Rethinking Governance Indicators for Effective School Review

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Effective governance is one of the five dimensions ERO identifies as impacting on student learning and achievement (ERO 2014, p. 28). Improving student learning and achievement is the central purpose of ERO's role in providing schools with effective external review. Therefore the signals it gives to school boards about what constitutes effective governance need to be based on what we know of the relationships between school governance and student learning.

This paper starts with an outline of what we know about effective school governance, aiming to identify some essential aspects. It then examines existing governance indicators (ERO 2011, pp. 34–39) in the light of that knowledge. It concludes with recommendations to reduce the 39 governance indicators to 3, to make them more effective signals to school boards about what it is most important to do well.

Current knowledge about effective school governance

Research into the relationship between school governance and student learning and achievement is sparse. There are three main reasons for this. First, unlike other dimensions of effective state provision of learning, such as teaching or school leadership, governance is probably desirable, to bring stakeholders together to achieve a complex purpose, but it is not essential. If governance is part of the fabric of an education system then it is most likely to be included at a district or local authority level. New Zealand, England and Wales are exceptions in locating governance of state schools at the school level. Second, priority in research funding goes to other dimensions that have a more direct bearing on the quality of teaching and learning. Most of the existing research into effective school governance is correlational; there are few longitudinal studies.

Third, locating governance at the school level also brings it closer to school leadership, making it harder to cleanly separate the two. Indeed, in both New Zealand and England, principals and staff representatives are members of school governing bodies. One recent comprehensive study of school governance in England concludes that school governance is best understood as "a collective activity in which the headteachers, members of staff and lay members collaborate in the governance of the school … The school leadership and the governing body are *'two sides of the same coin'* (Board chair) and the valuable coin is of course, good governance …" (James, Brammer, Connolly, Fertig, James & Jones, 2010, p. 82). Like other studies of school governance, this one notes the key role of sound working relationships, but also emphasises the need for them to be between 'players who have authority': neither the school professional nor school board chair (lay leader) dominating, and working together for the 'school as an institution'.

James et al. (2010) make a useful contrast between (i) the conceptualisation of school governance as *stewardship*, which fits with the idea of collective leadership, where the main task of the board is scrutiny, including self-scrutiny ('Are we doing the right thing here?'), and (ii) the *principal-agent* approach, in which a school board's main role is to hold the

school leadership to account. The authors note that while the English legislation has increasingly emphasised the latter, their case studies, including observations, showed boards taking more of a collective, stewardship approach. The principal-agent approach had been used by school governors in the case-study schools when confronted with non-performing principals – or governors. Sometimes it was the lay leaders taking a principal-agent approach; sometimes the headteachers. Thus the two approaches were not incompatible, so long as the stewardship approach was the default.

Interestingly, analysts of governance in private enterprise and larger public sector entities (Erakovic and Goel 2004, McKinlay 2003) also prefer a stewardship model of governance, enhancing trust-based relationships and shared knowledge, rather than principal-agent models emphasising control and detailed accountability "whose underlying premise is one of distrust" (McKinlay 2003, p. 10).

New Zealand's framing of school governance incorporates both this partnership of lay governors and school professionals for the good of the school and specific legal responsibilities such as the employment of principals, which position boards more in a 'control-accountability' framework. This dual framing has implications for what ERO reviews, and the indicators it offers and emphasises. The existing research would suggest that the weighting should be towards indicators that support a stewardship approach, since this is the type of approach most likely to support effective learning.

What do we know about effective school-located governance?

When I last reviewed research on school-located governance, studies in England and Wales showed some relationship between the quality of governance and student performance or OFSTED inspection results (Wylie 2007, pp. 7–12); they also showed that poor school governance was likely to co-occur with poor school professional leadership, teaching quality, challenging circumstances, and lack of external support. Cleanly separating out the role of governance from these other factors was not possible. Both the English National Audit Office and OFSTED analyses concluded that schools could function well without effective governance as long as they had strong professional leadership and teaching quality. The reverse does not hold: schools with effective governance also need professional leadership and teaching quality to function well.

At the time, New Zealand evidence about the relationship was more indirect. It also supported the stewardship approach. A study of improving schools showed the vital role school boards could play in lifting schools that had got into difficulty if they could attract and appoint a good principal, and if they used their connections in the parent community and beyond to support the school as well as gather useful feedback on the school's actions (Wylie 2007, p. 14–15). Board decisions on principal appointments are pivotal to school performance, and to the effectiveness of the board itself.

The English studies available in 2007 pointed to the importance of school boards operating in a stewardship role. To do this, they needed to:

- include governors from different parent communities
- have chairs who were skilled and committed to a stewardship mode of operating
- have governors who understood their role, particularly in relation to scrutiny and strategic thinking and planning, and who had training for their role
- have an active plan for continuity and succession.

Since then, three new studies have provided more information about what effective boards do. As well as further underlining the importance of stewardship, these studies amplify the need for a central focus on student learning in board scrutiny, the sharing of information in ways that support that scrutiny, and board self-review.

