

Governance and school boards in non-state schools in Australia

Abstract

The paper explores governance arrangements in non-state school in Australia, using seventeen interviews in six schools. The focus is on board composition, structure and reporting. Useful contributions about innovative practice are identified. School boards may benefit from implementing more stakeholder engagement. Existing models of school boards from international state school literature, such as the democracy and trustee models, were useful for describing some aspects of non-state school governance, but a faith model is also suggested. Further research could operationalise governance elements to conduct a quantitative investigation with more schools and more informants. The paper adds to the expanding international literature on schools governance by researching a country that has received little governance attention. The paper focuses on a significant area for school leadership: school boards in non-state schools.

Key words: School boards, decentralisation, governance, non-state schools, faith model

Introduction

Governance has changed over time, reflecting shifts in state ideology and policy (Ball, 2009), and new global and supranational pressures (Engel, 2008). Good governance is vital to the health and functioning of schools (Gruber, 1999). International literature focuses on devolving central control of state schools to local communities in various national contexts, with new forms of governance (Addi-Raccah & Gavish, 2010; Dahlstedt, 2009; Grant, 2006; Lo & Gu, 2008; London, 2010; Ranson, 2008). The nature and consequences of governance shifts vary, with research generally reporting decentralisation and local involvement (Edwards, 2010; Storey & Farrar, 2009). There is also a move for schools to adopt business models of governance (Eacott, 2008).

Analysing definitions of governance leads to the following: most imply both structures and processes, including decision making (Amey et al., 2008; Stoker, 1998), ordered rule and compliance (Ranson, 2008; Salleh et al., 2009), accountability and responsibility to, and involvement of, a range of stakeholders (Ackerman, 2004; Alfred & Smydra, 1985), and collective action (Stoker, 1998), in achieving a purpose or objectives (Coyle, 2004). The definition of governance adopted here combines these as follows: structures, processes and collective action, in order to fulfil responsibility and accountability to a range of stakeholders in achieving the purpose and objectives of the school. The governing body is usually the school board or school council, and the term board is adopted here for convenience.

The present paper addresses governance in non-state schools, in one state of Australia (Queensland). It contributes understanding of governance processes in non-state schools, in contrast to much of the extant literature on state schools (Allan, 2006;

Youngs et al., 2007). Further, there is limited Australian research on school governance (Brewer & Smith, 2008). Best practice in school governance needs to be identified and published (Allan, 2006; Bush & Gamage, 2001). Non-state schools, virtually by definition, have been free from government control, but in Queensland, have recently been subject to new regulations, implying new demands for accountability and responsibility.

Governance elements

According to Newell and Wilson (2002) there are at least ten elements of good governance, and this paper focuses on a selection that provides for a detailed description of board composition. A large part of governance is managing for, and being accountable to, a variety of stakeholders (Carver, 1997; Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Kiel & Nicholson, 2003; Picou & Rubach, 2006; Zattoni & Cuomo, 2008). Schools have a responsibility to communicate effectively with stakeholders (BRT, 2002; Zattoni & Cuomo, 2008). The board is also responsible for monitoring its own accountability (OECD, 1999; Picou & Rubach, 2006). Around five to nine is the optimal number of members (Newell & Wilson, 2002), while a governance committee should evaluate board processes including nomination of members (Picou & Rubach, 2006). While not-for-profit boards undertake evaluation of the chief executive officer (principal), they have not been as conscientious in evaluating their own performance (Tweeten, 2002). This evaluation includes the process for recruiting and inducting new members, during which the board should identify the required skills mix for its members (Kiel & Nicholson, 2003). Expectations should be clearly

enunciated to prospective members and new members should be formally inducted. General practice is for the board to select the principal (Picou & Rubach, 2006).

Local context of the study

There is limited Australian research on school governance (Brewer & Smith, 2008), although Hay (2009) argues that trends in Australia are similar to overseas, in terms of converging international policy, increasing school autonomy and new regulatory regimes.

