GOVERNING IN A TIME OF CRISIS:
COVID-19 AND THE CHALLENGE OF EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE

What does it mean to govern in a time of crisis, when the tried and tested systems that so many of us are accustomed to are no longer feasible, and decisions have to be made so imminently that the risk of getting something wrong is very high?

Covid-19 has driven everyone in the Education Sector back to their core principles. I'm deeply grateful that, for our team of governors and trustees within Lionheart Academies Trust, a profound commitment to equity for all is so deeply embedded that it's shone through our work more than ever.

Our strong belief in local governance has also evolved. Our 10 schools serve vastly different communities, with variations in levels of diversity, academic attainment and vulnerability. This makes a 'one size fits all' offer completely inadequate, and the voice of local governors increasingly important.

While some trusts have understandably distributed responsibilities away from local governors and towards local schools to allow for fast-paced decision making, we've instead increased the intensity of our governance. We've listened to governors' concerns about their particular communities and parental feedback; giving us insight into why not all pupils are engaging, and why some vulnerable pupils aren't attending school. This insight has been invaluable; holding Trust Leaders to account for our provision to pupils and support to their families, and sense-testing the narratives that we have held. They have been encouraging, supportive and aspirational.

Similarly, the Governance Board has made unprecedented, bold and courageous decisions to approve decisions which couldn't wait, including the purchase of over 1500 Chromebooks, the demand for which across the nation has grown rapidly. We've worked strategically and efficiently with Trust Leaders as we collectively turn the ship mid-voyage into new and uncharted waters. We know that every hour spent discussing plans is either an hour away from implementing the decisions, or an hour less sleep on top of extremely long days.

Moreover, these strange times have seen us collectively unpack the definition of what it means to be 'vulnerable'. We have been challenged to consider that the sheer number of students without access to digital devices or the internet is far greater than anyone could have previously thought. For many, accessing virtual lessons or making use of online resources has been an impossibility. To our dismay, the attainment gap has widened even further than before.

The NFER report (Schools Responses to Covid-19: Pupil Engagement in Remote Learning, 2020), published on the 16th June, stated that *'teachers are concerned about the engagement of all their disadvantaged pupils, but are most concerned about low engagement from pupils with limited access to IT and/ or those who lack space to study at home'*. With 81% of disadvantaged students having limited access to IT and/or study space, and approximately a quarter of all pupils having little or no access, clearly, a paper pack and a regular phone call isn't enough. As one trustee put it, *'We've been saving the reserves for a rainy day, and now the storms are pouring down'*.

Amazingly, like our fellow

Trusts across the country, we ourselves find that we're able to create change through our online platforms. Governors who had never logged onto our Governorhub, preferring to rely on paper, now work effectively with electronic documents. They've been rapidly trained to use Teams and have engaged fully with new data, which came hot off the press and provided robust evidence of student engagement, key worker attendance and, perhaps most valuable of all, the engagement and wellbeing of our most vulnerable pupils.

Trustees and governors have, thankfully, embraced the technology, finding a new love for the digital medium and its various offerings, which have become the new norm for so many of us. It's now time to ensure that all students, no matter their backgrounds, have every opportunity to benefit in the same way.

For Governance, things may never return to the way they were. The new technologies, and the keen focus on core values and basic principles of governance have forced us to reimagine a new world; one in which governance is efficient, effective and fulfilling. As we leave the norms we once knew, we make way for an even better future

https://www.nfer.ac.uk/schools-responses-to-covid-19-pupil-engagement-in-remote-learning/