Using the findings from nine evaluative questions in 673 school reviews conducted between 2005 and 2007, ERO (2007) judged that 60 percent of boards were meeting the following criteria for 'well-governed schools':

- have an explicit focus on student learning and achievement supported by strong professional leadership
- bring experience and expertise to their roles and share an understanding of their roles and responsibilities
- strengthen partnerships in the school community through respectful relationships
- implement inclusive and responsive consultation processes that acknowledge diverse school communities
- are involved in strategic and annual planning that focuses on improving student achievement
- use robust self-review processes to evaluate identified aspects of school performance and to contribute to ongoing improvement
- have sound financial, property and personnel policies and procedures to guide the management of these resources.

OFSTED (2011) went to 14 schools whose governance had been judged outstanding in the 2009/2010 academic year. These included primary, secondary, and special schools, and schools whose 'governance judgement' at the prior inspection had ranged from 'outstanding' to 'inadequate'. OFSTED's visits included interviews and documentation, including board minutes, and reports to and by boards. "No single model of success was seen", but these key characteristics were identified:

- Positive relationships between governors and school leaders based on trust, integrity, openness and transparency, and clarity about roles and responsibilities
- Governors get good accessible information about what is going well and why, or not well and why from school leaders; board meetings include presentations from relevant staff to enable informed discussion

- Good information enables governors to properly scrutinize: to ask challenging questions around progress and plans. An essential board question for school leaders is 'What difference will this make for students and how will we know?'
- Support of honest, insightful school self-evaluation and support for steps to address any problems
- Willingness to support and take hard decisions in the interests of students
- A core of key governors working as a team (English school boards have between 9 and 20 members, including community and Local Education Authority representatives, operating through committees, so this core team would usually consist of the board chair and committee chairs). This team has strong relationships with school leaders and the rest of the board. Individual governors often 'link' with a particular school aspect, to ensure closer understanding
- Governors gain information themselves about the school's operations from visiting the school, talking with staff, students, parents; they gain information themselves from external experts, e.g., on the analysis of student data
- Good use of governors' time
- Use of governors' networks to ensure needed skills
- Clear induction for new governors
- Constant reflection on the board's own effectiveness and steps taken to ensure ongoing improvement or development, including training and how they organise board work.

A recent study of school governance in England (James et al., 2010) includes a literature review, a multi-level statistical analysis of the relationship between school board effectiveness and student performance, and case studies of a cross-section of 30 schools, which provide some useful illustrations of boards at work, particularly from meeting observations and accounts of school development and decisions in response to challenges.

This mixed-methods study concludes that "The lack of a capable governing body is not a neutral absence for the school; it is a substantial disadvantage" (p. 3). This conclusion appears to be based on the benefits to schools of a wider base of active stakeholders who put knowledge, networks, and energy into the school as an institution, so that schools are not vulnerable and dependent on a principal alone (pp. 88–89). The case studies show that while this input may not be reflected in improved student performance it does contribute to school resilience in what is a particularly demanding time for English schools.

The case studies show the importance of what happens in formal board meetings, but they also describe important work done outside meetings of the whole board, in interactions between governors and school leaders and other staff, and between governors.

This study's review of the research literature includes studies that I reviewed in 2007, and adds the results of a national survey of school governors (Balarin, Brammer, James & McCormack, 2008). This latter survey asked governors for their views of their board's effectiveness in relation to:

- a common vision of what the school is trying to achieve
- good communication
- good quality relevant information
- members feel able to speak their minds at meetings
- clearly structured agenda at meetings and good meeting attendance
- effective chairing
- periodic review of how the board is working (James et al., 2010, p. 25).

The statistical analysis found a small positive effect size[1] in the relationship between effective governance (using responses to the national survey of school governors) and student performance for primary schools, but not for secondary schools. The study authors put this difference down to the closer school knowledge of primary governors, who were more likely to "be in the school and the classrooms" (ibid, p. 77). This relationship between effective governance and student performance held for schools in low and high socioeconomic contexts, though the latter were more likely to have school boards that had stronger governance 'capital': " the network of individuals and their capabilities, relationships and motivations that are available for the governing of any particular school" (p. 4). However, the study also pointed to the importance of governance 'agency', "the energy, level of proactivity, drive and commitment to the governing" of a school, which could sometimes make up for lower levels of governance capital.

Much of the research evidence we have about effective school-located boards stems from England rather than New Zealand. However, while there are differences in the size and constituency of school governing bodies in the two countries, their purpose is much the same. The English findings are consistent with information from New Zealand and the anecdotal reports of those who work with school boards and can contrast experiences of boards in schools that are doing well or making improvements, with those in schools that are treading water, in spirals of decline, or in crisis.

The evidence about how effective boards work is also consistent with the emphasis here on the use of evidence-informed inquiry processes as a lever to lift the capability and performance of our own education system.

