

**CHARACTERISTICS AND CAPABILITIES OF THOSE WHO WANT TO BE  
ELECTED TO A SCHOOL GOVERNING BODY  
(Author: Tim Gordon, CEO – Governing Body Foundation)**

School Governing Body (SGB) members almost certainly make up the largest single group of formalised volunteers in the country, numbering over a quarter of a million. Clearly then, there is no shortage of those keen or willing to take on the role! The real task is thus not so much to find people willing to stand, but to identify, correctly, those who are going to do the job well.

In our experience, most schools, with a little effort and organisation, are relatively easily able to make up the necessary numbers on their Governing Bodies. Less certain, though, are the motives of some of those who seek election. The literature on governance is quite clear in this regard:

- The first and overriding (though not only) task of a governing body member is **to serve the best interests of the institution** in which he or she is a governor. (In our case, that means the school, of course.)
- Those who see the position as an opportunity to advance their own interests, or the interests of their children, are in it for the wrong reasons, or with the wrong motives. Clearly, **governors may not seek in any way to advance the interests of, or gain any benefit for, their own children through their position on the governing body** – for example, by bringing pressure to bear, thus providing academic advantage for the child, ensuring that he or she is placed with the “best” teachers; or helping the child become a prefect or RCL member, or to gain selection for the choir, a sports team or club or society committee.
- A governing body member **may not receive any reward** for jobs carried out in his or her role or position as governor.
- Governing body membership should certainly also not be expected to allow a governing body member to be paid for appointing anyone onto the staff of the school — which evidence suggests, of course, has been happening in a number of schools!

To get a fuller idea on what is expected or required of governors — and also what is not expected or not allowed — see the next document, titled **“So you wanna be a governor?”**

## SO YOU WANNA BE A GOVERNOR?

You have ambitions of serving on the Governing Body of your child's school, do you? Well, congratulations – you'll be in good company!

School governors form the biggest group of volunteers in the country, and also make up the largest number of elected members serving in any one sphere of governance that there is. With about 275,000 members in all, Governing Bodies absolutely dwarf parliament (400 members), the Provincial Councils (430 members), and even municipalities (4 277 elected councillors).

In the field of education, Governing Body members serve as the third tier (local level) of governance. In this way, the Governing Body can be viewed as schooling's equivalent of the City Council and the Governing Body Chair as a sort of mini-mayor. Getting involved thus brings with it wonderful opportunities, but also awesome responsibilities. So let's look at how these opportunities and responsibilities stack up.

### Being part of the SGB

To start with, let's see what being on a School Governing Body **does not mean**. It doesn't mean any of the following:

- That you get paid or rewarded in any financial sense for your efforts;
- That you get to take over the running of the school finances;
- That you get to be the Principal's boss;
- That you get to fire the teachers you don't like;
- That you sit in on team selections, or get to advise the soccer, rugby or hockey coaches on who should be in the first team, the A-team or whatever;
- That you can tell the Principal which pupils should have which teachers, or decide which teachers will teach which classes;
- That you sit in on classes to see how the teachers teach;
- That you evaluate the staff nor get to fire the teachers you don't like ...
- That you can micromanage the school in your particular area of expertise;
- That you virtually get to run the school for a couple of years;
- That you turn the school into a business;
- That you get to decide on the formula for the granting of school fee exemptions;
- That you help your daughter to be head prefect or your son to head the cheer-leaders or captain a first team;
- That you can channel a lot of school business towards your own business;
- That you will be able to ensure that your neighbour's child is appointed onto the staff as teacher, coach or physiotherapist;
- That you get a discount on your school fees; and
- That you will be able to make sure that so-and-so's naughty kids won't get into your child's class or school.

If it doesn't mean these things, then **what does it mean?**

It means, amongst others, the following things:

- That you get to be an important player in a special team;
- That you get to partner the Principal in his/her critical role;
- That you get a bird's eye view rather than worm's eye view of how the school

- functions and what makes it tick;
- Provided your Principal and Chair understand the role of a governor properly, you will get a chance to use your skills and will be given a meaningful role to play, instead of simply doing menial helping jobs around the school;
- That you get a chance to use – and enjoy – your social skills as you interact at a meaningful level with parents and guests of the school;
- That you can have a great learning experience in an area in which you have not previously been involved; and
- That you get to experience the real challenges and thrills of getting to grips with strategic planning, rather than simple operational planning; of looking over the horizon, at tomorrow, rather than at the foreground, merely at today.

### **So what is a school looking for in its Governing Body group?**

Bring to the table skills that are not normally to be found in a school ... It is important for budding governors to recognize that schools, and the Governing Bodies that serve them, need people who can bring to the party some skills, perspectives or points of view that are missing from the school and its staff, not people who want to manage or interfere with employees – whether teachers or administrators - who have already brought their skills to the school and are using them in their work.

