**From failing to outstanding**

Please see below for a list of questions asked at the ‘From failing to outstanding’ session of the Governors for Schools Conference 2022, Wednesday, 28th September from 08:00am – 09:00am.

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| How did you engage with parents? Please give an example(s) | Dominic comments:  Engaging with parents was a challenge. We had to do it informally, rather than invite them to attend a forum or Q&A. I attended a few school events (such as performances) and talked to a number of parents. The head also engaged with parents informally (and was eventually able to recruit a parent as governor). |
| How did you engage with the board? Please give examples. | Dominic comments:  My chairing style is inclusive and I like to make sure everyone contributes at least once during any board meeting by specifically inviting contributions. I also had occasional 1:1 conversations to talk things through. Conducting an informal telephone interview before a governor’s appointment helped me get to know each board member and how they could contribute. |
| What did your governor induction entail and how did you implement it? | Dominic comments:  Our induction is in our Terms of Reference. It’s essentially a self-service model where the new governor is provided with specific documents and invited to spend time with the head (on a visit), the chair, and at least one other governor. |
| What advice do you have for a new Parent Governor? | Dominic comments:  I think the hardest thing for parent governors is understanding that they are not representatives – they act on behalf of the board/school. They are a governor with broad responsibilities and can contribute in all areas. |
| What does Dominic think of academisation and MATs? | Dominic comments:  I was chair of a voluntary aided school, vice chair of a local authority school, chair of two large MAT schools, and mentor to the chair of a small MAT school. There are good and bad MATs/academies, just as there are good and bad local authorities. The value of a MAT is the quality of central services – school improvement, HR, finance, and governance. My experience with United Learning has been very positive. I think small MATs struggle because the numbers don’t work. |
| What proportion of "disadvantaged" pupils and "special need" pupils did you have? How (if at all) did this affect the process of setting the vision for individual pupils? | Dominic comments:  I can’t remember the exact percentage. I recall we had about 1/3 SEND and 1/5 Pupil Premium. However, we had only a handful with an Education, Health, and Care Plan (EHCP), so only those few had money to cover dedicated TA support. For most with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), we had to target limited TA support in dedicated interventions. The school developed a very effective monitoring system to ensure each class teacher knew their pupils’ unique learning styles. Even the head had a very good understanding of individual pupils. |
| How challenging were the COVID-19 restrictions on your new board and, of course, on the school? | Dominic comments:  Very! Like everyone, we had to close the school at short notice, subject to keeping it open for vulnerable children. We focused on creating an online curriculum, providing support for children learning at home (including regular phone calls from the teacher), encouraging vulnerable children to attend school, and keeping a very close watch on child safety (which was more of an issue during lockdowns). We also had to manage staff confronting a worrying and unpredictable situation (when the risk of getting COVID-19 from children was high and the consequences serious). We did everything we could to make staff feel safe, and I had many 1:1 conversations with the head to navigate our way through uncharted waters. |
| Were staff supportive of the changes implemented and what type of monitoring was required? | Dominic comments:  Initially, there was scepticism from most staff. They were accustomed to a school that, as far as we can tell from records, was never ‘good’ or better since inspections started. One or two understood our plans straightaway and welcomed the fresh start. For others, we had to be consistent and persistent, keeping an eye on the goal (emphasising the vision for every pupil helped in this respect). We tightened up the appraisal process and created a senior leadership team which provided ongoing peer support. |
| Did allocating key areas to governors make you vulnerable at all in terms of concentrating expertise?  Did you make any steps to ensure governors' availability in the event of inspection? | Dominic comments:  With our skills audit (each year), we ensured we had broad coverage of skills – at least two with good/expert level in each skill. The portfolio system meant we had one governor accountable for our collective responsibility in each area. In practice, each governor has taken time to deliver on their portfolio responsibility.  Governor availability – we discussed Ofsted, prepared with a mock Ofsted, and had valuable input from the director at United Learning responsible for the school. One topic was the availability of governors and, when the time came, we were available (despite my being abroad at the time, as I recall). |
