

Schools need more robust and vigilant governance

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FULL TEXT

Shocking revelations about the abuse of children in schools generate waves of anxiety and concern throughout society. They prompt particular questions for parents, educators and policymakers. "Is/was my child safe in that school?" cuts to the heart of our desire to ensure children can grow and flourish in caring environments. Questions for those in positions of management, leadership and teaching in schools include: "Do the policies and procedures we have in place actually work to the good of the students?" and "Are such policies evaluated regularly, systematically and with transparency?"

Until the 1998 Education Act, governance arrangements in schools in Ireland were very limited; the voices of students, parents, even teachers, were mostly silent. A single school manager could exercise enormous power and was largely unaccountable. The creation of boards of management in schools was seen as a significant advance, with the 1998 Act stating: "It shall be the duty of a board to manage the school on behalf of the patron and for the benefit of the students and their parents and to provide or cause to be provided an appropriate education for each student at the school for which that board has responsibility."

A pivotal feature of school boards is that its members - teachers, parents, patron nominees and - in some schools - students - are all volunteers. The principal acts as secretary to the board. For the past two decades, many school boards have struggled to meet the demands of the onerous task "to manage the school".

Significantly, in the Chief Inspector's Report 2016-2020, published last year, the sound of alarm bells is distinct: "Changes in employment law, financial management, health and safety regulations, revised child protection procedures and the lack of growth in capitation funding are placing additional burdens on boards. It can be difficult for board members to dedicate sufficient time to deal with the range of tasks in their role". Then, in bold print, the report declares: "The voluntary nature of school governance arrangements is not sustainable."

This stark warning is a sober reminder that, while appreciating the tradition of volunteerism and civic contribution, the governance of 21st-century schools is generally weak and fragile. More robust and vigilant governance is clearly needed. While further progress is evident in a growing emphasis on school self-evaluation, close attention to child protection, more distributed models of leadership within schools and more widespread opportunities for students to have their voices listened to and acted upon, there is little room for complacency. The 2021 report from the Office of the Ombudsman for Children notes that "bullying in education is always our biggest complaint category". Such complaints about bullying relate to schools' responses to bullying, handling of complaints about bullying not being identified and acted upon, sanctions and the lack of supports for students (victim and perpetrator) in the aftermath of bullying.

Furthermore, there is widespread evidence that school principals - secretaries to boards - feel overworked and weighed down by administrative tasks.

If schools are to have the robust and vigilant governance young people deserve, the volunteer members of school boards need to be questioning, critical friends and not just enthusiastic supporters - or, worse, rubber stamps. For such a culture to develop, extensive training is required.

Currently, schools and their boards are supported in various ways, including training by patron, trust and management groups. Some of this training is funded by the Department of Education and introduces board members to concepts such as the board as a corporate entity, employment law, legal issues and child protection guidelines.

But school boards need more support. Parent nominees, for example, could benefit from greater information and confidence-building to ensure boards benefit from parents' potentially unique questions and contributions. Some fresh thinking is also required. Shared governance models offer new possibilities, notably for small, neighbouring schools. Might the brief of the 2014 established Centre for School Leadership be extended to become a centre for school governance and leadership? Should there be some remuneration to board members for their work? Are there alternatives to the principal carrying the load of secretarial and administrative duties? How might students' voices be more clearly heard at board level?

For schools, especially those with a Christian ethos, the New Testament references to it being "better to have a millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea" than damaging children and that "those of us who teach can expect a stricter judgment" are stark reminders of their responsibilities to be places of safety, care and compassion. Thus, oversight and vigilance within such schools has added layers of significance. All the children of the nation deserve informed, competent, caring and critical governance in the schools they attend. Gerry Jeffers is an educational researcher and a member of a school board of management

DETAILS

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