

Brighton Hove and Sussex Sixth Form College is an outstanding college - what can the governance community learn from their experience?

In 2012 Brighton Hove and Sussex Sixth Form College (known as BHASVIC) achieved outstanding in their Ofsted inspection having previously achieved 'Good' in 2007. BHASVIC is almost entirely by the EFA and has about 2000 students mostly studying advanced level qualifications.

This case study summarises three interviews carried out with the Chair, Principal and Clerk asking them to share their views on what role the governing body have played in achieving outstanding, the contribution each of them feel they make and what advice they would give to other governors on their journey to outstanding.

A bit of background....

The board operates a traditional structure, with committees having delegated responsibilities for decisions, and the chair of each committee reporting back a summary of outcomes to the full board and taking any questions. Each committee chair aims to meet the senior manager responsible for producing the reports and data for the committees prior to their meeting, to go through the papers, and agree where the time is best spent in the meeting to have the greatest impact. All board reports have a clear designation, showing the purpose of the report, the expectations of governors and what decisions are needed. Each main committee also includes one or more co-opted members recruited for their expertise and/or potential future governors.

In getting closer to teaching, learning and assessment the external governors are encouraged to visit lessons and sit in. They see different subjects each year and link to a department annually to 'touch' and 'experience' the outcomes of the strategic decisions they are making at meetings.

The full board meetings usually last for two hours once a term. Roughly a third of the time is spent covering committee chairs' reports, governance administration and monitoring of KPI's. This is preceded by the chair's and principal's reports and an update on the year's operating priorities that stem from the 3-year Strategic Plan.

All the governors are appointed to the board, firstly because they are firmly committed to the success of the college, and secondly, because each brings a unique skill or expertise that supports the board integrity in decision making. An assumption is made that everyone reads board papers in advance and questions can be submitted to committee chairs prior to the meeting to speed up the committee reporting at the full board, thus allowing for as much time on strategic discussion as possible.

A **Governance** committee, consisting of each committee chair, the chair, vice chair and principal, meets once a year to review the effectiveness and fitness for purpose of the governance processes, the terms of reference of the committees and review the governance self evaluation feedback.

So the structure isn't unique, the processes sound familiar, so what makes this board so effective....?

Principal and chair meet every two weeks to discuss what is coming up on the horizon, the impact of new policies, reports and local agendas. The chair draws on these exchanges, on SFCA and AOC briefings and information from local networks of Chairs of Governors, to write a report for each full board meeting that summarises the ever-changing national and local contexts. The principal follows up with a verbal report summarising the local and college issues. This gives direction to the strategic discussions that follow. These two reports underpin the substantial items at the full board meeting, with the majority of the time spent discussing the strategic implications, risks and actions needed.

The Principal feels part of the governance team, and is treated as such, not just the chief executive. He is very open to challenge, welcomes constructive debate and continuously reviews how effectively the senior leadership team work with the board to enable effective decision making, through reports, briefings, curriculum visits and links between specific governors and senior leaders. His leadership style allows for an open and free exchange between his team and the board.

The College undoubtedly benefits from having a qualified clerk who brings the following qualities - very efficient, exceptionally well organised, proactive, timely, focused and clear, with timely follow up and has an authoritative grasp of the legal aspects. Both the principal and chair recognised how these qualities contribute to not just the smooth running of the board, but to enabling a seamless process so that they can focus on what matters. The minutes capture the debate as well as the decisions, and provided valuable evidence during inspection.

The chair is a retired civil servant, used to the 'mechanics of governance and the politics.' He has a detailed knowledge of the local scene and local politics and is well networked. He leads through making suggestions and signposting rather than providing and directing. He actively seeks to understand the context and implications of government agendas. The principal sees the chair's eyes as **'doubling his capacity to lead'**. He is well informed and committed. He will do additional research to make sure all angles are covered. He tactfully adds, but doesn't drive. This sort of relationship allows for healthy debate and challenge.