The current trends in Australia include increased federal intervention and regulation for performance (publishing league tables, introducing national curriculum) (ACARA, 2009) and devolution at state level (principals hiring their own staff in some states). Each state is responsible for funding and regulating its own schools (Banks, 2005), and unlike in the UK, local government plays no role. This research is set in Queensland: one state of Australia, where in this state, schools are nominally either state (government run and government funded, also known as public) or non-state. This research is concerned with non-state schools, which are not charter schools (autonomous US state-schools). One Australian state (Victoria) has a version of this school type (Turkington, 1998). Although non-state are known as private schools, where parents pay (often substantial) fees, they still receive a measure of government funding, including from federal sources (Dowling, 2007), but are governed and accountable at individual school level, as far as the state is concerned.

Non-state schools are heterogeneous and their ownership structures vary, being divided into Catholic and independent, with the latter being a mix of Protestant, non-denominational and other (Queensland Department of Education and Training, (QDET) 2010a). Catholic schools form the largest system, and most are run by their local parish, or diocese under the auspices of the Catholic Education Commission. However, some are owned and operated by a specific Catholic order and thus are non-systemic. Independent schools are constituted separately but tend to be associated with a Protestant order and an overarching organisation (such as the Anglican Schools Commission), and are thus mostly systemic (Association of Independent Schools of Queensland (AISQ), 2010). There are also eight state grammar schools in Queensland which operate outside the normal state system. Modelled on elite grammar schools in the UK, they are a legacy of the 1800s, charge fees and have an independent governance framework enshrined in legislation (QDET, 2010b).

In 2010 there were 467 non-state schools in Queensland, with 239,636 students constituting approximately 33 per cent of enrolments and increasing (Non State Schools Accreditation Board (NSSAB), 2011). Standards for non-state schools in Queensland were established by the Education (Accreditation of Non-State Schools) Act 2001. The Act addresses broad criteria for governance arrangements and other aspects of school operations. Governance arrangements were not spelled out in detail. New Public Management (NPM) ideology is clearly evident where the NSSAB states *‘the efficient allocation of public resources will be of continuing importance given the rapid rate of growth in the non-state schools sector in Queensland’* (NSSAB, 2009: 1 emphasis added). This paper set out to examine governance in non-state schools, particularly in reference to structures and stakeholders.

Method

Extant international research on educational governance employs a descriptive, qualitative design with semi-structured interviews with key informants (Brewer & Smith, 2008; Brown & Duku, 2008; Chikoko, 2008; Falconetti, 2009; Hay & Kapitzke, 2009). The present study conforms to this trend, with interviews in six schools. The schools were selected to address the main ownership arrangements in Queensland, within the constraints of willingness to participate on the part of schools. Details are given in Table 1.

Table 1 Characteristics of the schools about here

In each of the six schools three key informants were interviewed: the chairperson of the board, the principal, and the business manager (with the exception of School 6 where the business manager was deemed by the chairperson as too new in the job). This resulted in seventeen interviews. The chairperson was chosen to represent the board, assuming that she/he would present the formal board position, even though it was possible that 'rank and file' board members may have divergent views. The six schools provided details of governance structures, policies and procedures, with questions around overall structure and arrangements, membership including representation, filling vacancies, skill mix, reporting, who selects the principal, induction and self evaluation. Interviews were taped, transcribed and analysed, clustering information into common categories across the schools.

Trustworthiness of the results was improved through triangulation (three informants' views) and through comparing themes between research peers (three authors) (Healy & Perry, 2000). General commonalities were identified and some unique practices emerged. Each school contributed to a more all-round picture of school governance, with the following findings.

Findings

The seventeen interviews produced large volumes of information about numerous aspects of governance. Owing to space limitations, this paper focuses on some elements of structure and stakeholder representation. Board membership, structure, characteristics and processes are shown in Table 2. The smallest board had seven members (School 1) and the largest mentioned was fourteen (School 5). The principal was a member of all school boards, and the board was responsible for appointing the principal in four of the six schools. In Schools 2 and 4 the owning body appointed the principal, with some input from the board.

