



The Governors



Do you have embarrassing governing body issues? Don't despair, **Aunty Kevin** has some comforting advice...

Here's an idea: why not give up several hours of your free time each month to attend (often lengthy) meetings and a further several hours reading interminable and opaque documents, oh and be responsible for a budget of a million pounds plus and the life chances of several hundred children and don't get any pay for it?

Like it? Probably not, but that's what thousands of school governors sign up to. Most are genuinely public spirited and want to give something back. Some do it to have a positive influence on the school their own children attend. A few do it for personal aggrandisement and/or the opportunity to axe grind.

Whatever their motivation, governors can and should be key players in schools. Here are my Agony Aunt's tips to make the most of them.

Dear Aunty Kevin,

Help! There's a Governor in my class! She said my lesson was "rubbish" because the children were running around, jumping and skipping instead of sitting down quietly and writing. I tried to explain that my PE lessons are always like that but she wouldn't listen. It was so embarrassing! What should I do?

**Yours truly,
Worried of Worthing**

Dear Ms Worthing

Don't worry. This is perfectly normal and nothing to be ashamed of.

It will help enormously if the governing body has agreed something like "a protocol for governor visits" which will hopefully prevent

the zealous and ill-informed from trampling over your lesson.

Governors should not take on an inspectorial role in class – few are educational professionals – but have you considered how they can learn a lot from observing relationships, whether the work space is safe and stimulating, how good behaviour is, etc. They can then feed back to you and help improve your practice.

Governors can also play a part in extending pupil voice. They could chat informally to children about what works in terms of safety, the school environment and many other issues. They can also invite the school council to join the full governing body meeting for 15 minutes to talk through their work.



If you still feel embarrassed, please apply the cream I am sending by return of post.

Dear Aunty Kevin

Help! I'm trapped in a Governor's meeting! The sound of axes grinding and hobby horses being ridden is giving me a migraine. What should I do?

PS. I've been in here three days.

**Yours truly,
Worried of Worthing**

Dear Ms Worthing (may I call you Worried?) This is perfectly normal and nothing to be ashamed of.

I attend a lot of meetings. A couple I actually enjoy, a few more I concede achieve something but too many are a waste of time. In the five or six full governing body meetings in a year (and the 10 or 12 sub committee meetings) you need to minimise time wasting and maximise achievement and enjoyment.

Make sure agendas include timings and always, always, always make sure these timings

are less than three days. This will help you cover the agenda in a reasonable time. If you go over time (and you shouldn't with the right chairman) then items need to be carried forward to the next meeting. This is not the United Nations – meetings should never be open ended.

Meetings should ideally take place during the school day (or immediately before/after it). Having to wait till 6 or 7 o'clock and then sit in a three day meeting is not good practice. If your governors won't budge from an evening slot, try and agree that you then start work two hours later the following morning. This "time in lieu" is accepted good practice in many schools.

Support your chair to allow everyone to have their say, but stop them rambling or going round in circles. Why not, as a governing body, draw up "Guidelines for chairing meetings" then the Governors can have ownership of how meetings are chaired.

Papers for discussion should be circulated at least a week in advance of the meeting. Resist accepting papers tabled at the meeting with a polite but firm approach.

If this still doesn't help, try the Bach's Flower Remedy ('Governor Gone') which I'm sending by return of post.

Dear Aunty Kevin

Help! I'm a Headteacher and seem to spend all my time servicing governors! Is this normal?

**Yours truly,
Washed out of Worthing**

Dear Washy,

(I think I may know your sister, by the way?) Lots of heads your age complain about the amount of time they have to spend providing stuff for governors and, yes, this is perfectly normal but not desirable.

Firstly, I would like to ask how big is yours? Governing Body, I mean. As every woman knows, size does matter: if your one form entry infant school has as many governors as a 1500 pupil comprehensive something is amiss. Large is impressive, but small and perfectly formed is often more useful and manageable.

Make it easy on yourself

“The best governors bring a welcome sense of perspective to the sometimes Alice in Wonderland world of education”

HOW TO GET GOVERNORS ON SIDE...