| On the journey to ‘outstanding’, did the board bring in external knowledge? For example, did you consult other governors from outstanding schools? I am developing a similar community engagement process for my academy. Are there opportunities for us to avoid re-inventing the wheel? | Dominic comments:  Yes. We had support from a range of people/organisations. We had great support from the central team at United Learning, especially the director responsible for the school (and particularly school improvement). We had a governance review from an external expert. We all took CPD seriously (it’s in our Terms of Reference), so there was regular input there. I know it’s the other way round, but I subsequently mentored a chair going through a similar situation. I agree, it is extremely valuable to have access to someone who has done it before and I am a big supporter of governors sharing their experience/expertise through mentoring/advice. |
| Can their Terms of Reference be shared please? | Dominic comments:  Yes – please see the conference [resource webpage](https://governorsforschools.org.uk/conference-resources-2022/). |
| Should the trust be communicating with the school's stakeholders, or should it all come from the school? | Dominic comments:  We are part of a large MAT, United Learning, so it is not possible for the trust to engage with school stakeholders. We do it on the trust’s behalf and that is an important role of the LGB. |
| How did you attract applicants to fill the posts when the school was 'failing'? | Dominic comments:  That was a challenge. There are some teachers who enjoy the challenge but they need to see they are going into an improving situation. United Learning has a United Teaching programme that hires NQTs, and we were heavily involved in that. We had a number of good recruits through that. |
| How did / do you now manage communications with parents and carers? This often spirals out of control when Ofsted have given their verdict. | Dominic comments:  I can’t remember much detail on the announcement of ‘outstanding’! I do recall though that we decided to take a relatively low-key approach as we didn’t want to be seen to gloat. So, no press release or banner. We put it on the website and told parents/carers (in our weekly bulletin I think). Of course, there was chatter at the school gate and as that percolated through the community, we finally turned the tide on applicants so we are now oversubscribed. One communications issue we had to deal with was all the other schools that wanted to visit us! In the end, we had to say we would only be available for visits at a particular time so we could spend two hours with 10 heads, instead of 20 hours of 1:1s! |
| Ofsted appear now to be taking a backwards step from monitoring/observing teaching during inspection?  Would that have affected the journey that you took? | Dominic comments:  No, it wouldn’t (and it isn’t, as we are on the same journey again). We had ‘outstanding’ in our sights, both as defined by Ofsted and by us. Our SEF recorded where we were heading and what we were doing to get there. |
| How big was the board? How many governors? Is it an advantage to have a small tight board, or wide and diverse? | Dominic comments:  We had the benefit of a blank sheet of paper. We decided on a relatively small board, but large enough to cover all areas (in terms of skills and portfolios). In a large board, you are more likely to have passengers and then accountability can be dropped. |
| How did you seek independent review of the SEF and how the school evaluated itself? | Dominic comments:  We have termly meetings with the Chair, Head and Director (effectively our school improvement partner). They are not strictly independent, but it is three people with very different viewpoints. In addition, we had a mock Ofsted with an independent ex inspector and there were other opportunities to get independent input (e.g., in specific subject areas or visits from other teachers/heads). |
| Do you think that the board behaving and managing like a business helps the school achieve better results? Or could this potentially damage the school, as they are different industries? | Dominic comments:  We are not experts in education, but we should be experts in finding expertise. I think this comes down to being clear about our role. The SEND governor, for example, is not a SEND expert per se (so doesn’t tell the SEND lead how to do their job, let alone do it for them), but they have to understand what good looks like, what procedures are in place and whether they are followed. In many cases, of course, we do bring specific (and valuable) skills to the table (for example, I have been involved in substantial change programmes in business) – the trick is to use that experience to help the staff deal with it directly. |
| How valuable did you find parent governors and what sort of things did they do to contribute to your success? | Dominic comments:  We were able to recruit a parent governor after about a year. He was valuable as a source of intel on feelings/attitude/knowledge among the parent body. He took on the health and safety portfolio and did that well. He was also very good at galvanising the parent community (for example, he helped rejuvenate the summer fair). |
| Did all your staff “survive” the changes and stay healthy? | Dominic comments:  This is a big challenge. We were expecting people to change radically and not everyone wants to. We kept up the communication constantly and consistently. The weekly staff meeting was crucial, and I attended occasionally as chair. The board also regularly asked about staff morale/welfare (during almost every meeting). We certainly paid attention to staff welfare but we can’t pretend that everyone will stay healthy in a situation like that. We had to deal with situations on a case-by-case basis. |
| Do IGoVs members get paid for their support? | Pat Barber, of IGoVs comments:  No, we are volunteers offering our services for free. If the school wishes to pursue further training after the initial connection or a review of governance, the IGovS colleague will negotiate the charges. |