

GATHERround

EDUCATION NEWS FROM THE GOVERNORS' ASSOCIATION
THROUGHOUT HULL AND EAST RIDING

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Welcome!

As another academic year draws to a close, we look back at some of the events that we have seen in our role as school governors. In September, the term started with a new Secretary of State for Education, Justine Greening. More on this later.

Throughout the year we've had DfE talking about a fairer funding formula. This has resulted in dire forecasts in the media of us all being worse off but nothing's actually happened, leaving many of us wondering how we're going to balance the books with what we've already got.

We had both Ofsted and DfE telling us how important governance is and publishing reports and guides on what we should be doing while multi-academy trust E-ACT abolished local governing boards.

We've seen academisation continue to grow nationally. There's a stark contrast in our own locality with nearly all Hull schools now academies while the East Riding remains at about 12% of its schools converting.

And then... Who'd have thought it? On 9th June, we got a minority Conservative Government. See what we think might happen for education as we look in into the GATHER crystal ball in Section 1.

Read on for our latest take on what's happening in the fascinating world of education and remember, we welcome your reports on the good things you're doing in your schools/academies or on anything else to do with governance.

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1. What now?

Following the rather surprising result of the general election, we now have a minority Conservative government propped up by an agreement with the DUP to push through legislation during the next parliament as set out in the Queen's Speech on 21st June. What was in it that may concern us as school governors? Very little. There was no mention of any of the proposals put forward in the Green Paper *Schools that Work for Everyone* of September 2016. These included the opening of new grammar schools, allowing faith schools to select all pupils on the basis of their faith and forcing independent schools to do more to help underprivileged children. Also missing was the election manifesto pledge to replace KS1 free lunches with breakfasts. Worryingly, there was also no mention of the new funding formula for schools. The only education policy that got any mention at all was the plan to expand technical education which we reported on in the last edition of GATHERround.

So what will it mean for us? Unless the opposition bring pressure to bear on the government, we are likely to see continuing uncertainty about how our schools are funded and how much we will receive. As for academisation, this is likely to continue because it has not been a universally unpopular policy and many LA areas, including Hull, are now fully academised. It's likely that the forced academisation of schools judged to be inadequate will continue but less clear is what will happen to successful and high-performing LA maintained schools. It has been said that LAs could become MATs themselves if they have any remaining schools but that, at the moment, is pure speculation. DfE tinkering with the curriculum, examinations and assessment will inevitably and, regrettably, continue unabated.

Justine Greening was returned to parliament albeit with a reduced majority and remains as Secretary of State for Education - at least for now. Since she took up the role in January, she has not made a lot of noise about anything, unlike her two predecessors, Morgan and Gove. It will be interesting to see whether she supports government policy now because she was clearly very lukewarm about the expansion of grammar schools before the election. We can only hope that she comes up with a fair funding policy, even though it wasn't in the manifesto, which will more equitably distribute whatever the Chancellor puts into the pot for education. However, redistributing a cake which is already too small is no recipe for improvement.

One of the reasons for the unexpected election result may have been to do with the public becoming increasingly fed up with cuts to the education, health and police services so perhaps the new government will finally realise that continuing down the austerity route is not necessarily the way forward. Meanwhile Michael Gove returns to the Cabinet as Environment Secretary. Will he try to influence education? He certainly made his presence felt as Education Secretary and he's not averse to bullying his way to getting what he wants. Ask Boris! There could be fireworks very soon!

Social media is reporting that a high turnout of young voters also had a big impact on the election result. That is good news and it seems that social media itself encouraged more of them to engage with politics. This unexpected influence of social media on election outcomes has turned out to be a phenomenon no political party can ignore in the future. Are we doing enough in our schools to develop an interest in politics? Did yours do anything to raise pupils' awareness of democracy and the importance of voting?

We will have to wait and see what's in store for us but hopefully, with the focus mainly being on Brexit, schools may be left to get on with the job in hand (educating children and young people) and we governors allowed to support them without having to respond to constant government meddling.

2. Dealing with Bereavement

We have seen a series of terrible events in London and Manchester recently. In each of these there has been a sudden and tragic loss of life which will have had an impact on many schools whether it be through the death of a child or children on the school roll or a member of a child's family. Death and bereavement are not things that we like to think about and you may not have considered them as a governing board but it's important that governors and heads have a policy that addresses the issue should it arise. Such a policy should include responses to children following a terrorist atrocity that are standardised and agreed by all at the school to avoid widely-varying opinions or beliefs possibly being shared. With social media and news coverage as it is today, children and young people will be only too aware of what's being said about such tragedies and may have concerns about them. Including something about the maintenance of school routines is also important; they promote a sense of normality, calm and purpose in the wake of tragedy.

We sincerely hope that such a policy is rarely, if ever, enacted but it's better to be prepared. Let's hope that the threat of terrorist attacks is successfully dealt with by this new government and that we don't see such terrible things happening again but sadly, bereavement will always be a reality that can affect any school at any time.

