

Governing schools in devolved systems

*'If we know that good governance contributes to excellence, we must ensure that schools in disadvantaged areas have excellent governing bodies if we are to achieve our aim of a school system characterised by high equity where high standards are not reserved for those from advantaged backgrounds.'*¹

*'It may be possible to have a successful or effective school with an ineffective governing body but how much more successful might that school be with an effective governing body, working in close partnership with the school and the community?'*²

School councils and boards have been around in various forms for decades. In some jurisdictions they have gone from being primarily a means for fund-raising and engaging parents in school affairs to being the means for setting the strategic directions of the school and holding the school accountable for its performance. Well in theory that's the case.

In reality, even in those jurisdictions like Victoria where there has been substantial devolution of responsibility to schools and school councils since the 1990s there has been no significant change in the philosophy behind and the structure and membership requirements for school councils. At inception school governance arrangements were based on a participative democracy model and to a large extent they still are.

Under a participative democracy model, members of councils tend to assume their main function is to support the principal and represent the views of the community. However, with the renewed push in NSW, WA and Victoria for even greater decision-making at the school level, it is time to examine the adequacy of current local school governance models.

The expectation underpinning the push for greater local autonomy is that schools will perform better when they are given greater control over their staffing, curriculum and budgets. Whilst on the surface this seems a reasonable proposition, it also assumes that all schools have a similar capacity to exercise their autonomy in ways that improve student learning outcomes. Clearly this is not the case. Leadership capacity is a key variable in determining the success of a school and our own common sense and years of research tells us that the quality of school leadership varies significantly from school to school. Equally the capacity of a school's governing body varies significantly from school to school.

A 2002 study of English school governance³ revealed that whilst only 8% of primary and 10% of secondary schools had unsatisfactory governance, this proportion increases in relation to school socioeconomic disadvantage. In lower socioeconomic schools 17% of primary school councils and 24% of secondary school

¹ Department for Education and Skills (2005) *Governing the School of the Future*

² Earley, P. and Creese, M. (2003). *Governors and school improvement*, National School Improvement Network Research Matter # 20. London, Institute of Education, University of London.

³ Ofsted. (2002). *The work of school governors*. HMI 707.
www.ofsted.gov.uk

councils were evaluated as being unsatisfactory. A similar pattern is likely to be evident in schools in lower-socio economic locations in Australia.

In order for councils to become more strategic in focus the rationale for having school councils needs to be clarified. To be effective a school council would need to be ethical, representative, consultative, transparent, accountable, improvement-oriented, and strategic. The participative democracy model of governance is best illustrated by the left-hand column rank ordering of these characteristics in the table below. In contrast, the rank ordering in the right hand cell best illustrates the characteristics for achieving strategic accountability.

Table 1: Primary purpose derived from prioritising school council characteristics

Participative democracy	Strategic accountability
1. Ethical	1. Ethical
2. Representative	2. Strategic
3. Consultative	3. Improvement-oriented
4. Transparent	4. Accountable
5. Strategic	5. Consultative
6. Accountable	6. Transparent
7. Improvement oriented	7. Representative

The characteristic of being ethical is a pre-requisite for becoming a member of a council as well as a fundamental expectation of the way the council functions. It is the ranking of the next three characteristics that are most telling. Councils are expected to develop the school's strategic plan (including goals and targets) but system processes and in too many instances councillors' limited knowledge of school performance and what is needed to sustain improvement generally precludes them from being able to develop an informed strategic plan.

The usual practice within school councils is that they will endorse a strategic plan developed by the school and twelve months later receive a report on how the school performed in relation to the plan. It is rare for a school council to regularly monitor the implementation of strategic plans and seek an explanation from the principal and staff when milestones and/or expected targets are not being met. However, a school board that was actively involved in scrutinising and evaluating the school's policies and practices would be a defence against the school resting on its laurels or worse still, declining in its effectiveness.

As the move to greater local autonomy is accompanied by the expectation that school councils will be more strategic and more improvement oriented, one would expect the rank order of characteristics in the right hand cell to be a better representation of the characteristics needed for a council to be effective in exercising its governance responsibilities.

Under the 'strategic accountability' model, strategic activity, improvement and accountability characteristics are reflected in council members' understanding of the role of council and their capacity to contribute to the council fulfilling its role. And whilst the council would not ignore the consultative, transparent and representative characteristics, a drive for meeting these characteristics should not

compromise the drive for attaining the main characteristics of the 'strategic accountability' model.

Applying a strategic accountability model to schools would change the power structure in the school. The governance group would exert more pressure on the Principal and Leadership Team in relation to the development of the school's strategic directions and the school's performance against Strategic and Implementation Plans. The model also has implications for council membership. It would 'professionalise' the council by changing the criteria for and composition of council membership. Expertise would outweigh representativeness. To balance this change that in some communities could result in mainly 'outsiders' governing the school, some concessions for local representation would need to be introduced, and forums and working parties would need to become a common feature of the council's operations to ensure local input was canvassed.

Whilst such a change is likely to be controversial, it also will be necessary as evidence from Victoria reveals that many councils simply are not capable of effectively discharging their governance responsibilities and the option of charging down the road to further school autonomy without reforming school councils will further compound this problem.