

From little acorns: The role of governors in developing behaviour policy and approach

Being a school governor is often a difficult role, but perhaps no more so than in the task of establishing behaviour policy. The potential for governors to become involved in the detail of classroom management or perhaps to be sidelined in discussions about behaviour is very real. Governors can often believe that the business of dealing with behaviour in school is the sole territory of the experts – that they should not meddle with teachers' practice. On the other hand there are governors who become frustrated at being regarded as 'rubber stampers'; a group that simply endorse pre-determined decision-making on policy direction and exclusion matters. It is a difficult dilemma – how might the governing body both challenge and support their school?

A possible framework for resolving some of the difficulties around the task of behaviour policy is to consider the image of an oak tree (see diagram). We will be familiar with the shape of a traditional oak – a large, full crown of foliage and a sturdy thick trunk, with an indication at ground level of a substantial root system running deep into the earth. Often when we start to think about developing policy on behaviour our attention is first drawn to the obvious themes:

- What should teachers do when children misbehave?
- How might we reward good behaviour?
- What rules should we have in the classroom or playground?

It is these aspects of whole school approach that are the most visible – like the crown on the oak – they cover aspects of practice that appear to be immediately important. The discussions around what are essentially techniques can then tend to develop into heated debates about the issue of consistency. Teachers and school managers focus on how best to ensure greater consistency in *managing* behaviour.

The discussion around consistency is important, but it is questionable as to whether the focus should initially be on rules, rewards and sanctions. Similarly, schools can spend a great deal of time in considering the procedures for managing (mis)behaviour:

- Who should be responsible for dealing with low-level behaviour, pupils sent out of class, highly disruptive incidents?
- How might referral systems integrate with the school's SEN, curriculum and pastoral arrangements?
- What is the role of the class teacher/tutor regarding the management of behaviour?

Once again, there is an understandable need to clarify these issues. The system and process that support staff in using techniques are less apparent but crucial in maintaining a whole school approach, in the similar way that the oak's trunk underpins the crown. However, this area may also not be the most helpful starting point for governors becoming involved in developing policy.

In developing or reviewing school behaviour policy the starting point must be a discussion around core themes:

- What are the **values** that lie at the centre of our being a school community?
- What **principles** and **aims** are we committed to as a school?
- What kind of **relationships** do we want to build within our school community?

These are the roots of behaviour policy development. They may not be the most obvious starting points but they are by far the most critical in shaping what happens around the school.

If schools are keen to develop teacher consistency then the focus at the outset should be on encouraging a coherent understanding amongst staff of what they most value, what are their aims, for the children and themselves, and what kind of relationships they are seeking to promote. It will be far more profitable to spend a professional development day on these tasks than leap-frogging into

discussions about what to do when children shout out or bully others or flout uniform rules.

Discussion around the roots of policy development should be the focus for governor involvement. Process and technique are invariably about *managing* behaviour round school. Hopefully this is not simply focussed on pupils but addresses adult behaviour too. In general terms these aspects can remain the domain of the practitioners and managers. Establishing clarity regarding values, aims and relationships is more centred on setting a quality standard for the school. It is inextricably linked to the wider development and maintenance of school ethos and purpose and this is prime territory for governors.

If our school is clear at the outset about its policy roots, then discussions around process and technique will be more effective and arguable straightforward. Support from governors at this early stage will have dividends in the latter part of the process. Let's return to the image of the tree and introduce the concept of sap rising from the base, through the trunk and into the highly visible crown. We can perhaps see how the input of governors in helping set the tone of approach can feed into the established techniques and processes of classroom practice.

In contributing to the policy development process governors can generate helpful debate through asking the types of questions that prompt thinking on values, aims and relationships:

- Who might we involve in the process?
 - Staff, parents, other agencies, community groups – children?
- How might we involve them?
 - Working group, consultation exercise, focus group, school council?
- How do we know what we know about *school* behaviour – as opposed to individual children's behaviour?
- What understanding of behaviour do we have in our school?
 - Can individuals be taught to behave?

- Are individuals inherently able to reflect on their behaviour and think about doing things differently?
 - Is behaviour essentially motivated by how individuals feel?
 - Is behaviour understood only by looking at the context in which it takes place?
- If our school is developing new, experimental work focussed on improving behaviour, how might the wider school community learn and adapt as a result of the experience?

These lines of enquiry may appear far from the more conventional discussions we may have had about behaviour. However, from a governor perspective they must be the priorities. Resisting the urge to be drawn into the process and technique debates is difficult but necessary. In the hurly-burly of day-to-day school life, teachers and school managers can understandably become preoccupied with the 'what to do when Johnny disrupts' type of questions. The role of governors should be legitimately focussed on the longer term and safeguard the aspirations for the school – for both staff and children.