Top tips for governors

Using data effectively to help your school improve
Executive Summary

The role of the school governor is becoming more complex. A detailed knowledge of school data is required to do the job properly. But governors are busy people, often juggling their role at school with a number of others at home and work. As a way of making the job somewhat easier, we interviewed a number of very experienced governors and asked them to share their best practice. We wanted to know what they look for in their school’s data and how they use it to ensure they ask challenging questions of their headteachers. This report is a summary of those interviews.
The governor’s role

“The role of the governor has changed significantly and much more is expected of them. They need to be a school’s critical friend and ask difficult questions to help drive improvement.

“Current data on achievement, attendance and teacher performance can help them be that friend; ensuring they ask the right questions and get to the bottom of what else the school can do to help its pupils.”

Rosie Simmonds, Headteacher and Governor, Leverington Primary Academy.

For a voluntary role, an awful lot is asked of school governors. Many are parents and hold down demanding jobs and so the increasing demands from Ofsted to understand how a school is performing may seem like an additional burden.

Governors’ knowledge of their school is now being scrutinised as part of the leadership and management aspect of an inspection. In addition, they are also responsible for setting performance related pay for school teaching staff.

"I think quite a few governors are a little nervous about the teacher assessment aspect of their role."  
Christine Homer, DRET Appointed Governor, Humberston

As a result, governors have to be more proactive than ever. They need to compare the progress of their school with its previous performance and also against local and national benchmarks. Governors also need to know what the school is doing to address its weaknesses. This means understanding a school’s performance data.

Inspectors will expect governors to know about the strengths and weaknesses of the school. Inspectors will expect school governors to be familiar with, and understand, performance data, including the information that the school data dashboard presents for their school.  
School Inspection Handbook – Ofsted

What follows in this guide, is the advice of experienced governors on how to best tackle the role in order to not only achieve an outstanding result from Ofsted but to help to bring about the best possible outcomes for the children at the school.
Using current data

- Governing bodies must have good and timely data to help them see clearly the questions they need to ask and to provide answers to their questions.

- All governors should be able to engage fully with discussions about the performance of their school.

"Governors need to ask for data from the latest teacher assessments and not an end of year assessment, which by the time it is processed, is too late to do anything about."
Rosie Simmonds, Headteacher and Governor, Leverington Primary Academy.

"If governors only get validated data twice a year it means they can be two terms behind what’s really happening. It does not leave a lot of time for making a difference within that year group."
Christine Homer, DRET Appointed Governor, Humberston Academy.

The only way the governors can possibly steer their school is through close analysis of the data available to them. But according to the governors we interviewed, this data will need to be up to date ‘in year’ information, in order to allow governors to effect change and meet Ofsted’s requirements.

"My advice is to work with current data. Current data allows us to ask further questions about what we can do to support the children more proactively."
Paul Hughes, Chair of Governors, Greentrees Primary.

Governors’ Handbook
Examining pupil achievement

When it comes to looking at pupil progress, it is essential to take the data as a starting point and then find out the story behind the headlines. Overall progress may be going up but governors need to find out what the individual situation is in each subject. This is particularly true of those vulnerable groups within the school, such as SEN or Pupil Premium pupils/children.

Here is some of the best practice from the governors we interviewed:

“Look at the performance of each year group and compare the performance across every class. We ask whether there are any marked differences in the achievement of the same group with different teachers. Then we compare it with the national average and see how it measures up with the previous year in the same term.”
Christine Homer, DRET Appointed Governor, Humberston Academy.

“Create a standard set of questions to ask. Our governors use a proforma with a number of issues they need to check through. When it comes to tracking pupil progress, we look at gender, SEN, Pupil Premiums and all the groups. We look at those who are not achieving enough and ask what the school is doing about it.”
Rosie Simmonds, Headteacher and Governor, Leverington Primary Academy.

“Ask the head to colour code the data. Ours is presented using a ‘traffic light’ system so that we can easily identify those areas where progress is not being made by the red or amber and look deeper.”
Christine Homer, DRET Appointed Governor, Humberston Academy.
“Ask all the questions you need to about what the data means. Governors need to understand what the measures are – what an average point score is and what is expected of that year group. If governors don’t know how the levels are measured or what the figures stand for how will they know if it is a good or a bad score?”
Christine Homer, DRET Appointed Governor, Humberston Academy.

“Think about what would happen if Ofsted came today. Would we know where the areas for improvement need to be and would we be able to break down the progress of different groups, such as Pupil Premium girls in a particular class?”
Kevin Tranter, Governor, Colmers School & Sixth Form College.

