

The impact of Covid-19 on the primary school community

Series editor: *Dr Gill Johnson*

This is the fourth in a series of articles exploring the impact of COVID-19 within the primary school community from different perspectives. As a national organisation, advocating for and working in partnership with primary schools to fund research, it was considered important that we should explore and reflect upon the pandemic and consider the impact on primary education. As the virus continues to disrupt normal life, the reverberations will be felt in primary schools for a long time to come.

COVID-19 - Challenges faced by primary school governors and the impact of this on children's learning.

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This article reports on the challenges and opportunities primary school governors face in managing the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspectives of primary school governors across different schools in England. The challenge of this pandemic is legion, offering opportunities for political, situational and transformative leadership by governors to hold leadership to account (Sood et al., 2018). The pandemic has led to what can be seen in business terms as a 'wicked problem' (Rittel and Webber, 1973) globally. So,



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locally, in the educational world, many governors have reacted to this challenge robustly and used creative opportunity in partnership with staff, parents and the community to support schools in providing high quality education.

Link to theory

This ‘wicked problem’ (the pandemic), has never been seen before and requires ‘collective action’ (van Bueren et al., 2003: 193) by parents, staff and governors. This poses a challenge for governors, as access to learning by children is varied, with the impact of school closure felt most keenly by the most deprived children (Lucas, et al., 2020). Therefore, governors must enable the staff to narrow the gap between deprived and non-deprived children (Ofsted, 2019) and an opportunity to work collaboratively, and holistically, by understanding each other’s values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviours. It emerges that the traditional model of governance has changed (the perception of just attending meetings to rubber stamp policies or practice). As today, within the pandemic, some governors are required to communicate almost on a weekly basis with their schools to help them adhere to government health and safety requirements which are changing on a weekly if not daily basis.

Research

The research approach adopted was qualitative. Interviews were carried out either online or by phone for primary school governors from a range of different schools across England. The sample group consisted of twelve primary school

governors representing schools from a variety of different geographical areas (North England, Midlands and Greater London). All respondents were informed of ethics and their right to withdraw (BERA, 2018). Responses from the governors have been embedded in the following discussion.

How has the role of governors changed as a result of the pandemic?

The role of governors has altered for some governors depending on their individual responsibility. A curriculum Governor (1) told us that ‘her role had not changed much’... but claimed that... more input was required from them on school matters’, which mirrored the National Governance Association’s (NGA) (2020) findings. Few others alleged they had to:

‘hold last-minute meetings to keep abreast of latest advice and changes from the government on COVID-19’ (Governor 2);

‘undertake policy amendments to ensure safety for children and staff’ (Governor 3);

‘consider how to improve attendance where some parents are still choosing not to send their children to school’ (Governor 4).

Although governors are not asked to implement strategies to improve attendance, most said they were kept informed as to what the current attendance rate was (87% in one school - according to Governor 5) which is considerably lower than pre-lockdown. Governor 6 maintained that:

‘as Chair of Governors I was more in contact with the head teacher than before in relation to attendance, so it was good to work as a closer team’.

Whilst Governor 7 reported that:

‘their governing body had decided not to impose fines for persistent absences as the situation is so dynamic’.

And Governor 8 avowed,

‘the school has designated a senior leadership team member to be in-charge of overseeing the attendance issue’.

What the literature suggests is that effective governing requires consensus, consultation and involvement. So, different stakeholders (staff, headteacher, governors) need a systemic approach to lead and manage change resulting from the pandemic crisis.

Partial school closure

The partial or full closure of primary schools in England due to the COVID-19 pandemic has caused ‘unprecedented challenges for all’ (Governor 11), including ‘children and their parents’ (Callinane and Montacute, 2020, 2). All governors testified to the cancellation of meetings during this crisis. However, many reported they were kept informed of the changing school routines like managing funds and early closure to enable deep cleaning. For example, seeking joint decision making in

‘the development of the teaching and learning contingency plan... and how the additional money is to be used,



‘were anxious about school closure in the future as staff were worried about the pressure of online learning to enable progress’.

the so-called Catch-up funding.’
(Governor 9).

