

KEEP AN EYE ON YOUR SURPLUS BALANCES

A report to the Schools Forum at its meeting on 28th June showed that at the end of 2011-12, schools held surplus balances of £20.561m. The DfE recommended limits are 5% of total revenue resources for secondary schools and 8% for nursery, primary and special schools. 52 Greenwich schools have balances in excess of the DfE limits. The majority of these are primary schools. Although some of these are only a few percentage points above the recommended limits, 10 schools have balances which are over 20% of their total revenue resources.

The DfE consulted in the spring on their intention to "improve" the assurance system for financial management in maintained schools. Pending the outcome of this consultation, they have given notice that they will seek assurance that local authorities and their schools are appropriately managing the large amounts of public money they receive.

There has been, and continues to be, a number of schools with surplus balances considerably in excess of the DfE recommended limits. The Forum has agreed that the Council should seek further information from these schools. It may be that the school is holding balances for good reasons, perhaps to fund a particular capital project. If this is the case, they are advised to take the opportunity to lodge this funding with the Council to draw down when required.

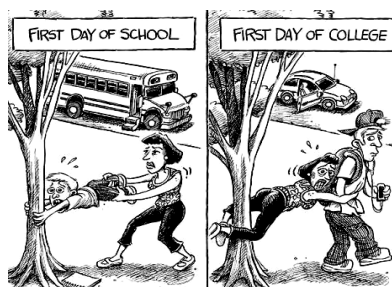
Where schools are unable to provide adequate reasons for holding excessive balances, the Schools Forum may be under pressure to consider the application of a clawback mechanism as permitted under DfE regulations.

THE SCHOOL FINANCIAL VALUE STANDARD (SFVS)

The SFVS was introduced in September 2011, replacing the FMSiS. The standard is primarily aimed at governors and consists of 23 questions which governing bodies should formally discuss annually with the headteacher and senior staff. Schools must send a copy of the signed Standard to the LA finance department, the first return by 31st March 2013 with annual submissions thereafter. Where schools have not made a submission the DfE will seek further assurance that sound financial management is in place.

Schools Forum members have agreed to raise the profile of the SFVS, emphasising its purpose, the mandatory requirement for annual submissions to the LA, and the DfE assurance mechanism where schools do not make a submission.

Roy Moore
Chair, Schools Forum



Voice

CONFERENCE FOR GREENWICH GOVERNORS

On Saturday 11 November, there will be conference for Greenwich governors, organised jointly by the Association of Greenwich Governors and Greenwich Governor Services. More details will be available in the autumn term, but past conferences have been very successful, so you might want to put this in your diary.

The AGM of the Association of Greenwich Governors will be held on the same day.

GOODBYE FROM THE EDITOR

This is the last *Voice* I will edit; I have been a governor for 30 years and it is time to stop. I cease being a governor at the end of this term, and so will no longer be Vice Chair of the Association of Greenwich Governors and Editor of *Voice*. I will hand over the editing of *Voice* to the extremely capable hands of Geoff Sheath.

My thoughts will still be with all of you, though – governing clearly isn't going to get any easier, and I wish you all success in your endeavours to fulfil your responsibilities

Margery Nzerem

AN IMPORTANT REPORT ON IMPROVING SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

The Department for Education's expert adviser on behaviour, Charlie Taylor, has written a report on improving attendance. The full report can be found at <http://media.education.gov.uk/assets/files/pdf/t/improving%20attendance%20at%20school.pdf> However, this extract about how three schools have succeeded in improving attendance may be of particular interest to governors.

'I have visited some schools that do an exceptional job in making sure parents get into good habits of ensuring their child attends early on. Jubilee Park Primary School in Tipton in the West Midlands serves a community of predominately white working class families where there are high levels of deprivation. These are parents who often experienced academic failure in their schools and they have little faith in the potential of education. Similarly, Crocketts Community Primary School in Smethwick and English Martyrs Catholic Primary School in Wapping make high attendance part of their ethos. These schools have a common determination to improve and sustain attendance rates.