“If all the pupils are not on track, ask what’s happening to them. Scrutinise behaviour and attendance along with achievement.”
Rosie Simmonds, Headteacher and Governor, Leverington Primary Academy.

“It is important to look at what interventions are in place and whether they are actually having an impact.”
Rosie Simmonds, Headteacher and Governor, Leverington Primary Academy.
Judging the quality of teaching in the school

Keeping a close eye on the quality of teaching is an essential part of the governor’s job. This is important firstly to ensure that pupils receive the best possible education and also to give teaching staff proper career development. Now that governors must approve performance related pay increases, the need for accurate assessment of the quality of teaching is greater than ever before.

“Data should be collected together about those teachers who are perceived to be good, outstanding or requiring improvement along with the lessons observed. This helps governors ask questions about support for teachers and make informed decisions if teachers have applied to go through a threshold for a pay rise.”
Kevin Tranter, Governor, Colmers School & Sixth Form College.

“You need to triangulate the data and not look at anything in isolation. Look at what the teachers are doing, what the kids are doing and the results that come out in tests every six weeks so you can judge the impact the teachers are having.”
Christine Homer, DRET Appointed Governor, Humberston Academy.

“The data is very important when it comes to looking at how teachers are performing. But it is essential to back this up with teacher observation and that means the governors actually going into the school with the head to see for themselves what is happening in lessons.”
Paul Hughes, Chair of Governors, Greentrees Primary
In order to get an outstanding judgment for leadership and management from Ofsted, governors need to prove that the school is run well, and that the governing team have offered the leadership support as well as challenging them where necessary.

It can be a hard job for governors to find the right balance between asking the right questions, without interfering too much. In addition, governors can sometimes feel reluctant to ask a busy headteacher for more information beyond what is already being provided.

“We do ask questions of the data we are given not only at the meetings but before and after too. We have had some very challenging meetings where we have sent headteachers away because we haven’t been satisfied with the answers and I would advise other governors to be confident in challenging their heads.”

Christine Homer, DRET Appointed Governor, Humberston Academy.

“Data is the governor’s friend. Take time to understand it as it allows you to create the challenge. Without it, governors can lack the confidence to ask the right questions. It is important to be confident in the data underneath whether it is performance data or financial.”

Kevin Tranter, Governor, Colmers School & Sixth Form College.

“Get to understand the targets and why they have been set at a particular level. We have an education review team which advises the rest of the governors why these targets have been set for this particular cohort. It might be that in one year there is not the same range of ability or there may be a year with not so many children in the lower range and this group needs to be pushed harder.”

Christine Homer, DRET Appointed Governor, Humberston Academy.

“I would advise having someone on hand who can explain the data to you. We have a thorough two to three hour meeting to go through our data with the data manager before we meet with the head. This is important because if you have a headteacher who is very convincing in their arguments it can be difficult for new governors to question them.”

Paul Hughes, Chair of Governors, Greentrees Primary.
Assessing behaviour and attendance

“We have seen a massive improvement in attendance this year and we achieved it by comparing groups, whether they be Pupil Premium, ethnic groups or others in order to see the patterns and understand the external issues behind the data. That way we could tackle the situation with a more targeted approach.”

Kevin Tranter, Governor, Colmers School & Sixth Form College.

Governors have a duty towards the health and safeguarding of the children at their school. They might not have the day-to-day input in dealing with behaviour and attendance issues, but they do need to understand how a trail of sometimes seemingly small incidents can be evidence of a more serious problem.

They also need to have the evidence that the school has taken action in each case to reassure themselves that the school has done everything they could.

“Governors need to look closely at attendance and see whether it is down to holidays, sickness or other reasons. Look for patterns in the data; it could even lead to the discovery of social or child protection issues. Data will allow governors to ask further questions and do more to protect the child.”

Paul Hughes, Chair of Governors, Greentrees Primary.

“Look at punctuality as well as attendance as you may pick up issues there too. Don’t just look for the trends but ask what can be done about them too. It may involve sending a family liaison officer around to work with some families.”

Christine Homer, DRET Appointed Governor, Humberston Academy.
Scrubinising the finances of the school

Increasingly, funding within schools is being targeted at particular initiatives or groups of children, the mantra being that the money follows the child.

The government is looking to see how the funding it provides, for example in sports or for pupils in receipt of the Pupil Premium, is having an impact and governors need to be aware of this.

Governors need to know how the school is spending its budget and whether it is balanced and in line with other schools in the area and beyond.