Table 2 Board membership: structure, characteristics and processes about here

Board membership in the schools suggested three or four different types (See Table 2). The first was School 1 which is unique owing to its being one of the state's eight grammar schools and thus the Minister for Education has a role in nominations. The second is School 2 where membership is more focused on the school community. Schools 3, 4 and 5 all had senior members of the church hierarchy as board members, along with

members of the local church. In School 6 the board is very closely tied to the local church by virtue of the church's senior minister being the board chair, who appoints the board, and the board itself a subcommittee of the parish council. Thus School 6 is similar to the third type but with more narrow membership, and even tighter structural linkages to the owner.

Apart from these differences in ex-officio memberships, the schools also varied in the processes by which members joined the board (see Table 2). Schools 1, 3, 4 and 5 all implied a 'tap on the shoulder' approach where potential nominees are identified by board members and invited to apply. School 2 was unique in issuing an open invitation to the school community. Schools 3, 4 and 5 had representation from Parents and Friends groups. In contrast, parent membership at School 6 was by chair invitation only.

The schools also varied in terms of the characteristics sought in board members, with schools emphasising either skills in the professions (School 1), active religious faith to a greater or lesser degree (Schools 3, 5 and 6), or a mixture of both (Schools 2 and 4) (See Table 3).

The emphasis on skills mix is illustrated by School 1:

When looking for nominees, the board looks at the makeup of the board and the person leaving. They look to have the professions covered, such as legal, educationalist, accounting, general business perspectives; also a representative of boarding parents or rural. There is a strong recommendation to the Minister to ensure that there is continuity on the board, plus the necessary skills mix from the professions.

The faith requirement of some schools is illustrated by School 3:

In relation to the Parish representatives they are members of the local church.

There is a faith requirement which has to be expressed to the minister or to several council members. I can't remember anyone being nominated who did not fit the faith requirement.

Following on from the process of recruitment is the question of inducting board members. Schools 1-5 mentioned induction, with most being relatively informal, although this varied. For example, School 3 has a policy subcommittee explicitly concerned with how the board works and a member of this committee does the induction. School 4, being systemic, has a handbook provided by the system's Schools Office.

In terms of other aspects of stakeholder involvement and communication, School 2 involves staff indirectly via their input to the board subcommittees. School 3 involves the whole school community (students, parents, staff, the board and the church council) in planning, which was unusual compared to the other schools. Schools 4 and 5 involve senior staff in strategic planning. In terms of parent feedback, Schools 2, 3, 4 and 5 all indicated that they surveyed parents.

Details of reporting to the owners were also sought. With the exception of School 1, reports are generally monthly, along with an annual report which is a matter of compliance (School 1) or in person and in-depth, with scrutiny (School 5). Since Schools 3, 4, 5 and 6 all have owner representatives on the board, they receive reports as part of board meetings and processes. Only School 4 disseminated to the wider

community a report that resembles annual reports issued by organisations in other sectors. Such annual reports are an important communication and accountability mechanism. In Queensland a new policy has subsequently been introduced requiring non-state schools to produce a written annual report (NSSAB, 2009). Differences in reporting can be illustrated by contrasting School 3 and School 4 as follows:

School 3: The Principal believes he has a professional obligation to be reporting to stakeholders. This is done in informal ways. About 10 times a year the Principal invites a group of parents in for a “vision” function. They look at where the school has been, where they are going and how they are travelling. The Principal reports on a monthly basis to the Council. The accountability to the wider community is more tenuous.

School 4: The annual report sets out the goals and achievements. The annual report is available at speech day and is provided to all members of the school’s community.

Three schools mentioned self evaluation or a focus on board processes, including School 3, which has a policy subcommittee explicitly concerned with how the board works. School 4 has board-level policies from the (Systemic) Schools Office which dictate how the board will operate. These include checklists to follow throughout the year to fulfil the constitution. In School 5 the board has a retreat each year where reflection on the board takes place. The Director of AISQ has been leading the retreat for the last few years.

