


DEI in school governance: Interview with Chiltern Learning Trust leadership

17 February 2025  Victoria Hatton

As part of Browne Jacobson's partnership with the National Governance Association to broaden the diversity of school governing bodies, our education team has gone out to the sector to find out about the various approaches to diversity, inclusion and equity (DEI) in school governance.

Here, we speak to the Chiltern Learning Trust's CEO, Adrian Rogers, and Chair of Governors, Paul Hammond, about their own experiences.

The interview also covers how DEI has supported better decision-making, the professional skills that can be developed by governorships and advice to prospective governors.

Overview of DEI in school governance

Q: What does diversity mean to you in the context of school governance, and how does it shape the future of education?

Paul: Diversity in school governance means having different voices that authentically represent the stakeholders within the school, such as staff governors, people from the local community, and professionals from various fields. It's about reflecting the community's cultural backgrounds and ensuring a variety of opinions and perspectives. This diversity is crucial for offering a balanced view and includes not just diversity of colour and role, but also of opinion. It's important to welcome contributions from individuals who might be seen as challenging or opinionated, as long as they have the school's best interests at heart.

Adrian: Adding to Paul's point, diversity is essential for creating a sense of belonging among staff, pupils and parents. It's important for the governing body to reflect the community it serves to foster a sense of community and acceptance. Diversity of opinion, as mentioned by Paul, strengthens the governing body by preventing it from becoming an echo chamber and ensuring accountability.

Q: Why is it important for businesses, schools, and individuals to work together to promote diversity and inclusion on school boards?

Paul: Collaboration among businesses, schools and individuals is vital for bringing diverse perspectives to school governance, especially from the business community. This is particularly important for schools with a specialised focus, like engineering, where input from local businesses can help align the school's curriculum with the job market's needs. Engaging with local industries and professionals helps schools prepare students for future employment by understanding the skills and qualifications that are in demand.

Adrian: The involvement of business representatives on school boards brings a valuable external viewpoint and challenges conventional practices within the education sector. This diversity of thought and challenge is beneficial not only for preparing students for their future careers, but also for enhancing the school's management and practices. Business leaders can ask probing questions and offer insights from a different perspective, which enriches the governance and decision-making process within schools.

Personal experiences and background

Q: How has your unique background and perspective influenced your approach to school governance?

Paul: My background as a headteacher and senior leader, coupled with my current involvement in education as a consultant visiting numerous schools, significantly influences my approach to school governance. Being deeply rooted in the educational landscape and having a personal connection to diverse cultural groups in Luton enriches my perspective. This unique background allows me to bring a current and diverse viewpoint to school governance, and to influence the appointment of governors who can represent various communities authentically.

Adrian: My role differs as I often participate in governing bodies in a different capacity as an educational expert. However, we encourage our senior staff and those in professional development programmes to engage with boards outside their usual environments, including schools, charities and voluntary organisations. This practice is not only developmental, but also promotes a broader understanding of governance and community engagement, which is vital for effective leadership and diversity in governance.

Q: How has your experience as a school governor shaped your views on diversity and inclusion in other areas of your life or work?

Paul: Working with people from different backgrounds and communities has highlighted my limited knowledge, stimulating a desire to learn more, listen more and ask more questions. Engaging with diverse perspectives, especially in challenging situations, has deepened my empathy and understanding, influencing how I approach diversity and inclusion beyond school governance.

Adrian: My experience has reinforced my belief in the importance of community engagement and leadership that extends beyond the school to the wider community. Leading in diverse communities like Luton has emphasised the need for school leaders to work closely with their communities, promoting a broader definition of school leadership that includes delivering not just academic results, but also engaging with and leading the community. This perspective on leadership and governance underscores the importance of diversity at the board level to ensure access to, and engagement, with the community.

Impact of DEI on decision-making

Q: Can you share a specific instance where having a diverse governing board led to a better decision or outcome for the school?

Adrian: A notable instance involved the inclusion of alumni as governors in several schools, which has been profoundly impactful. These alumni serve as mentors and role models, particularly in communities with low socio-economic status and potentially low aspirations. Their involvement has significantly raised the aspirational ethos within the schools, attributed largely to the diversity of governance. Another example highlighted was the influence of a Black member of Luton Town Council, Councillor Jacqui Burnett, on the arts curriculum and facilities in a new academy. Her advocacy and informed arguments led to decisions that have positively impacted the school's direction in arts education.