Schools like these understand that, without the opportunity to receive good teaching, every day, from the start of their school career, their most deprived pupils are unlikely to narrow the gap with their peers. These schools are on the lookout for poor patterns of attendance in their nurseries and address them as soon as they become concerned.

Parents are supported to get their children to school with a range of measures including walking buses, home visits or even school staff picking children up when parents are in real difficulties. In addition, these schools use education welfare officers, social services, the police and the courts when parents do not co-operate.

Parents are taught to understand the difference between minor ailments and the sort of illness that warrants a day off and head teachers refuse every request for holidays unless there are really exceptional circumstances. The head teachers of these schools see attendance as one of their most important responsibilities and, to improve it, they are prepared to spend both time and money. In these three schools, with significantly above average free school meals, attendance is above the national average and persistent absence levels are very low.'

THE CASE FOR CULTURAL LEARNING

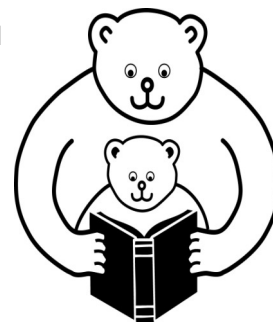
The Cultural Learning Alliance, whose members include teachers, artists, educationalists, cultural organisations, and education organisations, has published a report stressing the importance of the study of arts and heritage in schools. Their main findings are that

1. Learning through arts and culture improves attainment in all subjects.
2. Participation in structured arts activities increases cognitive abilities.
3. Students from low-income families who take part in arts activities at school are three times more likely to get a degree.
4. The employability of students who study arts subjects is higher and they are more likely to stay in employment.
5. Students who engage in the arts at school are twice as likely to volunteer and are 20% more likely to vote as young adults.

The full report can be found at http://www.culturallearningalliance.org.uk/userfiles/ImagineNation_doc_FINAL.pdf

PARENTS READING TO CHILDREN MAKES A DIFFERENCE!

A study by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development – 'What can parents do to help children in schools?' found that children whose parents read regularly with them when they first started school remained six months ahead of average reading levels by age 15. Reading at home was one of the most significant influences on a child's reading age at 15 and did not appear to be influenced by the parents' own level of education – the act of reading with the child was the important factor.



RECREATIONAL SPACES WITHIN SCHOOLS

Many spaces originally earmarked as playground have been built on, with either temporary or permanent structures. Extra buildings are needed but at what cost to outside learning space?

Not all but a fair number of playground incidents come about through lack of space "Miss he ran into me." "Move over you are catching my skipping rope". "The girls are all standing in our goal". All of us who work in schools hear the same pleas for space every break time. Some children wish to do something physical while others are searching for that space to think about the last lesson or the next lesson. Still another group will be happy to just stand about networking if they could find a quiet space. Now try and accommodate 200 children with such diverse needs a confined space and you start to appreciate what a stressful place the playground has become for our youngsters as well as the staff.

As governors, we need to look at the uses of all the open space within the campus. I'm not suggesting you concrete over the school garden - far from it - but is that 4-metre deep overgrown shrub bed the best use of space? Is that large grass area being used to its best? Either it's a mudslide or a dust bowl, resulting in its being out of bounds for most of the school year. Ask if grubbing up those fifty year old forsythia bushes has ever been considered (not established trees towering above - they can be worked into a new scheme). If the ground is covered with a porous material like artificial grass or soft play surfacing, an out of bounds area becomes a very valued part of the outdoor school. Add a picnic table or a climbing frame and you have provided all year round really useful area for pupil development. Also, you have provided a healthier space for the trees. This sort of project does not have to cost a fortune as parents or community volunteers could clear the site cheaply.

The learning process continues into the playground if the children have enough space within a good environment, playground behaviour issues will decline rapidly.

Trevor Hobbs
Premises Manager/ Governor
Cherry Orchard Primary School

TOWARDS A PAPERLESS SOCIETY?

Has your governing body faced up to the problem of how to reduce the amount of paper, which governors receive? We have, and it caused a greater division than any other issue we have discussed recently!