3. Phoning home

In her April newsletter to parents, Louise McGowan, headteacher of Walderslade Girls' School in Chatham, criticised those parents who side with their children following episodes of bad behaviour. She said:

'I have noticed increasing numbers of parents have not been supporting the school's decisions to implement sanctions and punishments for their children's poor behaviour. We have had several incidents where parents have actively fought on behalf of the children against the school, even when it has been found through investigation evidence that their child was in breach of the behaviour policy. This makes the job of staff extremely difficult and only serves to empower children's poor attitudes and behaviour rather than to correct them.'



The criticism was made following pupils phoning or texting their parents, saying that they had been unfairly punished for something they didn't do, resulting in the parent immediately coming into school to demand that their child is exonerated. Needless to say, this attracted national media attention and the Chair of Governors, Nigel Scott, was called upon to make a statement. He did:

'It's fair to say that the head is requesting that the parents back the school when there is a disciplinary matter at hand. It used to be that if you were in trouble at school then you were in trouble at home, but that does not now seem to be the case.'

Not the strongest endorsement for his headteacher's application of a behaviour policy that he and the governors will have sanctioned. However, pupils' use of mobile phones to summon parents into school does seem to be a growing problem and in our experience such parents are not always happy to accept the headteacher's stance on the punishment applied to their child and will want to take it further by involving governors.

Have any governors had to deal with incidents arising out of children phoning home? Is this a purely secondary school phenomenon or are primaries affected too? If anyone has dealt with this issue, it would be great to hear from you because we suspect that this is a problem that is not going to go away.

4. Ofsted - Is It a Force for Good?

Perhaps a controversial question! Joe Buchan, retired headteacher and current primary school governor, shares his personal views on the changing inspection regime over the years.

Anyone's answer to this question will, to some extent, come from personal experience. Mine was as a teaching head and now a school governor. From the beginning I believed Ofsted inspections had a lot to offer education. The first time they came to our school in 1997 I was, naturally, a little apprehensive. Although a village school, we had two inspectors for four days. They were experienced educationalists and quickly established trust. They understood our ethos and how we worked for the children and their relationship with staff was honest and professional. Yes, it was exhausting but it was worthwhile. The final report was comprehensive and helpful in many ways. In those days there was even additional funding available after an action plan had been accepted. Yes, that's true!

Unfortunately, my positive experience has not been universal. In the following years, there were examples of inspectors pursuing their own personal agendas; not a good basis for professional dialogue with staff. A climate of fear was established with probably the majority of schools just wanting to get inspections over with. I understand why when there was so much at stake. In some cases careers were ruined. Instead of taking the time to really establish improvements, many actions were taken to impress inspectors which only had short term effects.

For a time reports were governed too much by test data. As a Section 23 Church school inspector I reported on a wonderful little primary school in North Yorkshire. It was very inclusive and took in a large percentage of its roll from Special Needs children outside the catchment area. This understandably affected the SATs results but sadly this factor was not taken into account by Ofsted and their report annoyed me. Instead of making commendations, it made for dismal reading. These experiences just go to show how in one school Ofsted was a force for good and in another just depressing.

Sir Michael Wilshaw, in my opinion, did not help matters. He seemed too ready to criticise and rarely, if ever, gave any encouragement. Ofsted publications potentially disseminated much of real educational value. If what Ofsted had actually said had been given more emphasis, then the organisation might have been seen as being more helpful.

Now I feel things might be changing. How often does the relatively new Ofsted Chief Inspector Amanda Spielman* appear in the press? I suspect she is more interested in

ensuring Ofsted is genuinely promoting school improvement. Crucially I believe there is now much more emphasis on progress. If children's needs are being met and they are making progress, then that fulfils Ofsted requirements. Schools can again teach in a way that works in their situation. The absurdities of the statutory Literacy Hour are now a distant memory. Remember how the time had to be split 15 mins, 15 mins, 20 mins, 10 mins. I spoke to one teacher who had a lesson downgraded because he had taken 18 minutes for one section. Some firms even sold clocks with faces marked in these segments.

Recently in the school where I am a governor we had an Ofsted inspection. I was genuinely impressed by how the HMI in such a short amount of time built such an accurate description of our school. She really captured what the school's philosophy is, how the curriculum was being implemented and the work staff were doing towards improvement. Throughout the inspection she was thoroughly professional and engaged courteously with everyone. It was very demanding for staff and the governing body interview was taxing. However, we all knew the HMI was focused on being able to make an accurate report. Interestingly in my conversations with children after the report a common theme was that they had enjoyed talking to the inspector.