- 1** Be open and transparent in your dealings with them. If you have bad news to give get it all out at once rather than a slow but never ending trickle. Also, make sure they hear bad news from you – not from the school gate/the newspapers/the police. The idea is that when Ofsted or the LA or a parent tells them something less than flattering they are fully informed and can respond “we already know about this and this is what we plan to do about it.”
- 2** Get governors into school to sample a day in the life of. Pair them up with a subject/class teacher.
- 3** Governance is a strategic not a managerial role – they are the board of directors to the Head’s CEO.
- 4** Hold joint staff/governor meetings once a term. This is a chance to meet, understand and exchange ideas.
- 5** The National Governors Association is full of good advice www.nga.org.uk
- 6** Grow your own governors. Approach parents/staff about standing. Make sure any LA governors are ones you want rather than ones foisted on you – you can turn them down.
- 7** Parent governor elections and ballots – are your elections free and fair or would they make Robert Mugabe and George W. Bush blush?

Do you really need a separate personnel sub committee or can you combine it with finance? The more sub-committees you have the more meetings there are and the more you are required to service them.

Clarity about roles and responsibilities – through agreed role profiles for governors, terms of reference for committees - and taking time to inform and explain can save lots of time later on. Use the Ofsted self-evaluation form as the termly Head’s report. This kills two birds with one 20 page document.

There needs to be a structured induction for new governors. This is vital in the case of new parent governors who, having won their election, might be bewildered about what they actually do. Induction might take the form of a face to face with Head and or Chair about the dos and don’ts of governance.

Pairing the rookie up with an experienced governor also helps.

I am sending by return of post a Clerk to the Governors. These really do work wonders if they’re trained well as they take all the tedious procedural and legal stuff out of your hands. As well as being

responsible for all communication they will help map out the governors work a year in advance and, at a little over a thousand pounds a year for an average primary, they really are worth every penny.

Otherwise, continue to apply the cream.

Dear Aunty Kevin,

Help! My governing body is all mouth and no trousers; will discuss forever and take action never. I advocated putting the entire school budget on Laughing Gravy in the 3.30 at Aintree but they were dead against it. How do I get Governors to agree to do what I want?

**Yours truly,
Worried of Worthing**

Dear Wor,

You do have a lot on your plate don’t you? I can, however, understand your governor’s reluctance. Laughing Gravy is smooth on the flat but lumpy over the jumps.

Why not try something less likely to end in a prison sentence, like a library development project? If what you want is transparently good for

the school you are on surer ground. In short, you need to be on a mission to explain and inform.

Prepare your case. Write a paper on the aims of the project, time frame, costings etc (never more than one side of A4 – you want people to read it!) and circulate to governors well in advance of the meeting.

Lobby individual governors. Build alliances. Often it’s best to cultivate the governor from whom you expect the greatest opposition – it is always easier to agree a deal in advance of the meeting rather than in the heat of a vigorous discussion.

Demonstrate the benefits for the children in relation to the expected costs.

If, having made your case, the governors do not agree then accept it with good grace and listen to their reservations. In my experience, governors are intelligent and reasonable and if they disagree with something en masse it’s usually for good reasons.

Kevin Harcombe is headteacher at Redlands Primary School, Fareham and former NCSL headteacher of the year.

Worlds apart

TEACHERS ARE FROM MARS, GOVERNORS ARE EVEN MORE WEIRD THAN THAT..

Governors worth their salt will not unquestioningly support heads in their role. A key function is to challenge and in order to challenge they need detailed information.

Likewise you need to be prepared to welcome what they have to offer: be they housewife, financial expert, solicitor, factory worker or whatever – the best governors bring a welcome sense of perspective to the sometimes Alice in Wonderland world of education.

Similarly they can get hold of the wrong end of the stick, start waving it about and poke you hard in the eye with the sharp end. This can happen with parent governors especially who sometimes see everything, not unreasonably, from the perspective of their own child rather than the body of children as a whole. The Chair needs to explain the true purpose of the role to awkward individuals.

