



## **School Governance: Make-Do-and-Mend?**

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The municipal dumps and recycling centres are full of functioning but unfashionable devices and rejected technology – redundant hardware that no longer meets current spec or simply isn't functioning properly. When I was a child in the 60s and 70s fabric was re-used, furniture was re-purposed and, when something broke, you could often repair it yourself or, failing that, take it to somebody in a workshop who had the necessary know-how.

Anyone who has ever watched *The Repair Shop* on BBC will know that the first steps in a successful restoration are to take the adored artefact apart and examine the components in order to work out where the problems lie. Once the faulty elements have been identified a judgement call needs to be made; can they be mended or do they need to be replaced altogether?

The NI education system is in urgent need of repair. Boarded-up schools, educational inequality and spiralling costs have forced many to conclude that, in spite of the very best efforts of dedicated teachers, school governors and administrators, the model of education that operates in Northern Ireland cannot meet the demands of the 21st century. The 'New Decade, New Approach' agreement that brought our politicians back to Stormont, after their own extended pre-Covid furlough, states that the way in which our educational system is run at present is "not sustainable". It promises a "fundamental review" as a basis for change.

It is unrealistic to expect that this review will lead to the building of a radically new system of education but, just as with the beloved Edwardian cuckoo clocks and valve wirelesses that are brought through the Repair Shop door, major reconstruction is waste of labour, time, and money if the components that are relied upon at the heart of the device are unable to meet the demands of the mechanism that surrounds them.

The Transforming Education project was initiated by the UNESCO Centre in the school of Education at Ulster University to cast light into the corners of our school system that will need attention if it is to function optimally. The project uses the principles of evidence-based, academic research to deepen awareness around the issues facing the system and to promote debate among stakeholders in education. It has to date produced a series of easily digested papers and infographics looking at discrimination in teacher appointments, the role of faith in schools, isolated pairs of schools and the additional qualification required by those applying to teach in Maintained primaries. The most recent Transforming Education paper explores the governance of schools.

The way in which schools are governed here reflects the complicated and divided history of education service. The introduction of non-denominational, state-run, National schools in the 1830's precipitated outrage from all of the churches in Ireland. An intense lobbying campaign eventually secured clerical representation on the National Education Board and the right for churches to set up and manage their own schools. When Ireland divided a century ago, the new government in Northern Ireland sought once again to establish a common system of education, free from church control. Once again, the proposal of an ostensibly secular education system provoked religious ire. Eventually, the Presbyterian, Church of Ireland and Methodist churches agreed to transfer their schools to the new State controlled system in return for influence in the management of education and guaranteed places on schools' governing bodies. The Catholic church, on the other hand, opted to keep their schools out of the control of a state that they saw as being institutionally biased against their parishioners.

The seeds were thus set for the growth of a fractured and divided system where church interests were embedded in the governance of schools. Today, school governors are selected to represent the interests of the staff (teacher governors), the parents (parent governors), managing authorities (EA and DE) and those who originally founded the school (Representatives of the Transferor Churches, Catholic Trustees, the founders of voluntary grammar schools). The precise composition of the Board of Governors of each school is determined by formulae which vary according to the size of the school and the sector within which it is managed. A school can have as few as eight Governors on their Board or as many as thirty. The result is a pattern of almost bewildering complexity.

Governors in Northern Ireland schools are all volunteers tasked with the challenges of serving a school in much the same way that a Management Board serves a business; both types of board are responsible for challenging and holding the principal officer to account, making strategic decisions and ensuring oversight of financial matters. A school's Board of Governors has additional responsibilities in respect of the appointing of staff members and ensuring that the school continues to pursue the values and vision of its founders, particularly in respect of adherence to the teaching of religion.

The legislation that dictates the composition of a board can lead to it being comprised of governors from only one faith. In recent years, however, Northern Ireland has become increasingly multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-faith. Around 5% of pupils come from families whose origins lie beyond NI and the 2011 census recorded that 23% of the population are not aligned to any of the four faiths that have a protected presence on school Boards.

The potential effectiveness and efficiency of this model of governance may be affected by a series of issues inherent in the way in which it has been constructed. The law decrees that a specified proportion of governors must represent a church but there is no similar legal requirement in respect of the skill set required. It would appear that, in the process of selecting governors, faith is a more important consideration than ability.

The Education Authority is charged with providing training for governors in all types of school. There is however no requirement that they take up the training offered and no reward for those that do. Governors can therefore find themselves trying to understand a system beset with institutional complexity whilst at the same time seeking to fulfil a role that is considerably more demanding than they may have realised when they applied in a spirit of

altruism and community spirit. Unsurprisingly DE and EA have reported difficulty in recruiting voluntary members for school boards.

The role of governor in preserving the ethos of a school has recently been drawn to public attention. There was widespread media coverage when the socially conservative concerns of a clerical representative on the Board of a Controlled school effectively resulted in the vetoing of a proposed programme of relationships education.

Co-operation between schools in shared education programmes has become increasingly the norm but these relationships rarely stretch outside the classroom and into the boardroom. Several rural schools that have been identified as being unsustainable and targeted for closure have sought to create a single school solution across sectoral lines only to find their hopes thwarted by the complexity of finding consensus between two Boards with opposing vested interests!

The models of governance used here are, however, not the only possible way to run a school. Different regions and different nations have adopted different approaches. Alternative models have also been proposed for Northern Ireland although not all of these have been tested in the real world. One such model is that of a school-community partnership where health, community and other agencies and concerns are represented in the management of schools and the school serves as more than simply a place of education from 9:00 to 3:30. This model would, potentially, be in line with DE's extended schools programme where schools develop additional activities that support learning, raise school standards and promote healthy lifestyles. Under this system schools would provide education in a broader sense and, at the same time, serve as community hubs.

Federal models have also been proposed that would allow for shared responsibility and accountability, either through a single governing body, shared by a number of schools linked together in a common federation, or where each school within the federation has its own governing body overseen by a joint governance committee.

The boards of management of Educate Together schools in the Republic of Ireland include the school principal and one member of the teaching staff elected by the teaching staff, two members selected from the parent body, two members nominated by the founding 'patron', and two members of the wider community who are chosen by the other members of the Board. There are no places reserved for church representatives.

Parental involvement in the management of schools in Scotland is particularly strong. The 2006 Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act replaced school boards with Parent Councils. Significantly, the act also allows for a single Parent Council to manage more than one school.

In almost total contrast to the system here, schools in Finland are not required to have any governing body. Municipal bodies are responsible for funding schools. They appoint head teachers and arrange schooling to meet local circumstances. Central government provides legislation, top-up funding and guidance on what should be taught, and how.

The importance of schools to the structure and operation of society has been brought into sharp relief by the current pandemic. When the health crisis recedes, the financial costs associated with Covid are likely to accelerate the need for savings in the public purse. There

will be school closures and the best defence a school can have is a strong and pro-active Board of Governors that is strategically aligned with its neighbours. In the meantime, the need to reform the way in which schools are governed has never been clearer to ensure that all our children have access to the best possible education.

Links:

[https://www.ulster.ac.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0006/640563/TEUU-Report-05-Governance-of-Schools.pdf](https://www.ulster.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/640563/TEUU-Report-05-Governance-of-Schools.pdf)

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