The report validated what we believed about our school. I acknowledge if it hadn't, my feelings might have been different. However, I am confident that with her experience and ability then all schools she inspects will have an accurate report. Surely, if schools are doing what they should, there is every reason to welcome a professional to give external scrutiny, providing it is a good quality framework for inspection. My answer to the question is that Ofsted should, and can be, a force for good. It depends, like most things, on people having the right attitude and sharing an agreed direction for education.

* With impeccable timing, Amanda Spielman set out her philosophy on education in an address on 22nd June to the Festival of Education. You can read what she said [here](#)

5. Ask GATHER

'The staff governors on our board are required to leave before the final confidential part of every full governing board meeting that deals with issues such as pupil discipline, safeguarding and exclusions. It seems to me that this results in staff governors being denied information given to their governor colleagues that may be important in making policy decisions later on. Is this a ruling by our headteacher or is there legislation to say that all staff governors must leave before confidential issues are discussed?'

The short answer to this question is no, staff governors cannot be required to leave the meeting automatically every time confidential agenda items are considered. There is, however, one situation where a staff governor can be asked to withdraw and that is when the performance or pay of another named staff member is being discussed. Staff governors are not required to withdraw if it's the pay or performance POLICY that is being discussed.

There are two further situations where any governor (not just staff) is required to leave a meeting and these are:

(1) When there is a conflict between the interests of a governor and the interests of the governing board. An example of this might be when the governor is an employee or the

owner of a company that has tendered to carry out work at the school and the governing board is considering who to award the contract to.

(2) When a governor (or governors) have expressed an interest in the post of Chair, they can be asked to withdraw while the board discuss whether or who to appoint to the role. Staff governors cannot be considered for the role of Chair.

Regulation 16 and Schedule 1 of the School Governance (Roles, Procedures and Allowances) (England) Regulations 2013 covers this and does not state that all confidential matters must be kept from staff governors. The way your school is applying the legislation in this blanket way is not justified in law. Finally, all governing board procedures are decided by the board and not by the headteacher and must fulfil all legal requirements as set out in the DfE Governance Handbook 2017.

6. NGA survey of governance

The National Governance Association (NGA), in partnership with the *Times Educational Supplement (TES)*, is again conducting a survey of serving school governors. The survey is open to all governors, trustees, and academy committee members, including headteachers. You do not have to be an NGA member to take part - please share it with others on your governing board and your wider networks.

The survey aims to build a picture of who is governing our schools, of governance practice and to understand the impact of government policies on schools. This includes key issues, such as the current crisis in school funding. The findings of the survey will be vital as the NGA continues to campaign for the overall size of school budgets to be increased, so don't miss the chance to have your say. It takes 20 minutes or so to complete and the more responses received, the stronger the voice of governing boards in shaping national education policy. [Take the survey here](#) until Monday 17 July.

7. The things they say



Khaled Hosseini (left) is an Afghan-born American novelist. He has published three novels, most notably his 2003 debut *The Kite Runner*. His quote here has been brilliantly illustrated during events of the past few weeks and social media platforms are awash with people making statements they believe to be true, countered by others who say the

opposite. So it is with education. Here are just a few:

"I want the power to be in the hands of the headteacher and the teachers rather than the bureaucrats."

David Cameron's reason for pursuing total academisation. 15th August 2015

"A third academy chain in as many months has told staff across its schools they face losing their jobs - as the budget squeeze seemingly spreads to multi-academy trusts."

Schoolsweek reporting on bureaucrats telling academies' Heads what to do. 12th May 2017.

“As we move towards a system where every school is an academy, fully skills-based governance will become the normal [sic] across the education system,”

Nicky Morgan’s White Paper ‘Educational Excellence Everywhere’ setting out plans for scrapping the requirement for parents on governing boards. 17th March 2016

“I think parent governors play a vital role. I was a governor, I’m not any more, but I was a governor for 15 years, maybe more, and parents played a vital role on the governing body I was a part of.”

Justine Greening overturning her predecessor’s decision to do away with the requirement for parent governors. 14th September 2016

“Good for her, rules are made for a reason. As for parents backing their children, it’s just bad parenting from stupid people.”

Parent Nicky Veitch commenting on Walderslade School’s policy. 12th May 2017

“In my eyes they are failing my daughter, but the head teacher has the cheek to come on here and blame us parents for her school having problems.”

Parent Gemma Hastings commenting on Walderslade School’s policy. 12th May 2017

Anyone got any to add?

8. Website and Forum

Apologies to members who have visited our website recently. Since the departure of our web guru, it has been neglected and has fallen into disrepair. We have a working party looking at it and we aim to launch a brand new site complete with a Forum at our AGM in October.

9. And finally...

Our congratulations go to Ruth Truelove, volunteer with the National Literacy Trust and reading assistant and governor at Stepney Primary School Hull, who has been awarded a British Empire Medal for Services to Education in the Queen’s birthday honours list. Sadly, Ruth’s school is not a GATHER member so she may not see this but we feel she deserves our recognition of her achievement. Well done Ruth!