

Headteachers Governors Partnerships

What are the secrets of successful strategic partnerships between heads and governors? That was the subject of a recent talk2learn debate, taking a cue from work by Gilly Harwood-Smith, an executive head and leadership consultant, who has explored the topic for a research associateship project with the College.

Key points included:

- Heads play a pivotal role in making the partnership work.
- Recruiting governors willing and equipped to focus on strategy is difficult.
- More practical ways to engage governors in the work are needed.

The importance of the head had emerged as a major theme of the research, said Gilly.

"It is crucial that the headteacher is prepared to work in real partnership and share responsibility for leading the school. If the head is unwilling, or there are relationship or competency problems on the part of the governors, then strategic partnership will be difficult to achieve."

The most effective governing bodies were those able to differentiate between strategic leadership and management, she added.

"Once governors are clear about the areas where they need to operate strategically, they can then prioritise and make best use of time and resources." Given responsibility for tasks, they are enthusiastic and their interest is maintained. Most governors undertake the role because they wanted to put something back into their communities."

Finding governors willing to embrace the strategic role is difficult, said one school business manager.



"The vast majority of governors are unwilling to commit themselves to taking on roles that involve them coming into school other than for regular meetings. We have a core group of two or three governors who end up doing most of the work."

Gilly said her research suggested that schools which devoted effort to succession planning for governors and actively encouraged parents and others to join the governing body had fewer recruitment problems.

"[Such schools] felt that a key aspect to retention was that the *governors felt that they could 'make a difference'*," she said.

Alison Crossley, an office manager at an East Midlands school, felt more practical ways to engage governors authentically in school life were needed:

"We have 16 governors, including the head, but only a handful (and the handful are very good) appear willing to actually come in to the school and either observe, make recommendations or join in anything we do."

Gilly suggested a 'curriculum carousel': "It's a relaxed evening when subject leaders set up tables showing examples of work, planning etc for the subjects they lead. Governors are all invited and, over a drink and nibbles, can look at the different subject areas, meet staff and find out more about the range of subjects being taught."

Jo Williams, a primary head in Lancashire, was keen to find ways to streamline reading matter for governors:

"The one thing that really troubles my governors is the quantity of materials to be read before a meeting and the jargon. We spend quite a bit of time during meetings unpicking the paperwork to help governors with an overall understanding before a decision can be made. *Most of this paperwork is centrally generated and governors often feel overwhelmed and lacking the skills to handle it all.*"

Gilly said a documentary summary service, such as www.bristol.ac.uk/education/enterprise/docsum, could help.

If you are not yet a member of talk2learn and would like to join, more information is available at www.ncsl.org.uk/onlinecommunities.