Table 3 Characteristics of board members about here

Table 4 Summary of school governance models about here

Discussion

Appropriate models of governance

The findings suggest a range of governance models in non-state schools (See Table 4). In terms of existing state models, some of the non-state schools were similar in some respects. However, additional models may be needed. The democratic model where an elected board is committed to citizen voice and representing the interests of their constituents (Allen & Mintrom, 2010), is relevant to School 2. The trustee model in which competence and effectiveness in managing resources are significant (Allen & Mintrom, 2010), describes School 1, and to a lesser extent Schools 2 and 4. Since School 2 also resembled the democratic model a hybrid of the trustee plus democracy model seems appropriate. There are other typologies in the literature, such as a business model which argues that owing to the large budgets of schools they should be governed by a small executive body with experience in running organisations along business lines. This body may still include people from the community with requisite skills (Jones & Ranson, 2010), and appears like the trustee and democracy models of Allen and Mintrom (2010).

Another model sees decision-making decentralised to schools and families (Allen & Mintrom, 2010). This was not observed in the schools (with the limited exception of School 3, where members of the whole school community were involved in annual planning). Indeed, one of the notable features in the results was the high degree of

centralisation not just at board level, but also at church level, by virtue of close ties between ownership structures and board structures (with common membership).

None of the existing models seem entirely appropriate for non-state schools. For some an additional requirement is to maintain the values and ethos of the faith. This faith may exist to varying degrees along a spectrum of relatively laissez fair subscription to nominal Christian values (School 1), through relatively rigorous practices to ensure that board members are active in the faith (Schools 3 and 5), to a proactive approach where the explicit mission of the school is to make disciples or converts (School 6). Thus an additional faith model could be added to the literature.

Accountability to a range of stakeholders

Engagement with other stakeholders across the schools could be described as ad hoc, since most important stakeholders were involved, but no one school engaged them all. Overall, there may be an over-preoccupation with owning and governing stakeholders at the expense of others, particularly students, parents, the wider school community and governments who provide partial funding. Indeed, what is quite remarkable in the interviews is virtually a complete absence of any mention of governments, (with the exception of School 1, the grammar school and even in this case the implication was ‘lip service’), even though they are a stakeholder by virtue of funding.

Thus school boards could do more to meet current state based notions of governance in terms of engaging stakeholders, such as in the relationship governance model, where stakeholders have a say in board membership (Bhasa, 2005). Involvement of staff

and students in governance has been advocated in the literature for at least thirty-two years (Treslan, 1979). Decentralisation and local representation on school boards is a significant trend in the international literature, and democratic election of school boards has been recommended in Australia (Allan, 2006). Engaging a broader range of stakeholders is an area for school board improvement (Sheard & Avis, 2011; Youngs et al., 2007) and for sustainable school principalship (Drysdale et al., 2009). Yet in these schools students were the least acknowledged voice. It may be that the patriarchal and hierarchical models of the faith-based owning bodies of some non-state schools mitigate against involvement and empowerment. There are many obstacles, including traditional culture and hierarchy (Adams et al., 2009; Ryan & Rottmann, 2009), which seem evident in some of these schools' governance structures and processes.

Limitations and implications for further research

This research was restricted to six non-state schools in one Australian state. The study was exploratory, and the description of governance structures and processes and the suggested new type should be tested in other states, and in other countries. The governance elements and the notion of a governance model based on 'keeping the faith' could be operationalised in a survey to enable more extensive, quantitative analysis. How faith-based governance impacts on school effectiveness, along the lines of the Framework for Enhancing School Outcomes (Andrews et al., 2004) could also be examined.

Views of 'rank and file' board members could be sought, and the process of selecting the principal could also be examined as the focus here was on selecting other board

members. Only a narrow range of governance elements was addressed in this paper, and therefore it would be enlightening to research the opinion of students, parents, staff and other stakeholders on the extent of their involvement in and representation on non-state school governance structures and processes, particularly in those schools that have highly centralised and relatively closed structures. It would be interesting to conduct a longitudinal analysis of non-state school governance to see if isomorphism towards more business-like models develops, depending on any future government efforts to increase control.