Paul: Having community members on the governing board is especially for navigating sensitive community issues and ensuring the school's initial responses to divisive geopolitical issues, such as the Israel-Palestine war, are appropriate and well-received.

Q: In what ways do you think increased diversity in school governance can inspire and impact students?

A: Increased diversity in school governance, especially through the involvement of alumni, can significantly inspire and impact students by providing them with relatable role models who have succeeded in various fields. This visibility of success from similar backgrounds helps to combat stereotypes and raise aspirations among students. The diverse governance also ensures that the school's decisions and policies are more reflective of and responsive to the community's needs, fostering a more inclusive and aspirational school culture.

Professional development and employer support

Q: What skills from your professional life have been most useful in your governance role, and what new skills have you developed?

Paul: Skills such as chairing meetings, speaking with authority and facilitating discussions have been useful in my governance role. One of the values of governance roles is in broadening one's professional knowledge and skills, particularly in understanding institutional obligations.

Q: How do you think employers can better support and encourage their employees to become school governors, particularly those from underrepresented groups?

Paul: Employers should encourage their employees to engage in school governance by allowing them the necessary time off for meetings and school visits. This not only aids schools in making informed educational decisions, but also enriches the employees' professional development and aligns with principles of social responsibility. There are, however, sometimes delicate situations where we may have to manage tensions that can arise from conflicts of interest, such as the involvement of a manufacturer that supplies the arms trade with a school, especially during a time of war that may affect some of our pupils' families. This highlights the importance of navigating reputational issues carefully.

Adrian: Encouraging future leaders within trusts to sit on governing bodies can be an important form of professional development. This experience provides a broader perspective on school leadership and governance, offering insights into accountability and strategic decision-making. This exposure can enhance leadership skills, making it a valuable opportunity for both educational professionals and business leaders.

Recruitment and broader implications

Q: In what ways do you think schools and governing boards can better reach out to and recruit diverse governors (not just physically diverse, but diverse backgrounds, experience, etc)?

Paul: Schools and governing boards need to be intentional in their recruitment efforts to attract diverse governors. This involves actively inviting applications and nominations for parent governors, identifying potential candidates during school events, and personally encouraging individuals of prominence and ability to apply. Co-opting individuals with specific skills is also a strategy, as exemplified by the recruitment of a young Black female lawyer who brought valuable skills and served as an excellent role model. Schools must proactively engage with their parent body, set aside any concerns potential candidates might have, and demonstrate the value they place on diverse opinions and experiences.

Q: What do you think are the most significant benefits for both schools and businesses when employees take on school governance roles?

When employees take on school governance roles, schools benefit from the diverse perspectives and professional skills these individuals bring. Businesses benefit as well, as their employees gain strategic knowledge, leadership experience and a broader understanding of community engagement through their governance roles. This reciprocal relationship enhances both educational outcomes and business leadership capabilities.

Q: In your experience, what makes school governance an important step towards a more inclusive and equitable society?

Inclusive school governance is a vital component of creating a more equitable society. By ensuring that governing boards reflect the diversity of the school's community, schools can make decisions that are more representative of, and responsive to, all stakeholders. This inclusivity in governance can model societal values of diversity, equity and inclusion, contributing to broader societal change.

Advice for future governors

Q: What advice would you give to someone from an underrepresented background who's considering becoming a school governor but feels it might not be for them?

A: The advice for someone from an underrepresented background considering becoming a school governor is to take the first step and talk to the headteacher. This initial conversation can provide insights into what the role entails, the expectations and how they can contribute to the school's governance. It's an opportunity to express willingness to serve and to understand the impact one can have on the school community.

Paul: School governance is about community service, not self-service, and it's crucial for potential governors to see it as an opportunity to contribute to the well-being of the school and its students. The key is to approach the role with a mindset of serving the community and making a positive difference in the lives of children.

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Key contact

Victoria Hatton
Partner

victoria.hatton@brownejacobson.com
+44 (0)330 045 2808