

A vision comes first

The dedication of school governors is not questioned, but their first responsibility – to defend what is distinctive about Catholic education and promote its mission – receives too little attention

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TO BE called a guardian of a vision might well seem somewhat mythical, straight out of the world of the ancient Greeks. Having just completed a round of governor training days across a range of dioceses, I never fail to be impressed by the dedication, commitment and generosity of so many people who are willing to give up their free time, unpaid, to carry out an enormous task.

This responsibility is subjected to scrutiny by Ofsted under the pressure of their performance being made public. In both the Ofsted section 5 and 48 inspections (48 being the diocesan inspection), there is an extensive list of responsibilities concerning leadership and management including the role of governors' vision and ambition for the whole school community.

A guardian of the vision of the Church in education is exactly what a governor in a Catholic school is appointed to be and to do. For those in leadership positions in Catholic schools, Fr Timothy Radcliffe OP reminds us that "it is the primary role of leadership to articulate the call to transformation and facilitate response". This call is from the Holy Spirit and not from the leader of the Church. How to respond to this call is central to the formation and education of young people in Catholic schools and is, says Radcliffe, part of the "prophetic dimension of the ministry of leadership".

However, over the years I have encountered a serious and worrying lack of provision in helping governors to understand and carry out their first and most important duty. This is none other than ensuring that their school is on mission and not sliding into mission drift. There is a risk of reducing education to a business product rather than seeing that Catholic "education must contribute to the discovery of life's meaning and elicit new hopes for today and the future" (*Educating Today and Tomorrow: A Renewing Passion*, Section III (1), Congregation for Catholic Education, 7 April 2014) and this is a significant challenge for those in leadership for which they need formation.

The Government has required all schools to undergo a reconstitution of their governing bodies to ensure that they are no bigger than necessary and have the breadth of skills, experience and competences needed to carry out their role. The justification for this instruction

To do

MAKE SURE that governors are "big picture" people who, with the head teacher, set the strategic direction for the school.

GIVE governors the formation they need in terms of Catholic teachings and canon law to do the important work they do.

REMEMBER that education is a process of encounter, people on pilgrimage, in solidarity, learning to build the Kingdom.

is that the governors will be more cohesive, dynamic and effective, according to the Competency Framework for Governance published by the Department for Education in November 2015.

Governors have been made aware that there can be no passengers and the composition of their body must enable them to fulfil all their duties and responsibilities. After more than four decades of working in Catholic education, what I find to be in short supply is the formation and training for all governors in the mission of the Church in education and the ability to articulate what it is they are there to guard, promote and transmit.

I have the greatest admiration for governors who turn out for training after a long and busy day, or give up their Saturdays. Although many governors do attend local authority and/or national governor training programmes, they then need to contextualise this training within the mission of the Church today. What disappoints me is that so often a diocese has provided some training for chairmen or chairwomen and clerks on aspects of their legal responsibilities; what is less common, if available at all, is a deepening of the vision of the Church and its mission in education.

Rarely have governors been introduced to key Catholic educational documents, teachings or even the requirements of canon law. Finding oneself in the driving seat of an organisation that does not seem to know what makes it authentically distinctive from other good or outstanding schools is worrying. Governors are only too aware that Catholic schools must be the best they can be with the highest possible academic standards for all. They sometimes struggle in trying to promote the radical mission of the Church in education

as outlined in the words of the Second Vatican Council Declaration on Christian Education (*Gravissimum Educationis*): "The Sacred Synod earnestly exhorts the pastors of the Church and all the faithful to spare no sacrifice in helping Catholic schools to become increasingly effective, especially in caring for the poor, for those who are without the help and affection of family and those who do not have the faith." Pope Francis calls for education to be a process of encounter, learning how to be a people on pilgrimage in solidarity with one another, learning new ways to build the Kingdom of God.

Many dioceses are strapped for cash and short on personnel for delivering the necessary training and formation. But, today more than ever, it must be our priority to train and form our governors to carry out their ministry in the Church in this vital area. It can be argued that all this information is out there and waiting to be accessed. This is true, but what we are experiencing today is the need to translate the vision and mission of the Church in education into a new language, one that all can understand.

The governing body, while responsible for the governance of the school, is also leading a team in a mission responding to the challenges of today. Pope Francis reminds us that we are not in the business of self-preservation but part of a missionary option, one capable of transforming everything, ready to adapt to the needs of the time. The danger, Francis warns, of being administrators rather than "permanently in a state of mission" is real.

We urgently need missionaries who are prophetic risk-takers, ready to adapt the choreography as each situation demands. Governors are the "big picture" people who with the head teacher set the strategic direction for the school. Pope Benedict XVI on his visit to Britain in 2010 reminded educators and students that "all the work that you do is placed in the context of growing in friendship with God, and all that flows from his friendship". How to place our work in this context is the challenge for both governors and teachers today. One thing is certain: investment in training and formation of governors is a priority if our schools are to remain on mission.

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