Mervyn King, of King Reports fame, put it like this: a new governor comes onto the Governing Body with his/her own knowledge, skills and abilities. S/he was probably appointed to the Governing Body because of his/her knowledge and skills, and also his/her networks and status. But his/her purpose is not then to show the rest of the Governing Body, or the school, how much s/he knows. His/her purpose is in fact to learn what s/he does not know, but wants to know – especially within the school context. S/he should learn to listen and ask questions about how and why things are done - or not done: not try to tell those who are already doing things how they should be done.

In short, then, according to King, **the best way for a governor to contribute is not to come in as the one who knows how to put everything right, but rather to come in with an open mind and to discover what needs to be done.** S/he should do this by taking note of how his/her questions are answered, not by telling people what to do. A good governor can also act as a valuable sounding board. It takes a special insight and humility to recognize and accept that – and then go out and do it!

### **Who may – or may not – serve on a governing body?**

A person is **not eligible** to be a member of a governing body if he or she:

- Is mentally ill and has been declared as such by a competent court;
- Is an un-rehabilitated insolvent;
- Has been convicted of an offence and sentenced to imprisonment without the option of a fine for a period exceeding six months and has not yet served his or her full period of imprisonment;
- Has been declared to be unsuitable to work with children as stipulated in terms of the Children's Act, 2005 (Act 38 of 2005);
- Does not fall into one of the categories of members who make up a Governing body, or no longer falls within the category of members that s/he represented at the time of the election; or
- Has previously been removed from office by the provincial Head of Education for

breach of the school or provincial Code of Conduct for Governing Body Members.

### **How many people are there on a governing body?**

Every Public School Governing Body consists of the following (though you need to be aware that the actual numbers per category in different schools may vary – e.g. high/primary schools, schools in different provinces, special schools/ordinary schools and bigger schools/smaller schools do not all follow the same regulations or necessarily elect the same numbers):

- elected parent members;
- staff members (in most schools two educators and one non-educator, elected by their respective constituencies, though in some provinces this may vary, depending on the size of the school);
- the Principal (ex officio) by virtue of his or her official capacity;
- two learners (only in schools with learners in grade 8 or higher – both members must be members of the RCL);
- co-opted members (designed to bring in people with particular skills or knowledge, use of this category can vary greatly: some common ones are the Principal's PA or Secretary, Financial Manager, Principal of a feeder school, the President of the Past Pupils' Union, the Chair of the local Chamber of Commerce, a local doctor, dominee or pastor, specialists in HR, IT or physical amenities; and the immediate past Chair of the Governing Body. **(NB:** In Gauteng and Western Cape it will be fewer than this, as schools in those provinces are limited to 3 and 6 co-optees maximum respectively.)

### **What is the role of the Governing Body?**

The Governing Body should have a clear understanding of the parameters of its jurisdiction. Firstly, you need to remember that this is a public school and cannot be run as a private one. In this regard, the State requires that the Governing Body supports and actively promotes the Bill of Rights and the legislation and laws which flow out of the country's founding documents. The **critical issues** are the following:

- Governors are responsible for the governance of the school, **not its management**.
- The day-to-day running of the school is in the hands of the School's Management Team (SMT). It is important that prospective governors should appreciate this, and not allow themselves to be sidetracked by trivialities and day-to-day issues; be drawn into debates around school management; or become bogged down in discussion around the unimportant but emotional issues that abound in schools.
- There are also more specific expectations, depending on whether the school has Section 21 rights or not.
- Section 21 rights (they are set out in Section 21 of the South African Schools Act), entitle the SGB to govern the school, to a large extent, without interference from the state, but the quid pro quo is that, apart from having the salaries of some teachers and a few non-educator staff members paid, the annual subsidy from the state may be very low.
- It is important for members to understand the legal implications of Section 21 status and the responsibilities it brings with it. (Please note that a school to which Section 21 rights and functions have been allotted is not the same thing as a Section 21 company. Having Section 21 rights mainly means that we have the right to pay for the services that the school receives!)

## **What does the governing body actually do?**

- Most of the SGB members' monitoring and inputs take place via various sub-committees which are responsible for initiating and then monitoring action in a variety of areas of school life. This will vary from school to school – the following are some of the possibilities: Academics, Sport, Culture, Finance; Human Resources, Discipline, Safety and Security; Hostel; Physical Amenities; Marketing and Fundraising; Computers and Information Technology.
- Some or other part, or committee, of the SGB may meet in some or other forum virtually every week of the academic year, so that the SGB can monitor the progress of the school and the performance of the staff and management. Not every member will attend every meeting, but, of course the demands should not be under-estimated.

