

Looking after the governor is the business now - HOW DO WE RETAIN OUR SCHOOL GOVERNORS?

Retaining school governors in post is no less of a challenge than retaining teaching staff. Teachers are retained by 'golden handcuffs' in various guises; LEAs and schools rack their brains to offer staff development, technical support, promotion prospects and working environments that meet staff expectations. What are the rewards that motivate school governors and attract their continuing hard work and loyalty, however?

794 governors from business, recruited by the School Governors' One Stop Shop (SGOSS), were contacted in order to quantify their views on the key factors that had motivated them to remain in governance, since only 27 had resigned since the SGOSS's launch in 2000. 276 respondents (almost 35% of those contacted) provided high quality feedback on their perceptions of the positive and negative factors in governance.

Positives that made governors feel valued and want to stay in post

- **'Being welcomed and accepted by the headteacher'** (84%) was the highest response rate of any in the survey. The positive relationship between the headteacher and the governor was considered to be of paramount importance in releasing the added value that the newly-recruited governor can provide and it is a key factor in governors feeling valued. 71% responded that *'supporting the headteacher'* was one of the things they found particularly satisfying in governance. Elsewhere in the survey 52% mentioned that they gained satisfaction from *'acting as a critical friend'* and easing *'the burden on the head'*. Do headteachers recognise the overwhelming significance of the relationship with their governors?
- **'Being welcomed and accepted by fellow governors'** (70%) was also an extremely significant factor in governors feeling valued.
- **'Being invited to use their skills'** was given by 63% as a significant factor in feeling valued. 71% had identified this as a key aspect of the role that was satisfying and 74% had already identified that the opportunity to use existing skills in a different context was a reason for becoming a governor. Finance and accounting skills were mentioned by 22 governors; personnel, HR and interviewing skills by a further 27 respondents. A significant number (9) brought Health and Safety knowledge to the school, 6 identified the use of their IT skills. Governors also rated *'being accepted into the work of the governing body'* and *'being involved in key planning/tasks'* as very significant factors in feeling valued. *'Being proactive'* was given by more than one third (37%) as an aspect of the role that they had found satisfying. Many wrote that they enjoyed being involved in the *'strategic decision making'* of the school (50%). Some respondents, who had joined schools in particular difficulties including special measures, found the work rewarding (if exhausting!).



Is there sufficient training for headteachers in the management and motivation of governors? How much more emphasis should be placed on the training/briefing of headteachers to develop their skills in this aspect of people management?

Negatives that frustrated governors and that were identified as potential threats to governor retention by some respondents

The two most significant were:

- **Frustration about the level and the complexity of school funding** was a '*serious irritant*' and was mentioned by 21 respondents. There appear to be (at least) two issues causing concern: the level of funding and the complexity of the funding formula. Firstly, the '*lack of adequate funding*', '*funding issues impact on ability to improve*', and more alarmingly, '*lack of funding to carry out certain improvements - in regard to health and safety*', were all examples. Secondly, the '*complicated financial reporting due to various income streams*', and the '*funding cycle*' were some of the ways respondents expressed an opinion about the latter irritant. This cohort of governors has a background more exposed to the business and commercial world than the modal school governor and is likely to be able to distinguish between inadequate and ill-used funding. Moreover a commercial background might well expose individuals to complex funding regimes. Yet still many governors found the funding procedures complex and obscure. '*Should the DfES make school funding more transparent?*' is an obviously rhetorical question.
- **Criticism of the LEA/Government.** One difficulty in interpreting this category of responses was that of disaggregating statements about the LEA from those about central government. Complaints about 'policy' could, for example, be read either way and this category necessarily overlaps with frustrations about funding. However, in all, some 31 remarks might be placed under this combined heading which range from very direct comments such as: '*As a governor at two schools in different LEAs the key irritant is the poor service/advice/info given by the LEA in key areas, i.e., personnel, contracts, continued improvement*', to more reconciled: '*Good things happen in spite of (the influence of government and the LEA) rather than because of their involvement*'. (NB No information of any type was elicited or kept about individual LEAs)

This evidence of positives and negatives in governance confirms what experience has already told us. Good people management and a reasonable recognition of the time and effort spent go a long way towards making governors feel valued, despite contextual drawbacks. Are governors who work in the business sector any different in their views, aspirations and needs from other governors? Probably not.

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