The College feels fortunate in its seven staff, parent and student governors. In recent years there has been strong competition for the parent places and full engagement by those elected: every full meeting hears a report from the student governors appointed by their union and they are (mostly) keen to attend one or more committees.

What would be your advice to any governor or board of governors aspiring to be outstanding?

- The composition of the board has to work - there has to be respect and trust amongst all members, and a strong team ethos. The right people who 'gel' together.
- A high degree of open relationships with high emotional intelligence and team ethos amongst governors.

- Spend time building the quality of the relationships between individual members, the whole board and the senior leadership. They need to be one functioning team, continually growing and learning together.
- Spend time as a board reflecting on what you are doing, what you are spending your time focusing on and if they are the right things, and work with the senior leadership team to help them understand what you need as a governor in relation to level of information and data. The clearer the senior team are the clearer the board will be'.
- Actively seek and appoint outstanding people, never compromise and make sure they have proper recognition and reward.
- Establish and monitor a good balance of strategic discussion time and reporting back from committees at full board meetings, to ensure the majority of time is spent in strategic discussions.
- Use the SAR to identify key topics, review the evidence, make sure leadership team are making the right conclusions and acting on them, then let them get on with it.
- Have a thorough interview and induction process for recruiting new governors - ensure they are clear about the time commitment and their role on the board, including the reading of papers and contributing outside of formal meetings.
- The relationship between the Principal and the chair is critical. It has to be a partnership that trusts, is open and honest and works seamlessly for the good of the college.
- What came through all three interviews was a great emphasis on how the board work together as a team, a team that includes the senior leadership team.

In relation to your recent inspection, what role did governors play, before, during and after?

There was a session arranged for the governors by the college nominee to update them on the new framework, which unfortunately was scheduled the week of the inspection, so in effect there was no governor training. Once the inspection was announced, the Chair and Principal chose who from the board would meet the inspectors, carefully thinking about the message they wanted to give. In the only one-hour meeting with governors, the inspector saw the chair, the chairs of Curriculum and Quality and of HR and a student governor. The inspector, who had done his homework on the minutes, focused initially on the student governor, asking about the student voice, their contribution to governance and what impact they were making; and then sought examples of challenge and governors' capacity to judge College performance against comparative benchmarks.

The inspectors asked about how governors were recruited and for evidence of the debate and challenge around teaching and learning at the board. The detailed minutes of the full board meetings clearly demonstrated the debate and challenge. The minutes also demonstrated how the governors played a key part in monitoring the post Ofsted inspection action plan.

Conclusion and critical success

What came clearly across from all three interviews was the open honest environment that has been created for board debate and challenge. The principal welcomes and encourages open discussion and challenge. This atmosphere enables the two student governors to actively participate and contribute to strategic discussions. They are clearly inducted into and understand their role and level of contribution. They are clear what 'business' is appropriate to take to the board, and what business should go through other learner voice channels.

The principal and chair have consciously developed their working relationship recognising the importance to the governance process and the success of the college.

What Ofsted said in their report published on November 14th 2012

"The Principal, senior managers and governors have a clear strategic vision for the college that they have translated successfully into practice. The overall progress made by learners is excellent, and consistently high success rates are attained. Lines of communication between all staff are strong and managers adopt an open and consultative style. An ethos of high expectations is prevalent among staff and learners.

The governing body is experienced and highly skilled. Governors monitor the performance of learners' outcomes very well, receiving detailed information on results, particularly the progress learners make from their starting points. They offer highly effective support and critical challenge to senior managers. The college's financial health is good with outstanding financial management and control arrangements."

Reflective questions for readers of this case study:

How much of your board meeting is spent on strategic discussions?

How much time does your board spend on reflecting how effectively they support and challenge?

What time is spent on continuously building and developing the team and relationships?

How well would your student governors perform in front of Ofsted inspectors?

Could you evidence debate and challenge to an outsider from the minutes of your meetings?

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