

Written evidence submitted by Harris Federation

As an Academic group Harris seeks to use the potential tension between operating as a Federation with a centrally driven strategic direction with local autonomy and local control to create highly effective Governance.

Nine in ten Harris Academies open for longer than a year are judged to be Outstanding and we believe that a key causal feature of this performance is excellent Governance.

Harris Federation places a high emphasis on local Governance. We believe that local Governing Bodies, when well trained and led should provide highly effective challenge and support to our Academies. The Federation operates with a central Board of Directors, Chaired by the Sponsor, Lord Harris of Peckham. The Directors comprise Chairmen of Governors of individual Academies and some non-Executive Directors who bring a range of additional skills and insights.

Our local Governing Bodies tend to be small comprising 12 to 14 members. This includes two elected parents and a staff member. All other Governors are sponsor Governors. Our key selection criterion for Governors is that they are effective rather than necessarily being representative. Most of our Governors are professional people used to questioning, challenge and dialogue as part of their daily professional lives. Not only does this mean that Governors bring a useful skill set to the work of their Academies but also that they are more likely to provide the right level of challenge and support. This is borne out by the Ofsted inspection reports for our schools where Governance is consistently highly rated.

Where predecessor schools have been failing and have become sponsored Academies our experience is that usually Governing Bodies are relatively large and cumbersome. In these situations there is often a good deal of “evidence” of Governance in terms of meetings but little evidence of impact on standards. Further these schools tend to have large numbers of sub-committees (in one special measures school we sponsored, there were 13 sub-committees) tying senior staff up in time consuming ineffective meetings.

The Harris model is to operate with a relatively small Governing Body with just one sub-committee, Finance and General Purposes. The main Body would meet once a term, preceded by a Finance sub-committee a few weeks before.

Increasingly Governing Bodies of Harris Academies oversee more than one school. This means that excellent Governance can be shared across the group. Where this is the case there will be two main Governing Bodies per term and one Finance sub-committee which will consider financial matters for both schools.

The central Federation arranges regular Governor training, running a session once a month on topics ranging from interpreting data and Raiseonline to expectations that Governors should have on the information provided to them by the school, to exclusions training. Governors own performance is important to us and where Governors do not meet our

expectations in terms of regular attendance or useful contribution then they are replaced with new Governors.

One key issue is that school senior leaders can sometimes present information which can be laden with jargon, be confusing and over detailed, thereby inadvertently swamping Governors with information which prevents them seeing the big picture. We actively train our Principals on how to manage and work with Governor Bodies ensuring that Governors are presented with timely, useful and manageable information in a way which allows them to discharge their strategic responsibilities. Furthermore central Federation staff are members of all local Governing Bodies and will provide advice and assistance to Governors helping them to focus on the key issues.

We expect Governors to identify and challenge underperformance and to follow this up rather than to accept repeated poor performance in any area of a school over time. We support Governors by providing external consultants where Governors, the Academy or the data indicate an area of concern. These consultants will undertake mini-audits or mock Ofsted inspections, provide coaching and support for staff and report to Governors on findings and progress. Thereby ensuring that Governors have not only the information provided by senior teams but also, where necessary, external and independent data.

When new schools join we are usually able to redeploy some experienced Governors to assist in the establishment of the New Board. This provides continuity and allows us to ensure some consistency in the quality of Governance.

No one size fits all. Schools should have the freedom to manage their Governance arrangements as they see fit and be judged on outcomes. Flexibility in size and composition is vital. Too often schools follow an identikit style of Governance with processes dominated by procedure and bureaucracy rather than flexibility in being able to focus on the important issues and adapt working methods to the needs of the school. We try to operate Harris Governing Bodies with an emphasis on impact and effectiveness rather than with a culture of compliance which leads too often leads to mediocrity.