

Speech

Nicky Morgan speaks about the importance of school governance

From: Department for Education (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-education>) and The Rt Hon **Nicky Morgan MP** (<https://www.gov.uk/government/people/nicky-morgan>)
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The Education Secretary addresses the National Governors' Association (NGA) Summer Conference.



Thanks, Ian [Courtney, NGA chair of trustees], it's a great pleasure to be here - especially so soon after returning as Education Secretary.

And I'm particularly delighted to be back in this role, because over the next 5 years what you will see is education at the heart of this government's agenda.

Because like all 300,000 of you - the largest volunteer body in the country- who freely give up your time to help make our children's schools better, we recognise the power of education to be that great life transformer; to unlock real social justice, and to give every young person, regardless of birth or background, the opportunity to reach their potential in England's schools.

I am hugely optimistic about what we can achieve together over the course of this parliament, building on the very real progress we made over the past 5 years:

- the million more pupils in 'good' or 'outstanding' schools
- the 100,000 more 6-year-olds on track to become confident readers
- the large increase in the number of young people leaving primary school able to read, write and add up properly
- the lowest level of 16- to 18-year-olds not in education, employment or training since records began

That is the story of the past 5 years, and now we can do even more.

Importance of school governance

But we can only do that by working with you. As we move towards an increasingly school-led, profession-driven system, the importance of your role will only continue to grow. Though perhaps don't tell that to my husband, who is both a governor of our local primary school and FE college.

Because a school-led system doesn't mean schools as islands, making their own way. It means schools fully integrated with the local community, responsive to local parents and, crucially, connected with, learning from and supporting other schools. And you as governors will play a crucial role in this; ensuring your school is fully linked with the world outside.

What that doesn't necessarily mean is a stakeholder model of school governance, and I should be clear now that I intend to look further into how we can move away from that model over this Parliament - because what makes your contribution so important isn't the particular group you represent, it's the skills, expertise and wisdom you bring to the running of a school.

It's that rationale that has underpinned our reforms to governance over the past 5 years - making it easier for schools to recruit a wide mix of highly-skilled governors who can make an even bigger contribution to the running of their school.

In many cases, schools are already reaping the rewards of recruiting more governors from business backgrounds. And I'd call on more schools to reach out in a similar way.

I've been particularly grateful to the support of organisations like the CBI and especially its president, Mike Rake, for lending their support to the Academy Ambassadors programme (<https://www.gov.uk/sponsor-an-academy#support>) - a programme which has helped introduce over 60 exceptional business leaders to the boards of multi-academy trusts over the last 2 years.

Over the next 5 years we'll go further down this path, because we passionately believe that the best run schools are those with the highly skilled governors who can both hold schools to account and direct their future path.

Almost nowhere is this more important than in the field of financial management - a core function of governing bodies - and it's here that I expect them to play a key role. Every governing body and every individual governor should take seriously their role in ensuring that schools remain financially healthy with robust management systems in place.

I believe that it is entirely right to trust schools with how best to spend their budgets. All that I expect from governing bodies in return is the reassurance that they have the right systems of oversight and scrutiny in place.

I know that many of you are not only already doing that, but are also taking the lead in helping others to do the same. In particular, I'm following, with real interest, proposals for a new foundation for leadership being led by the NAHT, ASCL and, of course, the NGA.

And I'm pleased, as well, to see that governors are increasingly getting the recognition that they deserve in the public eye as well. You may well have noticed that the Queen's Birthday Honours (<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/queens-birthday-honours-2015-education-and-childrens-services>) was littered with awards for people who contribute to school governance, including Clare Collins, Lead Consultant to the NGA. And I really would encourage you to nominate your fellow governors as well.

Coasting schools

When I was campaigning during the election I made it clear that, if I returned as Education Secretary, I would ensure that schools had a period of calm and stability that would give the reforms of the last government - particularly in the crucial areas of curriculum and qualification reform - a chance to bed in. I know that this is something you will welcome just as much as our teachers and school leaders.

But stability and calm can't be an excuse for inaction. Particularly when young people's education and life chances are at stake. And it's clear to me that there is still much to do to ensure that we spread the excellence that we unlocked in the last Parliament everywhere - out beyond our urban centres and into our shires and coastal towns.

Because governing as one nation means, above all, ensuring that every child in every part of the country has access to an excellent education.

That's why one of the first bills we have put forward this Parliament is one which will allow us to take action more quickly to turn around failing schools as well as to put on notice and develop a sufficient plan for improvement for those schools that have been coasting.

Next week I'll be explaining to Parliament, as the Education and Adoption Bill (<http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2015-16/educationandadoption.html>) goes into Committee Stage in the House, exactly what it is we mean by coasting schools and how they'll be defined. But I am sure that all of you will have come across and instantly recognise the sorts of schools that I mean.

Schools that think that 'just good enough' is enough.

Schools lucky enough to have high-attaining intakes, but who don't push them to achieve their potential.

Schools for which the C/D borderline has been everything to the detriment of the very many young people on either side.

But I want to be very clear - our commitment to improving coasting schools doesn't mean automatically sacking heads and governors, nor does it mean automatic academisation. What it does mean is that we will expect to see - from the leadership and governors of the schools in question - a clear and sufficient plan for improvement.

It means that, having developed this plan, schools in this category will potentially work with national leaders of education (<https://www.gov.uk/system-leaders-who-they-are-and-what-they-do#national-leaders-of-education-nles>) to get themselves back on track. And let me be clear - it is only where schools prove themselves unable to do this, that regional schools commissioners (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/schools-commissioners-group/about/our-governance>) will consider if the leadership needs to be changed.

And in schools that are clearly failing, the measures in this bill will allow us to intervene from day one, by closing the loopholes that have previously been exploited by those ideologically opposed to academy status to stop desperately needed improvements in schools.

But - and I say this again - we will only improve schools and tackle both failure and coasting performance by using the expertise of those who know how to get it right.

Academy sponsors have huge amounts to offer here, and we will not shy away from opening more sponsored academies where schools are 'inadequate'. But the other group of people who have the skills and expertise are the people in this room. People like yourselves who know how to make governance work well, and know how to improve schools, are hugely important too.

Conclusion

So I hope that I've been clear about the importance I place on the job that you do, and how grateful I am, and the Department of Education is, for all that you give to the schools in your charge. And I know that you do what you do, not because of some imagined badge of status that being a school governor (<https://www.gov.uk/become-school-college-governor>) brings, but because, like me, you genuinely believe in the power that education has to transform young lives.

So as we embark on a journey over the next 5 years, to tackle underperformance, challenge mediocrity and have the highest expectations for every single child, let me assure you of my full commitment to working alongside you, listening to your concerns and embracing your feedback. Because together we can deliver a school system that allows every single young person to realise their dreams and deliver their potential.

Thank you for everything that you do.

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