be deceived by the argument of democratic accountability as a justification for this organisational framework for governing bodies. That belief is an illusion since the reality, as this article has already indicated, is that governing bodies are largely formed by a process of nomination or election which are either undemocratic or in which only a small minority of those eligible actually do vote. As in national politics, where the emphasis is on competent management not ideology, governing bodies need inner cabinets of the committed and able that can support the head and make the necessary decisions, and a small committee framework (curriculum, finance, staffing

etc) that can chew over the issues, reach sensible conclusions and ensure all governors are involved to their own chosen commitment levels.

The days of pretending that somehow a group of unpaid, volunteer and disparate individuals thrown together to run a major organisation will operate effectively have passed. Let's recognise the need to have a model that will deliver managerial competence and ensure the headteacher is supported, not deflected, by his or her governing body. Would you create such a management framework if launching a new organisation in the market place and expect it to succeed?

[John Fuller](#) November 2004