**Governors’ Visits to Schools**

Why do governors need to visit their school during the working day?

Governors’ visits to schools during the school day give insights that you can acquire in no other way. If you are to carry out your strategic, monitoring, executive and accountability roles as a governor, you need to have an understanding of the way schools work and a feel for the dynamics of your school.

There is no better way of gaining this information than by visiting during the working day. Being a

Governor should be an exciting, rewarding and productive experience and visiting your school should be part of this.

First hand experiences of the school help to bring governing body meetings to life. They introduce a reality that can otherwise be missing. The experiences can prompt questions to the Headteacher and enable governors to be more effective in the role of critical friend. Visits allow governors to develop relationships with staff, pupils, parents and members of the local community. This provides a two-way flow of ideas that helps to inform governors’ decision-making.

Visits can be designed to monitor the implementation of school improvement plans and as part of the school’s self-evaluation processes. Governors need to have first-hand experience of the impact of the strategic plans they have worked on with school leaders.

Some governors need to visit the school to make regular checks on critical aspects of the school’s work, such as financial procedures; special educational needs provision; health and safety; and child protection.

Ideally every member of the governing body should make a visit to your school at least once a year.

Schools always appreciate having governors present at key events such as end of term concerts, but these do not replace the need for visits during the normal school day.

Governors visit their schools in different roles. Some are a regular presence, such as parent governors at a primary school who usually bring and collect their children daily. Others may only be able to visit occasionally, for example those with full time jobs far from the school. Visits therefore may range from the very informal to the formal, mandated visit on behalf of the governing body, but governors should always be conscious of how their presence may be seen by other people and act accordingly.

Formal visits

It is good practice for the governing body to have a protocol for school visits. You may wish to allocate specific areas of the school to named governors, such as year groups or curriculum areas. You could have a ‘governor of the month’ to make a general visit and observe all aspects. The annual planner for meetings could include a routine of visits.

Whatever system you agree on, governors should be clear about:

Why they are visiting, what they are looking for and how they will feed back to the school and to the governing body.

A standard checklist or a reporting form with specific headings may help.

Informal visits

Informal visits take place when governors may ‘pop in’ or be on site because of their child or their job.

These visits give governors a picture of the general to and fro of school life and a good idea about how the school works. However, governors should be careful how they use this information. It is difficult to switch roles completely: others will always see you as a governor, even if you think you are just being a parent.

What sort of things might governors do during school visits?

Classroom visits

All governors should have opportunities to observe the core business of schools, which is teaching and learning. Governors will be interested in the roles of teachers and teaching assistants. Spending 10-20 minutes in any one classroom is usually sufficient. Classroom visits can take different forms, for example:

Visiting a sequence of classrooms in pairs to get a feel of classroom life. The protocol agreed might allow governors to chat with children once they are working independently or in pairs/groups.

Visiting classrooms to observe the impact of a recent school improvement project e.g. literacy lessons to observe improvements in the teaching of writing. This sort of visit can work best if a school leader who can point out the new or improved features accompanies governors.

Meetings with groups of pupils, staff or parents. A half hour meeting with a representative group can provide governors with an invaluable opportunity to gather information and opinions as well as develop relationships with members of the school community. The focus for the meeting and the questions need to be planned in advance. This can be a particularly good way to gather information about the impact of development planning. For example, a meeting with a group of middle leaders could be a good way to gather information about the role of middle leaders and the impact of any training.

Breaks and lunchtimes

Planning opportunities for governors to spend time informally with staff and children during breaks and lunchtimes adds to any visit. These times can be crucial to the development of good personal relationships which underpin all effective governing bodies. This can include time to:

* visit the playground and/or canteen and chat with children and supervisors.
* sit in the staffroom and have a coffee with the staff.
* spend time in the school office getting to know the office staff.

Touring the learning environment

A tour of the school and grounds is an opportunity to observe the displays, resources, and specialist teaching equipment. Governor visits can also include opportunities to observe a wide range of other activities including: staff meetings and training sessions; leadership team meetings; sports competitions; assemblies; music and drama performances.

The framework for governor visits

Governor visits work best when there is a planned programme and when governors come into the school in pairs or small groups. This allows governors to discuss what they have seen. The programme should ensure that there are opportunities for governors to monitor specific aspects of the school, to follow up lines of enquiry and to develop a general idea of what the school is like.

