

Reflecting our communities: The push for diversity in school governance

28 February 2025  Claire Archibald

As a school governor, I've seen first-hand the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in governance. In partnership with the National Governance Association (NGA), Browne Jacobson are working to encourage more people to take on governance roles and ensure boards truly reflect the communities they serve. As part of our project, I had the privilege of speaking with two leaders in the field: Samantha Dossetter, a governance professional at Nexus Education Schools Trust, and Petra Yazbeck, the Co-Vice Chair and Chair of the Resources Committee at The Totteridge Academy.

Through these conversations, numerous common themes emerged, highlighting the importance of DEI in school governance. From their insights, it became clear that a diverse board not only enhances governance but also positively impacts students, the education system and employers of governors.

Beyond physical representation

One of the key points that both Samantha and Petra raised was the need for a variety of skills and perspectives on a governing board.

Samantha highlighted that true diversity should include skills and cognitive diversity, saying: "Diversity is about far more than just physical appearances—it's also about bringing a mix of skills to the table. To make sure our board is well-rounded and skilled, we regularly perform skills audits. This helps us identify any gaps and ensures we have a diverse range of expertise to guide us."

Petra touched upon the value of bringing in younger governors who can offer unique insights, adding: "We're seeing an increase in younger governors on boards nowadays, which is fantastic. Their presence brings fresh perspectives, particularly in understanding emerging technologies, and their impact on our schools and students."

Speaking from my own governance experience, having diversity of age, particularly when sitting on exclusion panels, has been extremely beneficial in situations where issues with social media and technology arise. Getting a younger perspective can help students feel understood and bridge the technology age gap which so often exists in these situations. I've witnessed how having younger governors in the room creates a more balanced discussion, ensuring decisions take into account the realities of young people's digital lives today.

By prioritising diverse representation across different demographics, be it age, gender, skills, or professional experience, schools benefit from a board that approaches problems with varied angles and solutions.

Reflecting the community and empowering students

Both governors discussed with me how having a diverse board creates a sense of representation that resonates with students and the wider community.

Petra shared that her school's leadership made a conscious effort to build a diverse governance team—one that reflects the diversity of the student population. This intentional approach not only signals to students that their voices matter but also offers a powerful example of inclusive leadership. When students see themselves reflected in their school's governing body, they are more likely to believe that leadership roles are within their reach.

Similarly, Samantha stressed the value of diversity in decision-making, particularly in situations like disciplinary meetings. She explained that having governors from varied backgrounds helps ensure decisions are approached with empathy, fairness, and cultural awareness. For students and parents, seeing someone with shared experiences on these panels can make them feel truly heard and understood. As Samantha put it: "A diverse board brings different questions, different viewpoints, and ultimately, better scrutiny to decisions. For instance, in deprived communities where families might have had negative experiences with education, it's essential for their children to have proper representation. Having relatable figures on boards helps to break down barriers and ensures that no part of the community is overlooked or forgotten in decision-making processes."

Breaking down barriers to participation

One of the challenges both Samantha and Petra acknowledged was the difficulty in finding the right governors who mirror the demographics of the schools they serve.

Samantha suggested this can be improved by tapping into a range of recruitment channels, such as using services like [Governors for Schools](#), or looking at school alumni who may already have valuable professional experience, as well as the lived experience of being a student. She advised that alumni who graduated around five years prior could offer both workplace experience and a strong connection to the school community.

Speaking about the potential challenges faced for finding the right candidate, Petra pointed out: "Resilience is key- finding the right board members might take time, but the effort is well worth it when it creates a board that truly reflects the needs and values of the school."

Reflecting on her own journey, Petra told me she was interviewed several times before being accepted onto a school governing board. She recalled: "I was confident that despite those initial refusals, I would be able to add value, so it was just a matter of persevering and getting a foot in the door."

Both interviewees agreed on the importance of making adaptations to ensure the role is accessible to a wide range of people. This could include offering flexibility in meeting times and ensuring that meetings can be attended remotely.

Samantha explained: "Our board schedules meetings a year in advance and offers support, such as childcare assistance, to help governors attend meetings – we really don't want anyone to be excluded or feel they can't be involved."

Striking a balance: Creating a supportive but challenging environment

Another consistent theme from both conversations was the importance of creating an environment where new governors feel supported but also challenged. Both governors spoke about the need to mentor new governors, reassuring them their unique perspectives are valued. It's essential that newcomers feel confident that their role is to contribute to the board's work, not just to agree with the status quo.

Samantha and Petra both touched on the idea that school leaders must be confident and courageous enough to actively seek out governors who may challenge their thinking. This requires a level of trust in the process and an openness to different viewpoints, which can be daunting but ultimately strengthens the board's ability to make well-rounded decisions.

Governance within Samantha's MAT ensures the one constant is a fresh injection of opinions. "We limit the chair's term to eight years to ensure fresh perspectives and make room for new voices," she said.

The broader benefits of school governance

Finally, both governors highlighted how employers can benefit from encouraging their staff to become school governors.

Petra, who entered governance with a corporate background, noted how the skills she developed, including strategic thinking and decision-making, are directly transferable to any workplace.

A study by [Governors for Schools](#) on the impact of school governance on professionals highlights its significant benefits:

- 84% of employees recognised the skills gained through their governance roles were directly applicable to their professional careers.
- 73% of respondents reported their experience as governors improved time and task management skills.
- Over half of the governors reported an improvement in their ability to build and maintain professional relationships.

- Many governors referred to an enhanced sense of purpose and self-belief after becoming a governor, which in turn helped to improve their confidence.

By supporting staff in taking on these roles, employers not only help their employees grow but also contribute to a wider societal good by helping to diversify the pool of school governors.

The path forward

Having served as a school governor myself, these conversations with Samantha and Petra have reinforced my belief that diversity in governance is not merely a box-ticking exercise but a necessity for effective school leadership.

A diverse board brings richness of thought, broader perspectives, and more comprehensive decision-making that ultimately benefits our students.

For those considering becoming a governor, I can personally attest to the immense rewards of the role. You'll develop valuable skills, make a meaningful contribution to your community, and help shape the future of education.

I particularly encourage those who might not see themselves as 'typical' governors to step forward. Your background, lived experience, and skills are precisely what our schools need. The time commitment can be manageable (typically six to ten meetings per year), and the impact you can have is significant.

If you're interested in becoming a school governor or would like to learn more about how your organisation can support governance diversity, please see below:

- **Connect with [the NGA](#)** for resources, support, and expert guidance.
- **Visit [Governors for Schools](#)** to learn more and explore current opportunities.
- **Reach out to your local school** directly to enquire about available governor roles.

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