

Being a Parent Governor

Parent governors are in a unique position on a governing body. Not only do parent governors have to work in the best interests of the school, but they have to balance this with their natural desire to see the best outcomes for their own child(ren). The aim of this briefing paper is to offer advice to new parent governors on their specific role and suggest ways of handling some of the tricky situations which may arise.



As a parent governor it will sometimes feel that you have to know everything about the school, but can't talk about it; you have to be on everyone's side; if you don't do paid work, people imagine that you have loads of free time.....and you have to be able to juggle all these expectations. As a parent you will already be an expert juggler, but developing your role as a governor will take time.

You are not alone! There is advice, help and support you can tap into....and reading this guidance note is the first step.

Parent governors are:

- ✓ well placed to understand parents' views and to remind the governing body how matters being discussed affect parents;
- ✓ individuals! How you vote on any decision is up to you;
- ✓ in a good position to help the governing body to communicate effectively with parents;
- ✓ equal in status to all other governors.

Parent governors are not:

- ✗ expected to gather the views of other parents and take them to the governing body;
- ✗ simply expected to represent the interests of parents;
- ✗ a link between parents and the governing body;
- ✗ expected to vote as instructed by other parents.

What are the good bits about being a parent governor?

- ◆ You have a very privileged and responsible role.
- ◆ You have the opportunity to make a difference, not only for your children, but for children in years to come.
- ◆ You have the opportunity to make a difference for other parents, and to influence the way in which school works with them.
- ◆ You will learn a lot and develop new skills.

How to fulfil your role

- ◆ Attend governing body meetings regularly and play an active role in committees and decision-making.
- ◆ Learn all you can about the school.
- ◆ Consider how the governing body communicate with parents? Could you help them to improve links?
- ◆ How accessible is the school – how easy is it for parents to go into school to discuss things with the headteacher or teachers? Could you give feedback to help the school to be more open and welcoming?
- ◆ How accessible are the governors – do parents ever get the opportunity to meet with governors; do they know how to get in touch with the chair of governors if they need to? Could you encourage the governing body to be more visible?
- ◆ Learn how the school handles complaints and read the complaints policy. If another parent approaches you with a complaint, advise them to speak to the headteacher.
- ◆ Be approachable to other parents, but make sure you are clear about your role.
- ◆ Always represent the school positively.
- ◆ As a governor you are one of a group and must never act alone.
- ◆ Always support the decisions of the full governing body. Have your say on decisions in meetings and vote in the way you wish; but then support the outcomes of votes – even if you disagree with them.
- ◆ Always, always, always observe confidentiality. You will get to know a lot of highly sensitive and confidential information – don't discuss it with anyone who is not a governor. Remember, a governor can be suspended for serious breaches of confidentiality.

How you can help individual parents

From time to time you may be approached by other parents asking for help, or wanting to make a complaint about something the school is, or isn't doing.

- ◆ Make it clear you can't act for the governing body.
- ◆ Don't raise expectations that the school will "put it right" – there may be underlying issues or background that you don't know about.
- ◆ Keep an open mind – there are at least two sides to every story!
- ◆ You may need to explain why the governing body has made a decision in a certain way, so be prepared.

What to do if you experience a conflict between being a parent and being a governor

This can happen – especially if you think the governing body is making decisions which you feel will adversely affect your child(ren).

- ◆ If a difficulty arises, take a step back and think things through as objectively as you can.
- ◆ If you are concerned, talk to the headteacher or to the chair of governors.
- ◆ Make sure you don't break confidentiality when discussing your concerns outside governing body meetings.

Where to get help, advice and support

- ◆ From other governors.
- ◆ From the headteacher.
- ◆ From the chair of governors.
- ◆ From the clerk to the governing body.
- ◆ Ask for a governor mentor or "buddy" to help you through the first few months.
- ◆ Attend the induction training offered by the Local Authority (see the Governor Training Programme). Sessions run during the day and in the evenings to help you in your juggling act! You'll meet other new governors and will find lots of people who feel just the same as you.
- ◆ Phone the Governor Support & Development Service team on **York 554210**. The staff are around during office hours, Monday to Friday. They are a very small, busy team though – so if you get the answer machine please leave a message and someone will call you back as soon as they can.
- ◆ Email the Governor Support & Development Service at governance.service@york.gov.uk.
- ◆ Look on www.governornet.gov.uk.

And finally.....

- ◆ Don't be discouraged if at first everything seems confusing and difficult to get to grips with. Most new governors feel this way.
- ◆ Don't feel you have to know everything straight away.....it can take a full year to begin to see how the cycle of governing body business fits together.
- ◆ Smile at these words from R D Laing in "Knots" (1970). If you feel like this – don't worry, things WILL get better. See above for sources of help and support.

*There is something I don't know
That I am supposed to know.
I don't know what it is I don't know,
And I feel stupid
If I seem both not to know it
And not know what it is I don't know.
And yet I'm supposed to know,
Therefore, I pretend I know it.
This is nerve-wracking since I don't know
What I must pretend to know.
Therefore, I pretend to know everything.*