There are also significant questions and issues underlying this and other governance research in terms of comparisons between state and non-state schools, the significance and purpose of education, the ideology that underpins each system, what constitutes effectiveness, the implications for governance and why this might or should be varied across systems.

Conclusion

Non-state schools comprise around one third of schools in Queensland and the number is growing. Government has expressed some intention to increase regulation, partly reflecting international trends in the state sector. This paper explored governance structures and processes in non-state schools and found the schools are not homogeneous. Further, even though they are decentralised according to notions of governance from the state system, they appeared quite centralised in practice. There were tight structural linkages between school owners (churches) and school boards in some cases. Few schools exhibited completely democratic processes in terms of

opening board membership to the school or wider communities, yet there were exceptions. More schools could engage with more stakeholders more systematically.

Existing typologies of state schools governance may need to be extended for these schools. Our research suggests that the existing models are somewhat useful and relevant for describing non-state schools, particularly the trustee model. However, more dimensions and variations are needed and the typology could be expanded to include a faith model.

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Table 1 Characteristics of the schools

School	Religion	Ownership	School type	Day/boarding	Year levels
School 1	Nominal Christian	One of 8 grammar schools. The Board of Trustees is constituted under Grammar Schools Act 1975	Single sex	Day and boarding	Primary and secondary
School 2	Catholic	Non systemic, owned by religious order, incorporated separately	Coeducational	Day and boarding	Secondary
School 3	Christian	Non systemic, unincorporated, operated by local parish, governed by church's state level governing body	Coeducational	Day	Primary and secondary
School 4	Mainstream Protestant	Systemic, a Pty Ltd company with 1 shareholder being the	Single sex	Day and boarding	Primary and secondary

		auspicing Church			
School 5	Mainstream Protestant	Non-systemic, separately incorporated and wholly owned by the Church, a Diocesan school	Single sex	Day and boarding	Primary and secondary
School 6	Mainstream Protestant	Non-systemic, unincorporated, operated by the local parish of the church, which belongs to the state Synod of the church	Coeducational	Day	Primary and Secondary

Table 2 Board membership: structure, characteristics and processes

	School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4	School 5	School 6
	Grammar	Catholic, non-systemic	Christian	Mainstream Protestant	Mainstream Protestant	Christian

	School 1 Grammar	School 2 Catholic, non-systemic	School 3 Christian	School 4 Mainstream Protestant	School 5 Mainstream Protestant	School 6 Christian
Board membership	Four members appointed by state Minister for Education, three elected.	Members of school community	About 8 representatives from local church appointed by parish council. A Synod representative and also a Presbytery representative. Minister of local church is part of the board by virtue of office.	Archbishop has representative of Diocese on board. Also a representative of the church's Schools Office.	14 members. Owners have direct representation: Moderator of the church, Clerk of Assembly and General Secretary ex officio. Two members of local Presbytery. Two members of church's board of	Senior Pastor of parish is automatically chair.

	School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4	School 5	School 6
	Grammar	Catholic, non-systemic	Christian	Mainstream Protestant	Mainstream Protestant	Christian
					finance.	
Board membership – process for determining membership and filling vacancies	Casual vacancies filled on recommendation of board. Board arranges panel of suitable applicants. Principal is aware of nominations and expresses a preference. Chair approaches	Open request to school community for expression of interest to the board. The school community includes teachers, past students, students (if over 18), Applicant’s letter and accompanying CV and references.	Local church council nominate to board who then nominate to Synod. Council talks to nominees. Council or minister will be very familiar with nominees - no need for formal interview. Parents	Under constitution, Synod appoints board, including chair. Usually take the board’s recommendation. Board members are selected by word of mouth. Talking to people in the community who have	Appointment confirmed each year by Assembly of the Church. Names are brought forward by existing members. Board can be pretty confident that names would not be brought forward if	Ultimate responsibility for selecting board members rests with the chair. Board do meet with prospective candidates several times

