



executive summary

a best practice review of the role of schools forums

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Schools forums have a consultative and advisory role in school funding and financial matters. They have been a statutory requirement in every local authority (LA) in England since 2003. The key areas of work are a) the school funding formula; b) contracts and financial issues. Schools forums do not hold a budget and regulations do not allow a decision-making role.

Currently, all LAs in England receive the main element of education funding through the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) and have some discretion in determining the way that this grant is distributed across schools. The Government are currently proposing the development of a national formula to distribute the DSG more fairly across LAs while ensuring that LAs and schools forums still have a role in distributing those funds between the schools, the early years settings and high-needs pupils as deemed appropriate at the local level. However, the degree of discretion at the local level is yet to be determined.



The Local Government Association (LGA) commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to explore the current role, operation and impact of schools forums in England.

Key findings

- The research evidence indicates that schools forums influence and shape the amount of funding that goes to different educational providers. They were generally perceived to have a strong influence on funding decisions.
- Schools forums provide a platform for discussion at the strategic level about funding decisions at the local level.
- Effectiveness was characterised in terms of connected, proactive and child-centred behaviour. This includes effective communication within schools forums with LA staff as well as the wider educational community; full engagement of all members; training to facilitate members to challenge effectively; and an informed understanding of education policy and the broader demands on the LA. Distinct models of operation did not emerge as defining characteristics of schools forums.
- In the most proactive schools forums there was clear evidence that the funding formula is developed through consultation, characterised by transparency, continuous negotiation, the sharing of information and members work together to achieve the best outcome for all children and young people.
- Schools forums valued the contribution of councillors and cabinet members because they provide a council perspective, expert advice, feedback on education issues, information and advice. Their involvement gave schools forums the opportunity to have views, ideas and issues represented and considered at council level.
- Schools forums were broadly representative of their local education community in terms of phase and type of school. Local communities were represented on schools forums through the involvement of councillors, teacher unions, diocesan representatives and the press.
- Although schools forums' meetings were 'open', members of the public were not actively invited and rarely attended meetings.
- Interviewees identified a range of barriers to achieving the goals of schools forums which included a lack of funding, time, personalities (related to dominant characters and personality clashes) and uncertainty surrounding the future of schools forums.
- Looking to the future, interviewees expressed a lack of clarity about the role and status of schools forums in general. The outcome of the national funding consultation is expected to reduce the current ambiguity. There was uncertainty about whether the changes will result in a strengthened or reduced role for schools forums. The impact on funding decisions of the increased number of academies was also a key current discussion point in schools forums.
- Key advice for other schools forums included: open and transparent communications; respectful relationships within the forum and between the forum and LA; a commitment to a shared vision and set of values; appropriate support for members; and adequate publicity of the schools forum role, remit and elections.

Conclusion and recommendations

Schools forums play a significant role in influencing and shaping local education funding. They provide a collaborative and consultative platform for strategic discussion and contribute to local decision making. Drawing on a wide spectrum of stakeholders' knowledge, views and experience ensures that funding decisions are shaped by open dialogue, informed debate and challenge.

The research indicates that schools forums are responsive to the changing educational policy context, particularly in terms of the growth of academies and the implications this has for the representativeness of their membership, as well as funding and service provision.

A more connected and proactive way of working characterised the most effective schools forums in terms of representing the interests of the local educational community and the children and young people it serves. The most effective schools forums operate in an open and transparent way, are accessible to the public, consult extensively with stakeholders, communicate effectively, are engaged in the detail of decision making and have a common strategic vision and commitment to meet the needs of all young people in the area.

Recommendations

The research indicates that schools forums will benefit from greater clarity about the proposed national funding formula in order to facilitate better planning and enhanced confidence in a time of economic uncertainty. Additionally, schools forums would value better guidance about the academies funding regime, working alongside the existing system for maintained schools, in order to achieve the best outcomes for all children and young people.

Recommendations for schools forums

- Ongoing training for schools forums' members to ensure they have confidence and competence to effectively engage in and challenge local education funding decisions.
- Children and young people may benefit from schools forums working more creatively with reduced funding, for example, encouraging federations of schools.
- Schools forums need to continue to review their membership to ensure that they are representative of the local community.
- When evaluating their effectiveness, it is advisable for schools forums periodically to review the remit and role of subgroups to maximise their contribution and ensure its relevance.
- Schools forums need to examine how well they disseminate, and how clearly they explain, decisions to constituents, stakeholders and the wider community.
- Schools forums will benefit from considering the extent to which their practice reflects the characteristics of the more connected and proactive behaviour outlined above.

Recommendations for LAs

- Schools forums will benefit from LAs providing opportunities to inform and build links in order to increase understanding of local education funding in its fullest national and local context.
- LAs need to periodically review the level, type and frequency of involvement that senior managers and officers have in schools forums given the changing policy and priorities for the education, support and well-being of children and young people.
- When evaluating their working relationship with schools forums, it is advisable that LAs are aware that being responsive to requests for the provision of thorough briefings on statutory and policy developments is greatly valued by schools forums' members, as this helps them to provide more informed scrutiny and challenge.
- The further promotion of the schools forum and its role and remit within the LA, and more widely among constituents, is recommended in order to ensure that wider understanding and recognition of its responsibilities is achieved. Further research on how this aim could be realised is worthy of consideration.

Methodology

This executive summary presents key findings from nine case studies based on 40 telephone interviews with the LA officer responsible for the schools forum, forum Chairs, forum members (including school and non-school members) and constituent members. The research included a desk review of current models of schools forums in LAs by an analysis of 92 schools forums' websites, undertaken before the case study interviews in order to inform the sampling of the good practice case studies and the development of the telephone interview instruments.

Further information

For more information about this report visit www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/LGSF01



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