Distilling this down to a few key essentials that could provide boards with useful focus and feedback from ERO, I would suggest these three:

- the extent to which a board operates as a 'stewardship' of lay members and professionals
- the extent to which a board can scrutinise the work of the school for student benefit
- the extent of the board's own self-review.

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[1] Although the analytical method is described generally in an appendix to the report, the modelling and results are not reported specifically, so there are limits to what one can make of such findings.

ERO's current evaluation indicators for governance

These three key essentials are discernible in the introduction to the governance dimension in *Evaluation Indicators for School Reviews* (2011), but not as clearly as they could be. The introduction and the five key evaluative questions emphasise legal functions rather than the essence of effective board practice:

- What is the quality of governance in providing vision, values and strategic direction?
- What is the quality of the relationship between governance, leadership and management roles?
- How coherently does the board focus its efforts on student achievement, including the alignment of resources, policies and practices?
- How effectively are human, financial and property resources aligned and allocated to support the board and school's strategic direction?
- How well does the school provide evidence to support the board in its strategic planning and self review?

Once these evaluation questions have been unpacked into nine sets, with some shaping to align them to boards' legal responsibilities, we have 39 indicators:

- Vision and Values (4 indicators)
- Strategic planning and focus on student achievement (7 indicators)
- Use of achievement data (3 indicators)
- Self review (4 indicators)
- Allocation of resources (6 indicators)
- Board operation and management (4 indicators)
- Performance management (5 indicators)
- Leadership opportunities (1 indicator)
- Whānau and community relationships (5 indicators).

The plenitude of prompts and indicators, combined with the fact that the 'possible sources of evidence' are mostly school documents, suggests that what boards are being asked to do is provide an audit trail. This helps explain a recent comment that had puzzled me about a school "only meeting x number of the y number of things we were supposed to do" in their ERO review.

Some of the nine sets and many of the indicators are related to other dimensions of the ERO framework: they are not specific to the work of the board. This does not help boards to understand their particular role, or to develop it in the light of sound knowledge about what makes for effective school governance.

For example, the Allocation of Resources section prompts use of evidence from student data to decide priorities in spending, but it does not suggest using evidence (external as well as internal) when deciding how to spend money (i.e., how to make the most efficient and

effective use of resources), nor does it suggest reviewing whether spending has achieved its aim (i.e., was it effective?). One of the two evaluative prompts under Allocation of Resources, 'To what extent does the board have sufficient resources to support learning programmes for all students?' raises a question that few boards could answer.

Self-review is vital to board effectiveness. Yet NZCER's national school surveys show that only 29 percent of primary trustees (2013) and 42 percent of secondary trustees (2012) reported that their boards regularly reviewed their own performance (Wylie & Bonne 2014, p. 123; Wylie 2013, p. 39; p. 42). Board self-review was even less likely in decile 1–2 schools, where the government's priority learner groups are concentrated. The current Self-review section is more about school self-review as a whole, and about processes: things that can be easily audited, such as regularity of the monitoring and review cycle.

Board self-review could be read as included in the Performance Management section, which includes the evaluative prompt, 'To what extent are trustees supported to evaluate their performance as a board?' (perhaps a question for government agencies rather than boards themselves). Boards can spend a lot of time going through detailed plans and processes, thinking they are evaluating their performance, but they will not be doing this well if they do not prioritise scrutiny as a core board role. Boards should focus their own self-review on their role in ongoing school self-review.

A second relevant prompt can be found under Self review: 'How effective are … board self-review processes in identifying what is working well and what needs to be improved?' But again, the focus is on a (formal) process rather than what the board would be able to tell ERO (and itself, for that matter) if it asked:

- What have we changed as a result of our analysis and discussion of evidence related to our goals and targets?
- What difference did this make to the achievement of our goals and targets?
- What are we doing with our knowledge of this?

Questions like these have a double use: first, in the actual, ongoing work of the board; and second, when the board fronts up to periodic ERO review, when the quality of its practice undergoes external evaluation.

Such questions incorporate different aspects of governance without requiring that they be split across different sections and separately accounted for. By answering such questions, boards would give ERO meaningful information about resource allocation, self-review, the quality of information going to the board, the collaborative nature of lay and professional governors, and the quality of board scrutiny.

To build school governance capability through its review processes, ERO needs to trim its indicators back to the essentials, guided by questions such as those that I have suggested.

Doing this would also make for greater transparency in the judgments that ERO makes about the quality of school governance.

Indicators alone will not provide sufficient leverage to improve school governance – they need to be accompanied by illustrations of what effective governance actually looks like in practice, along with with benchmarks that boards themselves can use. Further, if we want to improve governance capability using sound indicators as levers, it would be useful to include proven board chairs in ERO review teams.

There needs to be a coherent, shared, core focus if we are to make more effective use of school boards to get gains in student learning. ERO should be working with NZSTA, sector organisations and the Ministry to provide sound illustrations of good practice, and coherence in training, resources, and support.

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