

# School governance: Driving change through diverse leadership

13 February 2025  Victoria Hatton

School governance creates a powerful bridge between education and society, offering professionals an opportunity to shape future generations while developing valuable skills.

In conversation with Sabreen Marashli, Chair of the Trust Board at Inspire Education Community Trust and Senior Advice Officer at the National Governance Association (NGA), we explore the benefits of school governance for professionals and how diverse representation on boards strengthens schools, communities, and businesses alike.

## Why school governance matters

"Schools are at the heart of their communities, and their pupils are the future workforce," explains Sabreen. As the saying goes, "children of today are the leaders of tomorrow" – the link between education, business, and society is undeniable. Having a governing board that reflects and understands the needs of its school is fundamental to their success.

Data from the NGA's [annual survey](#) suggests this isn't the case currently, highlighting a lack of diversity in terms of ethnicity, age and working background. Just 9% of respondents were aged under 40 and 1% under 30. Four in ten (41%) of governors were retired, highlighting a gap in representation from working-age individuals, while 95% identified as white.

Sabreen believes diversity, equity, and inclusion in school governance should go beyond being merely buzzwords but be treated as essential components that drive better decision-making and improve educational outcomes. Diverse perspectives on governing boards lead to increased adaptability, more inclusive policies, enhanced problem-solving, and a reduction in "groupthink" that could otherwise hinder a school's progression.

The presence of professionals from various backgrounds and with different sectorial experience on school boards helps forge stronger connections between educational institutions and businesses. These partnerships create valuable opportunities for mentoring programmes, work experience placements, and potential sponsorship initiatives, enhancing both students' career awareness and long-term community engagement.

## Overcoming barriers

Sabreen's journey from local governor to Chair of the Trust Board in just four years is particularly inspiring. Being in her twenties, she demonstrates that leadership ability isn't determined by age. Despite initial doubts when presented with the opportunity, she challenged herself by asking "why not?" Encouraged by her manager, she realised that age shouldn't be a barrier to leadership, noting that "there is nothing about age that defines a Chair."

She dispels the common misconception that governance is reserved for a specific type of person. Her argument is that diverse boards—comprising different ages, backgrounds, and experiences—are crucial in ensuring governance reflects the communities they serve and brings fresh perspectives that might otherwise be missing.

"Good governance is about skills and ability," Sabreen says. "It's about asking the right questions; making important, and sometimes tough, decisions; and providing support."

# Benefits for employers

Supporting employees in governance roles offers significant returns for businesses. "Governance develops transferable skills that are valuable in any workplace—strategic thinking, communication, and leadership," says Sabreen.

When employers enable their staff to join school governing boards, they gain multiple advantages, including:

- Enhanced corporate social responsibility activities by demonstrating commitment to education.
- Stronger business networks through school-business collaborations.
- Access to potential recruitment and partnership opportunities.
- Development of a more skilled, connected, and socially responsible workforce.

# Benefits for employees

Board membership provides unique professional development opportunities. Governors gain exposure to school leadership challenges, developing their ability to tackle complex problems and adapt to changing situations. The role builds confidence through critical thinking and decision-making responsibilities, while expanding professional networks through engagement with educators, local government officials, and community leaders.

Sabreen's experience is an example of the accelerated professional growth that governance can offer. She says: "I hadn't carried out CEO appraisals or managed senior relationships previously, but in my role as Chair, I gained first-hand experience. Many young employees don't yet have management responsibilities, but governance allows them to develop skills they can add to their CV."

For emerging professionals, school governance provides valuable leadership exposure they might not otherwise access.

Beyond career advancement, governors may find personal fulfilment in contributing to education and helping to shape students' futures while strengthening their local communities.

# How employers can support governors

Practical support from employers is essential for successful governance. "Time has been the biggest factor," Sabreen notes, praising the NGA's approach to flexibility. "I'm fortunate that my employer is really understanding and flexible - If I need to leave work early for a meeting or arrange a one-to-one with the CEO during the day, I can do so."

Employers can support their staff in governance roles by:

- Allowing flexible working hours for governance commitments.
- Supporting remote attendance where possible.
- Recognising governance as professional development.
- Promoting governance opportunities internally.
- Providing understanding when unexpected responsibilities arise.

# The wider impact on education

"Schools themselves have a huge responsibility in fostering inclusion," Sabreen explains. "Governing boards oversee this, holding school leaders accountable for ensuring all pupils achieve their best, regardless of background."

Governance influences not only student outcomes but also staff development and school policies, ensuring institutions effectively serve their communities while preparing students for future success.

"Schools shape future generations, so their governance must reflect the communities they serve," Sabreen adds. – "I'm fortunate in that the board I sit on does just this. By ensuring inclusive representation at board level, we can better address the challenges students face and create a more inclusive education system."

# Getting started as a governor

For those considering a governance role, particularly from under-represented backgrounds, Sabreen stresses that effective governorship comes from skills and insight rather than demographics.

She adds: "Different perspectives strengthen boards and bring valuable insights to decision-making."

Her advice for new governors:

1. Understand the time commitment—typically a few meetings per term.
2. Discuss flexibility with your employer early on.
3. Recognise that your unique perspective adds value.

## Making a difference

Whether you're considering becoming a governor or leading an organisation that could support governance, your involvement matters. The education sector needs diverse voices to ensure schools serve all communities effectively.

For more information on becoming a school governor or supporting employees in governance roles visit [the NGA's website](#).

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[Addressing the diversity deficit in school governance: A call to action](#)



[Browne Jacobson and National Governance Association unites to address the diversity deficit](#)



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