Some governors were happy to receive their agenda papers by e-mail, others preferred paper copies posted to them in advance and some would like them on their i-pads. Whatever method was preferred, the clerk was required to print sufficient copies for all members for distribution at the meeting. The system was not ideal for any group. Those who received them by e-mail had the option to print the papers in advance, but they were incurring costs by having to use their own printers and paper; those who received them by post often complained that they did not get them sufficiently in advance and the i-pad users didn't want any paper at all as they preferred to view all the documents on their i-pad screens.

Being aware of the need for greater efficiency and to save paper, it was decided to put a proposal to the governing body that all governors be provided with i-pads. These would be specifically for governing body business, would remain the property of the governing body and handed back when governors left the governing body. The debate caused a split, which saw a vote with 50% in favour and 50% against. The Chair was left with the unenviable task of a casting vote! Reasons given by those who opposed included the cost, and there were those who simply preferred to have their documents in paper form. The result was a compromise, which retained all the options and left everyone reasonably happy, but left us no nearer the "paperless society" which we were aiming for at the beginning!

Has anyone got a perfect paperless system? Do we want one anyway? Do let us know!

Roy Moore
Greenwich Governor

HOW DO YOU ORGANISE YOUR COMMITTEE MEETINGS?

The following article is about how DeLucy Primary School organises their committees. We know that there are many different committee structures in Greenwich schools and would love to know what they are. Could you write an article about what your school does? Or just send us a short email - we'll put all the emails together into an article. You can email us at voice@associationofgreenwichgovernors.org

The organisation of our school's governing body meetings is something I could discuss in less than 10 or 100+ words. Jestings aside, the short of it is that each term we host one full governors meeting and one "Joint Committee" meeting. Giving a bit more detail, this means that:

- All of our governing body meetings are always quorate;
- Invariably most governors are able to make the majority of meetings and, as frightful as the Agendas might look,

Most of our meetings conclude in less than 2 hours - great for working governors!

Our Joint Committee reviews the school's finance, curriculum, SEN and premises management. And, because most Governors are able to attend the earlier 5pm start times, there is not much need to dwell too long on these items again at Full Governor's meetings. Ad hoc meetings, e.g. to review the Governor Mark process or to focus on larger financial strategies, are held with much smaller teams of governors (and staff as necessary), who then report back to the Joint Committee or the Full Governors.

Our system works for us and is reflected in our results. Our mission is for "High Achievement in a Caring Community", for all our pupils. In our Autumn Newsletter, the Headteacher was pleased to report that...

"Following our visit from OFSTED in July, we are pleased to report that all areas of the school was graded as good, with healthy living graded as outstanding. It was summed up by a quote from one of our parents, which is in the OFSTED report.

"De Lucy has come of age, and is on its way to the top in all aspects of leaning and preparing kids for the future."

Of course, the Governors cannot take all the credit for these achievements. It's as a result of all the stakeholders really working together for the benefit of our children - to achieve our mission. I am just pleased that the organisation of our governing body meetings mean that governors are able to contribute as much as individually possible to make a holistic contribution towards the developmental needs of the school.

Ann-Marie Cousins

Community Governor, De Lucy

GOVERNORLINE

There have been two key developments affecting GovernorLine, the free, confidential advice, information and support service for governors. The service is now available to governors of academies and free schools.

Secondly, the website has moved to www.education.gov.uk/governorline as part of the general policy of reducing the number of government-funded websites. Remember that you can call free on 08000 722 181 or email from the website.

DON'T FORGET THE AGG WEBSITE!

We can be found at <http://www.associationofgreenwichgovernors.org>. The website includes past issues of Voice, plus an index, so you can easily find that article you're looking for, as well as:

- a list (and thumbnail sketches) of committee members,
- copies of information sharing emails which are sent to all Chairs
- links to useful organisations.



Have a look and tell us what you think. We particularly welcome suggestions for other things to include. In addition, you can contact us at voice@associationofgreenwichgovernors.org

PTA-UK - THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR SCHOOL PTAs

The National Confederation of Parent Teacher Associations has changed its name to PTA – UK, www.pta.org.uk