	School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4	School 5	School 6
	Grammar	Catholic, non-systemic	Christian	Mainstream Protestant	Mainstream Protestant	Christian
	potential members. No formal interview or application. Often potential members are known in the community. Success rate is less than 50% of those approached (mainly due to time constraints).	Interviewed by principal and chair. Recommendations made to the Order.	& Friends (P&F) on each campus nominates a member. P&F representatives ratified by council. Extent of parish involvement ebbs and flows depending on minister at the time.	skills and time to commit. Most have some church affiliation. Is not a formal interview. Potential nominees are well known and interviews are not common. The P&F nominates 3 people, Board selects one and recommends	existing members did not think that nominees subscribed to Christian ethos the school promotes. Committee consists of chair, deputy chair, principal and chair of the finance committee. Meets with nominees and	with a view to look at character of individual and their heart for educating children. Parents are able to become members if invited by chair.

	School 1 Grammar	School 2 Catholic, non-systemic	School 3 Christian	School 4 Mainstream Protestant	School 5 Mainstream Protestant	School 6 Christian
				them.	discusses type of person board is looking for, extent of commitment. Process provides sufficient checks and balances. A representative from P&F. Some members of the board are current parents.	

Table 3 Characteristics of board members

	School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4	School 5	School 6
Characteristics of board members	Board looks at makeup of board and person leaving. Look to have professions covered, such as legal, educationalist, accounting, general business perspectives; also a representative of boarding parents or rural. Strong recommendation to Minister to ensure continuity plus necessary	Chair and principal look at skills mix remaining and match, as close as possible, required skills mix with applicant. Board members have to accept and not be in opposition to the Order's	Only criteria for members are that they are acceptable to members of local church - they are worshipping members. Parish representatives are members of local church. Faith requirement which has to be expressed to the minister or to	Chair and deputy chair identify suitable candidates, often looking to replace the skill sets of who is leaving. Explicit recognition of skills gap. Try and get a cross-section of people. A lawyer, accountant, marketing. Cross-section of thought	Majority of board must be communicant members of church: protection to ensure board implements ethos. No-one can serve who is not practicing member of Christian congregation (except P&F representatives).	Members of board do not have to attend sponsoring church, but must be Christians.

	School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4	School 5	School 6
	skills mix from professions. Board is continually looking at skills mix required so that board has a range of expertise.	philosophies	several council members. No clear criteria for P&F members - they are nominated by the P&F. There is no skills audit or analysis in the process of selection.	and views. A range of interests: people of high standing in local community. At least half have to be practising (the systemic religion). Members must sign that they adopt and abide by Ethos Statement.		

Table 4 Summary of school governance models

	School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4	School 5	School 6
Board appoints principal		No		No		
Size	Smallest 7				Largest 14	
Membership	Education Minister involvement	School community	Church hierarchy membership	Church hierarchy membership	Church hierarchy membership	Church and School Board closest ties
How members join	Tap on shoulder	Open to school community	Tap on shoulder P&F	Tap on shoulder P&F	Tap on shoulder P&F	Chair invitation only
Member characteristics	Skill in professions	Skill in professions Active religious faith	Active religious faith	Skill in professions Active religious faith	Active religious faith	Active religious faith

Induction	Informal	Informal	More formal	More formal	Informal	
Staff involvement		Staff input to board subcommittees	Whole school community involved in planning	Senior staff involved in planning	Senior staff involved in planning	
Surveyed parents		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Reporting	Compliance – to Minister		to owner via representation on board	to owner via representation on board	to owner via representation on board In person, with scrutiny from parish	to owner via representation on board
Widely available				Yes		

annual report						
Self evaluation of board processes			Via policy subcommittee	Via Systemic Board Policy documents	Annual retreat	
Tentative fit with existing models	Trustee model	Democratic model/ Trustee model	Decentralised/ democratic	Trustee model	New faith model	New faith model