Visit days need to be planned well in advance: this could be an agenda item during a full governing body meeting once a term. Governing bodies should aim to organise one or two visit days per term. It is a good idea to secure and record commitment by governors during the meeting.

It is important that Headteachers support governors’ visits and ensure that governors’ time in school is used well. It is also important that governors carry out their commitments: there is always disappointment and loss of confidence when Headteachers make arrangements for a visit only for the governors to fail to turn up.

Preparation

Agree a convenient time and date with the Headteacher and/or the member of staff you are linked with. Avoid stressful times such as test or exam weeks. Decide on what the visit is for and, if you will need any paperwork, make sure that the relevant person is aware of this. Inform yourself about the aspect you will be observing by reading relevant documents such as the school policy, school self-evaluation or the last Ofsted report. Dress suitably – nurseries or practical lessons can be messy and infant chairs are tiny!

Start and Briefing

Governors should arrive punctually and observe school protocols for signing in and wearing a visitor badge. Effective visits start with a meeting with the Headteacher or deputy head to clarify the nature of the nature, what governors are to see and do and any protocols to be followed by governors.

During the Visit

Remember that you are not an inspector: don’t give the impression that you are looking for faults. Governors should not make judgements about what they observe, especially when they are watching lessons. Bear in mind that governor visits are about gathering information and developing relationships. They are not about the day-to-day management of the school, which is the headteacher’s responsibility. Your link staff member may have planned an itinerary for you and will probably want to introduce you to the class or other colleagues.

You may want to offer praise and this is entirely acceptable. However, governors should not offer advice or criticism directly to the staff – any such comments should be made to the Headteacher separately. Keep note-taking to a minimum and pay attention to what is going on around you. If appropriate, join in with the pupils’ activities. Don’t make any promises on behalf of the governing body – unless you have been given specific delegated power to do so.

Thank everybody for their hospitality, including the pupils where appropriate.

Follow-up

It would be helpful to include a de-briefing at the end of your visit so that you can clarify any issues and share your experience with the Headteacher and/or relevant members of staff. Remember, do not criticise any member of staff in their presence. A little note or card to say thank you is always welcome.

If there are any urgent actions needed following your visit, such as a health and safety issue, these should be raised with the Headteacher in the first instance and could be referred to a committee or the Chair. If you have any concern about Child Protection, report it to the Headteacher immediately.

A brief report back to governors is an important part of your visit, especially if you were looking at a specific area of school life. It is a good idea to have standing item for feedback on every agenda. Complete the agreed feedback form, if you have one, or write up your observations for circulation to the governing body. If you can, get this to the clerk in good time for the next meeting.

Nominated governors

Whilst it is very important that every governor knows and understands their school’s individual characteristics and needs, it is also important that the governing body fulfils its monitoring role. It is not realistic to assume that every governor can monitor every aspect from literacy standards to toilet maintenance. Governing bodies often make use of individual governors’ interests and expertise by nominating them for particular areas such as special needs, healthy living or literacy.

Beware, though, of responding to every initiative by appointing a nominated governor. DFE and local authority documents often suggest that a governor should have oversight and each governor could have several nominated roles. Governing bodies should consider what the needs of the school are and balance this with the time available from each governor. (Do you really need a ‘Head Lice Governor’ or a ‘School Pets Governor’?)

There are only three statutory nominated roles:

* child protection,
* health and safety
* special educational needs.

Governing bodies can agree on any number of additional roles to suit the needs of the school. Once a governing body has agreed which nominated governors it needs, terms of reference should be drawn up and approved.

Examples of items to include in terms of reference:

The nominated governor for (e.g. special educational needs) will:

* report back to the governing body
* keep a record of visits and meetings undertaken
* meet with the relevant member of staff to discuss school self-evaluation and progress against the school’s improvement plan
* receive and deal with relevant correspondence and guidance
* keep up to date with relevant legislation and school documents
* seek to attend relevant school training sessions or staff meetings
* attend parent evenings and other relevant school events
* make themselves available for interview by Ofsted Inspectors if needed
* monitor targets and results
* be a member of any relevant committees (e.g. the health and safety governor will be on the premises committee)

Whatever your governing body decides, it is important not to undermine the corporate responsibility of the governing body by placing too much emphasis on assigning responsibility to individual governors.

The governing body maintains overall responsibility for every aspect. This makes reporting back an essential part of the job description.



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