



Your thought leader in
school governance

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Governing Body Foundation
14 Harfield Village Centre
48 2nd Avenue
Harfield Village
CAPE TOWN
7708

Tel: 021 671 6756
Cell: 072 98 55 456
Fax: 086 575 0399
Email: timgordon@gbf.org.za
Web: www.gbf.org.za

Undercurrents

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South Africa appears to sit almost permanently in election mode. In December it was the ANC top brass; and next year it will be the turn of the parliamentary and provincial polls. This year, of course, it is our own governing body elections that will take centre stage. They are an absolutely critical part of the democratic process in the education sector, and the democratisation of society as a whole. As with any other election, they provide the opportunity for the public voice to be heard and we go into them unprepared at our peril. This is the first of eight pieces we will be sending out this term, with a view to addressing the upcoming elections, governance and governing body issues. We trust they will help enhance the efficacy of the elections, as well as the role, standing and performance of those chosen to serve for the next three years.

GOVERNING BODY ELECTIONS: AN IMPORTANT COMPONENT OF OUR DEMOCRATIC PRACTICES

A little bit of history

Where did this rather strange electoral animal, the School Governing Body, come from? It was shortly after the first universal adult franchise elections of 1994 that the South African Cabinet decided that the country's system of school organisation, governance and funding "must be transformed in accordance with democratic values and practice, and the requirements of the Constitution". As part of these moves towards true democracy, it was decided that at the local tier of government in the education sphere, the governance functions would be exercised by something to be called a governing body. The system that emerged was not arrived at simply by accident or default: it was the product of deeply held political convictions and philosophies.

A negotiated partnership

The imperative that education would reflect the democratic changes taking place in the political sphere gave rise to a negotiated partnership between state and society, as well as to the inclusion of additional stakeholders in governance structures (e.g. teaching staff, non-teaching staff and even learners in secondary schools). This was intended to be no fake attachment or pretence at collaboration: it was ordained that the partnership must be a genuine alliance between a local community and the provincial education department, with the education department's role being restricted to the minimum required for legal accountability. In this partnership, the balance of decision making would rest with the governing body in accordance with its capacity.

In keeping with the above, it was resolved by the powers-that-be that they would grant to parents extensive governance rights and a meaningful say in the nature of the schools attended by their children. The new governance system would involve a radical decentralisation of powers, with the management of governance responsibilities devolved to local schools and communities, and the resultant governing bodies would have the right to sit in council, formulate policies and even levy 'taxes' in the form of school fees for those who earned enough to pay them. The critical rights to be granted to governors included the following:

- ◆ **Substantial decision-making powers** which would include, but not be limited to:
 - ◇ setting policies in fields like admissions, language, religion in education and finance;
 - ◇ governance authority over matters such as subject choice, the extra-mural curriculum, school uniforms, school times and learner codes of conduct.

- ◆ **Staff appointments:** The responsibility of making teaching staff appointments was the clearest indication of the extent to which real devolution of decision-making power to the school level was to take place. The authors of the new dispensation accepted that:
 - ◇ staff appointments are a shared interest of the governing body and the provincial education authority, with the *initiative rightfully belonging at school level*;
 - ◇ the appointment, though ultimately made by the provincial education department, should be made *in consultation with the governing body, in a true display of partnership*, and while the department has the discretion to decline an SGB's recommendation, it should be done *only on the grounds of professional incompetence, inappropriate qualifications, misconduct, or prima facie evidence of improper influence*.

(This makes for very interesting reading in the light of current proposals included in the 2017 Basic Education Laws Amendment Bill, but that is a story for another day. Suffice it to say that there is no doubt that there was a real and clear intention during the period of transformation to grant meaningful rights to governing bodies.)

Electing the Governing Body

So that is where the governing body comes from. Here follow some 'quick hints' on how governors could be elected in the upcoming elections:

You obviously need to avoid any hint that you may be involved in manipulation of the voting process. While adhering to this, you nevertheless need to:

- ◆ ***Try to get the necessary quorum at the first election meeting***—having to go to a second meeting is frustrating for all involved, including the parents who took the trouble to arrive at the first meeting; time-consuming; and opens the process to manipulation.
- ◆ ***Hold your poll as early in the election period as possible***, so as to allow time for a second round of voting during the first term, if that should become necessary.
- ◆ ***Impress on your parent body the importance of the election*** and the significant powers still vested in governing bodies — meaning that it is critically important that they turn out and get the right people elected.
- ◆ ***Impress on your staff that those who they elect need to be people that can add value to the school and the governing body***—they should be visionaries with something to offer, not shop stewards whose major role is to raise personal complaints.
- ◆ Attempt to ensure that there are ***candidates from all the critical segments of the school community***—perhaps significant religious groupings, ethno-cultural groups, geographical areas, hostel parents and the like.
- ◆ Do your best to ensure that you will have candidates making themselves available for election who have the at least some of the ***skills you need*** to help govern the school—financial skills, HR experience, knowledge of grounds and buildings, legal knowledge, IT sector experience; people with standing in the community you serve. Remember, ***if you do not have people with such high-order professional, financial and business skills in your parent body, you are entitled to try to co-opt people — including staff members — who are in a position to help; but recognize also that influential “ordinary” parents understand your community, can inform you about it, get buy-in from their peers and the community, and help retain “the common touch” and a “feet-on-the-ground” approach. Such people can bring great value and make an enormous contribution to the SGB—don’t under-estimate their potential and value.***

Finally, how should the elected group rise to meet these lofty ideals?

It has become widely accepted as part and parcel of the introduction of a new position, role or task, that the expectations attached to it must be laid down, explained, elucidated and clarified. Such expectations and elucidations are, in the jargon of management, generally referred to as *standards*. As examples, we have seen the education department publishing *Standards for School Principalship*; authorities providing *Standards for School Facilities*; manufacturers setting standards for the products they produce; and governments laying down standards to be met by those elected to office or appointed into positions of responsibility or authority.

We in schools are no different, and in the belief that it is necessary to establish a clear and agreed understanding of what the South African education system expects of those who are entrusted with the governance of schools, the Governing Body Foundation has looked to do the same. However, there currently appears to be no common and universally accepted understanding on the specifics that should be required or demanded of school governing bodies, although there has been much general talk about expectations in both the public and private sectors. We have therefore developed a tentative set of *Standards for School Governance* that defines the role of governing bodies in schools and identifies and highlights the key aspects of the structures, procedures, professionalism, image and competencies expected.

To kick off this series of ours, they are attached for your information and use, while the next issue in this series will look at the characteristics and capabilities of those who want to be—or should be—elected.