Regular meetings and projects - **the expectations and demands should not be under-estimated ...**

## **What are the responsibilities of the Governing Body?**

- The Governing Body is responsible for determining the aims and the overall vision\* of the school, and it holds the Vision and the Mission Statement of the school “in trust”.
- Together with the staff, the Governing Body sets and reviews policies, plans and procedures that will ensure the provision of high-quality education for present and future learners.
- It should adopt a Constitution\*, determine the Language Policy\* of the school, and adopt a Code of Conduct\*.
- It is responsible for basic matters such as school hours, uniform, admissions and employment policies.
- It is also responsible for the care and development of the property of the school, and may allow the use of the premises by outsiders if it is in the interests of the school to do so.
- It recommends certain staff for appointment by the provincial education department, and may itself appoint staff members whom it pays from school funds: (exactly which members of staff is currently under debate).
- Legally, the Governing Body represents the school and enters into contracts on behalf of the school.
- The overall control of finances is another of its important roles.

\* The responsibilities marked with an asterisk have obviously been carried out by successive Governing Bodies, which have preceded the present one. Your task is therefore review and incremental improvement, where necessary, not a re-invention of the wheel. This is to be done in conjunction with the Principal, of course. Note that the Department or District may ask for more, but these are the ones written into the SA Schools Act.

## **The role of individual members of the Governing Body.**

Parental representation on the Governing Body is essential, and is required by the SA Schools Act. Parents are generally up to date on what is going on in the school, and how others regard or view it, as well as having a general ‘feel’ for how things are going in a school. However,

your mandate is to serve the general good of the school, and not the particular interest of your own child or a particular interest group.

- Members must be able to work as part of a team in the best interests of the school.
- All members have an equal right to participate in debate or discussion, and to make up their own minds about issues. Once a decision has been taken, however, members need to accept collective responsibility for ensuring that it is carried out, and they have to be seen to be supportive of decisions which have been made by the full Governing Body.
- No Governing Body member should have a pecuniary interest in the school, or make money out of the school.
- Confidentiality up to the point of public pronouncement on any matter is vital, and great damage can be done by members failing to observe this requirement.
- SGB members will almost certainly be approached by parents for comment or discussion on any of a number of issues. You need to apprise yourself of the difference between “car park chatter” and the real situation, before taking sides on an issue.
- Governing body members should try to get to know all members of staff, and should regularly and publicly acknowledge the role they play. However, governors also need to be careful in this, as some teachers or employees may experience your interest as interference, while others may attempt to use their friendly relationships with individual Governing Body members to have decisions made in favour of their own areas of the school. This has potential to drive a wedge between management and the Governing Body, and needs to be guarded against.

### **Should the school be run like a business?**

“The essence of a business is to grow and make profits. **The essence of a school is to provide a service to its community.**” In the final analysis schools need to become better educational institutions, **not** better businesses.

The majority of members of the school’s Governing Body are often professionals of some sort, or business people who have themselves run or worked in successful business undertakings. As a consequence, there is often a temptation to try to run the school in exactly the same way. However, this is not necessarily the best way to go.

Although a school needs to observe good business principles, schools differ markedly from businesses in a number of ways, especially in relation to the predominance of the service ethic in the school environment. It is, therefore, important for Governing Body members to understand, accept and nurture the service nature of the institution, and you need always to keep the following in mind:

- The school is like a family in which there is a high degree of emotional content, and in which relationships-before-results are central.
- Good results (in both exams and extra-murals) are important, but alone they cannot accurately portray the full picture of the health and success of a school or the effectiveness of a teacher. It is impossible to measure inspiration, enthusiasm, character, charisma and determination; yet these are the essence of good teaching.
- There are also ‘good’ classes and ‘bad’ classes, clever learners and strugglers. For these and many other reasons, results alone are not necessarily valid indicators of quality teaching.
- That said, poor results are almost invariably indicative of poor management and a poor school, as well as of poor teaching.
- In the end, the product of a school is the value that is added to the lives of the

learners. Much of this comes from the ‘hidden curriculum’ which is almost impossible to measure accurately.

We believe, in line with the above, that the biggest need in our school is for the Governing Body to ensure that each school is run according to sound educational and business principles (not as a business), but at the same time, to retain and enhance its humanity and service ethic.

### **So should you stand for election?**

#### **If you are:**

- someone with skills that are in short supply in the school;
- a selfless server willing to play a bit-part in a larger cast; and
- someone who wants to create a good and sustainable education, not just for your own children, but also for your children’s children; then you are probably a strong candidate.

#### **If, on the other hand, you:**

- feel you have a score to settle, or bear a grudge;
- are forceful, a bit authoritarian or dictatorial, highly assertive or a little arrogant, with an own agenda that you want to implement; or
- are a control freak, wanting to micro-manage a portfolio;

then you will probably be better off – and so will the school – if you find yourself a role in another sphere. Remember, a governor is part of democratic governance, not of forceful management!

### **Last thought**

If, having gone through this document carefully, you still want to – and really believe you can effectively – contribute within the parameters it sets out, you should do a couple of things:

- let your Principal know you would like to serve;
- give him/her an insight into how you can contribute;
- get two parents who believe in you and know of your abilities to complete a nomination form; and
- see to it that it is handed in on time.

Good luck as you think this all through.

**With grateful acknowledgement to Tim Gordon, CEO of the Governing Body Foundation.**