But Governor 10 implied that their school’s response was not as robust as it could have been, especially in terms of meeting the different needs of children to ensure progress for those working above or below expectations.

Since the opening of schools, all governors told us that they continued to offer guidance specifically for those who had contracted the virus whilst also trying to source additional funding for extra staff required for cover. Governor 11 emphasised that staff,

‘were anxious about school closure in the future as staff were worried about the pressure of online learning to enable progress’.

Whereas Governor 12 professed that:

‘their school development plan had to be rewritten because... everything feeds into that, finances and everything else.’

How did governors support school staff?

Higher collaboration was evident from responses from the sample group. There was ‘a listening and sharing forum’ (Governor 10), using MS Teams once a half term, and ‘replacing face to face termly meetings’ (Governors 6 and 8). Many staff have huge talent in using technology and yet some are still reticent, as are governors. Governors 5 and 6, stated that they have worked with subject leads to

help them get licenses for online resources that they feel would benefit the staff in their teaching. A common thread emerging for the interviews is that of high work-load pressures on staff. For example, Governor 12 explained that staff produced,

‘literature online for all children... and staff spending time to prepare resources as home packs for those who didn’t have access to the Internet.’

Governors were sympathetic and offered help and support. What we are witnessing in managing the COVID-19 pandemic is resourceful leadership, which Coleman (2011) characterised as being open to continuous learning and being able to frame and solve ‘wicked’ issues.

What are governors doing to help staff support children’s learning at home?

To support home learning and in preparation for potentially another national lockdown where schools are closed, staff in one school are looking at investing in devices such as iPads and dongles for internet access especially for disadvantaged children. A good example was reported by Governor 1, who saw enhanced personalised learning experience for children by staff using zoom or phone calls to ensure that the children and their families are coping. This requires heavy investment in time and budget for staff to be given the skills, tools, and capacity to augment the pastoral care system. Indeed, Governor 7 declared some concerns about parents from minority community being

‘left in the dark as school information was sent in English when our parent population is very diverse as over 70% speak other languages’.

Challenges faced by governors

Several challenges are being echoed by governors, many of them are worried about staying on top of a dynamic situation especially with local lockdowns and the pressure on schools to stay open safely. Governor 4 recognised schools had done a lot but felt ‘awkward in asking teachers questions in meetings’ as she felt she was adding to the burden of stressed teachers. Although online meetings have nearly full attendance, some governors (3, 9) have missed coming to the school for meetings to discuss issues face to face. Crucially, all respondents felt at times they did not know what to do to help as this is a new situation to all. Another common challenge was that the speed of change required was something that they were not used to because in some cases decisions (such as which year groups come into school and when) were required to be made overnight especially in relation to the current lockdown.

Overcoming challenges

The key challenges fell into these generic claims:

‘Not to have limited reliance on one member of staff- headteacher’ (Governor 10), implying that some governors were only allowed to speak to specific staff only, hence the team as a whole was missed. *‘Prioritisation, adaption, and*



responsiveness... access to good quality education' (Governor 11); implying that governors were asked to help source laptops for disadvantaged children in order to help them access learning for core subjects at home.

'Ensuring school's financial obligations are met whilst ensuring money or resources are used effectively' (Governor 12) implying that governors still had to make sure that finances were well-used, including extra unplanned costs, such as sourcing hand sanitisers.

Sharing the concerns of staff in terms of self-isolating children who then fall behind and further supporting staff with additional resources needed for booster sessions. Governor 5 suggested 'pairing up with staff to help communication' in relation to classroom issues as well as school issues.

Summary

In summary, the pandemic is a 'wicked' problem requiring management by all. According to our research, school staff feel supported by their governors and appreciate their commitment in helping them to do their jobs as well as possible under the 'new normal'. Vulnerable and disadvantaged children continue to be supported by staff during local lockdown by providing resources for them to access learning. This includes including offering guidance to parents on how to supervise learning at home. The safeguarding of vulnerable children and those at risk of harm is a key priority in any pandemic strategy. Finally, all respondents indicated that all are working within a dynamic situation whereby there are no right answers therefore, working together with open communication is more paramount now than ever before.

Pen Portrait

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