OPERATION OF PRIMARY SCHOOL BOARDS OF MANAGEMENT

Submission to:
The Standing Committee

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1 INTRODUCTION

IPPN's comprehensive study of primary school Boards of Management in 2011, documented in our publication *Primary School Governance – Challenges and Opportunities,* confirmed that Boards of management are properly constituted, and that many are diligent in their compliance with the regulations for Boards of management. Our research concluded, however, that some Boards fall short on required practices and operate a low-level minimalist approach to governance. It is our position that there has not been significant change in this regard in recent years. Many Boards are still not engaged in effective school governance, are unsure of roles and responsibilities, and are short on the skill set required to fulfil the various functions that fall within their remit. In many cases chairpersons and principals are the governance force in schools, with other Board representatives providing tacit support without being key contributors to the governance of the school.

2 CONCLUSIONS

There are a number of conclusions that can be drawn from the research on primary school governance in Ireland. The following represent the main challenges – the big, urgent issues that prompt reform and that must be addressed if schools are to improve their governance practices.

2.1 Primary schools in Ireland are managed rather than governed.

There have been significant changes in primary education since the replacement of school managers by Boards of managements four decades ago. Schools now need strong, informed, effective, responsive governance structures that are compliant, proactive and accountable, thus contributing to an assurance of high quality education for pupils.

2.2 A new governance structure is required to support a far more complex school system with educational, legislative, financial, human and other resource responsibilities.

Irish primary schools were legislation-light when the Board of Management structure was constituted. There are now more than twenty pieces of legislation that impact directly on primary schools. These refer to schools' legal, financial, resource and other responsibilities. Given that schools are now operating within a much more complex framework, the long-established management model needs to be replaced with a more appropriate governance structure*.*

2.3 Governance by voluntary representation alone is no longer sustainable.

The significant legal, financial, human resource and building/maintenance responsibilities that now impact on schools demand high-level compliance. This can only be assured when expertise is available to schools. The committed, volunteer 'feel' of primary schools need to be supported by appropriate professional services.

2.4 Current governance structures remain embedded in an outdated system of management whereby most activity and responsibility is retained by/left to the chairperson and the principal.

The formation of Boards of Management as an extension of the one-person-manager model influences Board members in taking collective responsibility for governance.

2.5 The external appointment of chairperson weakens the leadership potential within governance

Most Board members, including chairpersons, are unhappy with the imposition of a chairperson on the Board. Many religious chairpersons indicate that their preference is to be a member of the Board rather than chairperson, that they have been 'reluctant' chairpersons for many years, that they do not have the time or the skills that other Board members might have, and that their commitment to school governance is a distraction to core pastoral duties. Board members feel chairpersons should be selected by the Board at the first meeting.

2.6 Governance impacts heavily on the workload of principals

The overlap between governance and management, and the absence of any paid professional services to support governance, leaves most principals who are already experiencing overload in their day-to-day school responsibilities, filling the governance gaps. This has worsened since 2011.

2.7 The large number of small primary schools in Ireland, and the voluntary nature of Boards, leaves many schools struggling to fill some positions, thus reducing the capacity for good governance.

In some cases people with legal, financial, human resource and other expertise are not available to schools through the representative structure. In other cases professional expertise is available exclusively to one Board within a parish or community with no facility to extend such professional support to other Boards in the same parish or community.

2.8 Training is available but many feel that it falls far short of what is required.

Most Board members are unhappy with the extent and quality of training available to them. Some members have had training opportunities but have not availed of them. This impacts on governance effectiveness, and may explain the unequal participation of members at and between meetings.

3 RECOMMENDATIONS

Governance of Irish primary schools needs to be redesigned to accommodate a rapidly changing society, an education system that has a strong legislative underpinning, that is becoming more community-based than parish-focused and a school population that is more diverse and more demanding in terms of the expectations of parents and the needs of children.

The following recommendations focus on the foundations for good governance:

3.1 Primary schools need to be both governed and managed.

The current 'Board of Management' entity is a misnomer. Governance needs to be clearly defined and distinct from day-to-day school management. Governance is about vision, mission, goals, direction, policy, values and compliance. It supports and enables effective school management.

3.2 Management should be defined in the context of the day-today operation of the school.

Management requires the accessible, visible, leadership of the principal and the middle leadership team. It is about leading and inspiring people, inducting and coaching, evaluating children's learning, communicating internally and externally, planning, and implementing policy.

3.3 The chairperson should be selected by the Board.

The Board, at its first meeting, should select the chairperson. This should ensure that the most appropriate person, with the necessary skills, experience and time, is the person selected to chair meetings and lead the governance group.

3.4 The role of the principal in school governance should be clarified.

Governance and management will be more clearly defined if the principal is in attendance at, reporting to, and contributing to governance, but not a member of the Board.

3.5 Smaller schools should be encouraged and incentivised to establish shared governance structures.

Resolving the overlap between governance and management should facilitate a governance structure for clusters of schools within a community. This should ensure a more skilled, effective representation on governance and the availability of a sufficient number of people with the time and the interest to commit to governance.

3.6   Legal, financial, human resource and building/maintenance expertise should be available on a cluster or regional basis to all schools.

School governance cannot continue on an entirely voluntary basis. The increasingly complex nature of education requires an availability of paid professional services on an ongoing basis to all schools. This should ensure greater planning for, and sharing of, facilities and expertise.

3.7   Training should be provided for, and attended by, all Board members at the beginning of their four-year term, and as required thereafter.

Schools can only be effective and accountable if appropriate training is provided (and availed of) on an ongoing basis to the Board as a corporate entity.

3.8   Training should be provided for individuals who have specific roles and responsibilities in governance.

Training must respond to the differentiated needs of Boards and of Board members on matters such as chairing of meetings, human resource management in schools, legal implications for Boards, managing school finances etc.

3.9   Good governance should be underpinned by effective planning, recording and reporting.

Boards must plan, record and report effectively. Structures need to be clearly outlined, and adhered to, if effectiveness and accountability are to be assured.

3.10   Adequate, skilled administrative support should be put in place to enable principals to fulfil both their governance and instructional leadership responsibilities.

The principal is key to effective school governance and efficient school management. Ensuring that the principal can fulfil the distinct roles of secretary to the Board and leader of teaching and learning requires appropriate, professional resources, including secretarial support, appropriate office space, and access to paid financial and legal services.

3.11   Governance roles should be defined and duties and responsibilities delegated.

All members of a school 'Board of governance' should understand their collective and individual responsibilities. Individual responsibilities would include areas such as chairperson, treasurer, secretary, recording secretary, capital projects' officer, maintenance officer, safety officer and school premises' officer.

3.12 Governance should include the formation of sub-committees, and co-option to the Board or to sub-committees of the Board, when necessary.

Very few Boards have any structures beyond full-Board meetings, and no facility for the co-option of members that might contribute to a specific issue under consideration. This diminishes the potential effectiveness of the Board.

These recommendations they challenge current governance structures in Irish primary schools. The voluntary contribution of thousands of people over many years to Boards of management has ensured that Ireland's extensive network of primary schools has been well supported. People have volunteered legal, financial, human resource, architectural, building and other services to schools. This community spirit in contributing to quality learning and teaching will, hopefully, continue. It must, however, be underpinned by effective governance structures that ensure that *all* communities can provide effectively and efficiently for the educational needs of their children.