

Question and Challenge

A Step by Step Guide for Governing Bodies

Introduction

Governing bodies are told to 'question and challenge'. This is NGA's step by step guide to how governing bodies should question and challenge. It is important that governing bodies and leadership teams work together professionally, and in a climate of respect and trust and with the intention of there being 'no surprises'.

Step 1: Think about the governing body's style of questioning

Consider:

- How questions are framed, and the manner in which they are asked.
- Asking 'open' questions, with follow ups and enquiry.
- Creating a culture where the 'intelligently' naïve question is encouraged.
- Ensuring that all governors get the opportunity to contribute to discussion.

Step 2: Be clear about the purpose of questioning

The governing body is the accountable body for the school and so must hold the head to account for the educational performance of the school and for ensuring that financial resources are well spent. Governors need to question the school to satisfy themselves that the strategy is effective, that the school's ethos is being expressed through policies, that statutory requirements are being complied with, and that resources are being well used.

Consider:

- Questioning the strategy (*See Being Strategic A Step by Step Guide*)
 - Is our vision clear and our strategy agreed with key priorities against which we can measure progress?
 - Have we agreed with the head the data we need to evidence progress?
- Questioning policy
 - Are we sure we are dealing with policy guidelines and not procedure?
 - Are our policies adapted to embrace our ethos and culture?
- Questioning that statutory requirements are being complied with
 - Do we receive regular reports on issues on compliance such as safeguarding, health and safety, finance, HR?
 - Would pro forma reports be helpful so that we get used to seeing information in a certain format?
- Do we receive the information we need in time to read it prior to meetings?
- Are we clear about how questions and discussion will be minuted?

Step 2: Questions governors might ask

See: *Knowing Your School Questions for Governing Bodies to Ask*

In relation to questioning the strategy, the governing body's focus should be on progress towards achieving the key priorities.

In relation to the performance of pupils, the governing body might ask:

- Which year groups, subjects and groups of pupils are on target for attainment and progress and can we identify any patterns of over or under achievement?

- How are you addressing the areas of weakest performance? How does this work with specific groups such as the most and least able, those with special educational needs, those receiving free school meals, boys and girls, those of a particular ethnicity, and any who are currently underachieving?
- Do we have the right curriculum and how – and when - will we know this?

In relation to the quality of teaching, the governing body might ask:

- Are classroom observation judgements triangulated with pupil progress data?
- Are all staff on target to meet their performance objectives?
- Have we got the right staff and the right development and reward arrangements?

In relation to the wellbeing of pupils, the governing body might ask:

- Is this a happy school with a positive learning culture? How do we know?
- What is our track record on attendance, behaviour and bullying? How good is the wider offer to pupils – are we offering a good range of sports, arts and voluntary activities?
- Is school food healthy and popular?

In relation to policy governors might ask:

- Is the policy fit for purpose or does it confuse policy and procedure?
- Does our policy work? For example does an open door policy mean parents are given easy access and are listened to?
- Could we have an umbrella policy for example for all HR policies and procedures?
- Are all staff policies and procedures up to date, including performance related pay and planning for appeals?

In relation to matters of statutory compliance governors should expect regular reports and might ask:

- Are safeguarding procedures securely in place? How do we know?
- Are we compliant with all matters to do with health and safety including educational visits and fire practices?
- What is the school's approach to implementation of pay reform and performance related pay, and if appropriate, is it compliant with the most up to date version of the School Teachers' Pay and Conditions Document?
- Are financial procedures sound and regularly audited and is the budget on track?
- How do we benchmark spending (including salaries) and how do we know we are getting value for money particularly with interventions being funded by Pupil Premium?

Step 4: Having a courageous conversation

The answers to questions may indicate that the school is not improving and a courageous conversation is required.

Consider:

- Are the governing body's expectations clear, reasonable and agreed?
- Is there a culture of excuses or defensiveness and what is the reason for this? Has the governing body ensured the right training and support is in place?
- If a conversation is needed, who will have it and how will they prepare for it?
- What is the role of the local authority or academy trust in supporting the governing body?