

# Governing a group of schools

Clare Collins looks at the importance of creating a clear vision and group identity

I have written before about how we have been surprised at how few governing boards have spent time formulating a clear vision for their schools, and that without clarity of vision it's not possible to develop a strategy, let alone identify a few key priorities, the achievement of which can be measured over time.

It's been incredibly satisfying working with governors and senior leaders in workshop settings helping them to understand this, and starting them on the journey to developing their own vision for the next three to five years.

Recently we have been doing more work with governors who are governing groups of schools. This is mostly in multi academy trusts (MATs), but also in federations and less formal collaborations. NGA is interested in the notion of governing in groups – there is evidence that it promotes better governance and it addresses the issue of there not being enough willing and skilled volunteers to be the 'right people round the table'. Best of all it improves the education of pupils.

## Resistance

However, there is considerable resistance to governing more than one school. Governors worry about loss of identity, there may be a history of poor relationships, there may be competition for pupils or staff.

Yet in the work that we are now doing, governors who have made the leap to be a federation or trustees of a MAT do understand the need to create a group identity, and that this is an opportunity to look forward into the long term. They can take the best from all and create a new and vibrant vision for the group.

But vision and strategy present their own issues for those governing groups of schools: should there be an overarching vision for all the schools? Or should there be some shared values and then maybe one or two key indicators, or 'non-negotiables' which schools in the group sign up to? Or should the schools be allowed to plough their own furrows and simply be held to account against their own vision and outcomes?

There is no right answer. The circumstances of the group may well determine the extent of the shared vision. If it's a faith group, shared values will underpin the vision; if it's a group which is sponsoring a lot of schools, there will, inevitably, be some

non-negotiable key indicators; if it's a cluster serving a clearly defined geographical area, there may be shared goals which reflect the local economy.

## Challenges

The first challenge is to find the time to think and work together on determining where the vision sits and how far it extends. The next is to ensure that all those in the partnership are consulted and involved, including the stakeholders – parents, staff and children – so that the vision truly reflects the aspirations of the wider community. Once the vision is agreed by all, the board will be in a position to determine the strategy for achieving it – the key priorities and milestones required to ensure that the vision is achieved.

The final challenge is to ensure that those new to the group partnership understand its vision, and the expectations that arise from it. The aim is, of course,

“Without clarity of vision it's not possible to develop a strategy”

that the group vision will be so compelling that others will either want to come and join you, or will be inspired to work to create their own group using what they have seen and learned from those who are working together successfully to ensure better outcomes for children.

Two years ago we would not have predicted that exploring the meaning behind the governing board's first core function of “ensuring clarity of vision, ethos and strategic direction” would provide us with so much food for thought, let alone that it would lead to the *Framework for Governance* (GM Jan 2014 p8). We are building a raft of knowledge and experience on how schools, federations and MATs develop their visions and strategies that we can share with those who commission our service. 



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