The crux of the job is about challenging the information that is provided by the school leadership and holding the headteacher to account. This is especially true of governors of the growing number of academy schools, who have to shoulder an even greater responsibility.

“As academy governors, you are far more accountable to the Department for Education. We are a business and our business is pupil progress. My advice is to have a qualified accountant on the governing board if you can, to offer advice and effectively question any investments.”
Rosie Simmonds, Headteacher and Governor, Leverington Primary Academy.

“You need a good business manager. Ours is great at presenting the data and simplifying what’s going in and what’s coming out. This is important as it gives us a forecast, even though no budget is completely predictable.”
Sally Collier, Chair of Governors, Park Lane Primary and Nursery School.

“Accounts should always be independently verified and a good governing body would get an accountant in to check the data.”
Christine Homer, DRET Appointed Governor, Humberston Academy Primary Academy.
“The question governors need to ask is, “Are we getting good value for money?” If you offer a curriculum option that only attracts three or four students, then the cost could be astronomical.”
Kevin Tranter, Governor, Colmers School & Sixth Form College.

“Look for economies of scale or sharing resources with other schools. As we are a group of two schools, we share resources. We have a Senco who works across the two schools and we share the same contractor for ground maintenance.”
Rosie Simmonds, Headteacher and Governor, Leverington Primary Academy.

“I would suggest every governing body should have a risk register covering all areas, such as buildings, finances, health and safety. For example, if you are a small village school with four teachers and two become sick, how would you cope with only 50% of staff?”
Christine Homer, DRET Appointed Governor, Humberston Academy.

“The governing body needs to have a longer term forecast than just setting the budget for the year ahead. If they agree on a teaching assistant they need to consider what happens if the funding doesn’t stay level next year. Then they might be better offering a fixed-term contract rather than a permanent one.”
Kevin Tranter, Governor, Colmers School & Sixth Form College.
Conclusion

“We were judged outstanding in 2007 and we are still outstanding; but we can’t sit on our laurels. We have to have live data so that we can continuously benchmark our improvement not only internally but against the county and nationally.”

Paul Hughes, Chair of Governors, Greentrees Primary.

The use of current data to help governors fulfil their role is more important than ever. In the past, many governors had information fed to them by the headteacher and the leadership team but now governors need to know more about what data exists and request it themselves if they are to be able to hold the leadership to account successfully.

“The role of the governor has completely changed from when you just used to sit there and listen to the head talking. Our governors are trained in order to meet the new challenges, and they are in school far more than before,”

says Rosie Simmonds, Headteacher and Governor, Leverington Primary Academy.

Having up to date information on how the school is doing and what is being done to improve – even if the school is already judged to be outstanding – is essential for the governor. Then governors can drill down to ask the right questions about the quality of the teaching, the effectiveness of intervention strategies and financial decisions.

“If the school’s assessment procedures are robust enough you should be able to say to the leadership, ‘Well done, now what’s next?’ The measure of a good governing body is when a school is outstanding but still wants to go further,”

says Kevin Tranter, Governor, Colmers School & Sixth Form College.

Finally, it is important to remember to look behind and beyond the data in order to see the true situation. As Sally Collier, Chair of Governors, Park Lane Primary and Nursery School says, “Look at the data but also look at all the factors that complement the data within the school. It is not only about performance, a school also needs to be a happy place to be.”

“Ofsted is the external measure and challenge of the school and governors need to be the internal measure and challenge of the school. It is a very privileged role to have and we need to perform it to the best of our abilities. Data helps with that,”

concludes Kevin Tranter, Governor, Colmers School & Sixth Form College.
We would like to extend our thanks to the governors who helped with the development of this guide.

All the featured governors’ schools use the SIMS management information system, which can provide governors with a great deal of the information they need to make accurate judgements about school performance and ask probing questions of the leadership team.

It is very likely that the school you work with uses SIMS. For more information on how SIMS is used by governing bodies, please visit www.capita-sims.co.uk or call 0800 170 1220.
About Capita SIMS

SIMS is more than just a management information system – we help schools to improve learning outcomes. With SIMS, you have all the information you need to make a difference in the classroom – to achievement, behaviour, attendance and inspection outcomes.

We understand the issues you face, because we've worked alongside schools for over 30 years.

That's why over 22,000 schools use SIMS every day.

Contact us today to find out how we can help and to make an appointment for your account manager to visit.

Call 0800 170 1220 or email info@capita-sims.co.uk.

www.capita-sims.co.uk