

# Diverse governing bodies, with long serving and newer governors, work

By Liz Cross

Governance expert at The Connectives and  
Governor at St Mary's Church of England Primary School

**T**here's a real danger when we talk about governance that we get so hooked into the process that we forget its purpose. Having been a school governor for 26 years on the same board, I speak from experience that our purpose – that is creating the vision and ensuring it's made real for the benefit of pupils, their parents and the community - is at its heart.

And despite the fact that we might not comply with conventional wisdom – on turnover of governors, on the size of governing body or recruitment of professionals as a tactic – what we have been doing seems to be playing its part in our school's success. St Mary's Church of England Primary School in Moss Side, Manchester, has just been announced Primary School of the Year in the *TES* awards.

The school went from OFSTED special measures 15 years ago to 'Outstanding' in 2009 to being recognised nationally in the *TES* awards. This was due largely to the inspirational leaders, staff, parents, pupils and community and in part to the longevity and diversity of its governing body. And perhaps that wouldn't have been the case if the view of some DfE officials had prevailed and our governing body had been made up of accountants and lawyers, with governors being able to serve for six or nine years.

We've applied common sense at St Mary's and have excelled over the years due to a diverse range of school governors working within an inspiring school and community. Just one in five families at the school speak English as a first language and its wide variety of nationalities, cultures and life experiences in the school and community is quite rightly reflected in our governing body - it's probably more diverse than the UN!

Don't misunderstand me, I believe the principles of Langlands, Higgs and Cadbury are absolutely right and that boards and governing bodies should pay close attention to the tensions between continuity, succession and renewal. At St Mary's we've struck the balance well. Yet our agenda has always been to change the way people see Moss Side, in order to lift the aspirations of our children, families and the wider community. That we've got high schools, further education, higher education and employers to understand why our pupils should be targets on their list to recruit could not have been achieved with just six years in office. Over the years, the continuing focus of the school has been a relentless lifting of the range of voices and aspirations of the many people we serve.

The diversity of our governing body means we're never complacent or cliquish, or worse still, a bland group that fails to drive extraordinary outcomes. We're proud of the fact that we've helped the school achieve by having committed, bold and brave people working together with its best interests in mind and bringing a wide range of talents to the table. We bring all we know and, importantly, all that we are and if some of us happen to have business experience or professional qualifications, it's a bonus, not criteria we start with.

As schools comprise a wide variety of people and backgrounds, so this should be reflected in their governing bodies. Let's keep an eye on who we really need sat around our governing body tables, how long we can keep them so short, medium and long term goals can be set, and what really makes them work. What's been achieved at St Mary's could not have been achieved with a handful of professionals spending just six years in office.



*Liz Cross*