

# Employer engagement

**David Sayers** and **Ian Ferguson** explain how their employer's commitment to social engagement with schools has led to them both to governance

**I HAVE WORKED FOR Bank of America Merrill Lynch (BofAML) for 30 years. During that time, as well as advancing in my own career, I have seen the organisation go through many changes.**

One constant, however, has been my interest in what is happening outside the financial services world. It has always unsettled me that I can walk out of my office in the City for 20 minutes, and reach one of the most deprived areas of London.

## Volunteering

Ten years ago I decided I wanted to do something about that disparity so I started volunteering at a primary school near my office where 92% of the children speak English as their second language and 61% receive free school meals. I began by assisting students with their reading and language skills.

Two years later I decided to take a sabbatical from work and volunteered for a non-profit organisation called Business in the Community (BITC). There I helped write a paper on the importance of volunteering and school governance in the corporate workplace. On my return to work I decided I wanted to make a longer-term commitment and joined the governing body of Osmani Primary School, where

“Too often it's thought that contributing to society starts and ends with donating funds”

I am the governor responsible for the school's art and culture activities.

This is a fulfilling role, working with teachers and having oversight of the curriculum, matching a passion of mine outside work. Twenty years ago the school was put into 'special measures' but since that time, through the dedication of a highly accomplished school team, including the headteacher and a talented governing board, the school has become a real success story, achieving an excellent reputation and 'good school with outstanding features' grading in the last Ofsted assessment.

## Transformative results

I have become a real advocate of contributing to the community through school governorship and since BofAML partnered with the Inspiring Governance service last year I have had the opportunity to contribute by attending and speaking at events. So far this year BofAML has recruited eight new governors through the initiative.

Applying the skills you have built in your professional career in a new context, such as a school governorship, is not only rewarding but can have transformative results too. By bringing our considerable skills such as budgeting, strategy, working with complex figures, negotiating with suppliers, or scrutinising legal documents, governors/trustees have a lot to contribute.

The experiences and expertise acquired during one's career also allow governors/trustees from the business world to provide a different perspective. It's easy to take these things for granted but they are very much needed within governing boards, and have the potential to turn around a poorly performing school.

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Serving on a governing board not only allows people like me to share their skills, but to build on them too. When serving at board level, employees gain experience of strategic decision-making, influencing, presentation and critical analysis – which are all significant areas for professional development.

## Further benefits

Research shows that in addition to helping inform young people about the breadth of jobs that exist and acting as role models, employer engagement activities can improve their educational performance while at the same time helping them to develop their social skills through interaction with adults outside their normal school and family spheres of influence.

My work role is a demanding one and my job involves a lot of travel. It's a privilege that exposes me to different cultures and backgrounds. Those experiences are enriching and have reinforced my view on the value of diversity, including diversity within governing boards.

The fund-raising capacity of big firms such as ours is impressive but too often it's thought that contributing to society starts and ends with donating funds. Our people power is worth so much more than this and that's the message I want to share.

**David Sayers** is a member of in BofAML's Equities Sales team and a governor at Osmani Primary School in Tower Hamlets, east London

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## NEVER A DULL DAY

**I** KNOW THE IMPACT that good teaching and good teachers in particular have on young people. My mother taught in various schools across south Wales and even now, nearly 40 years later, when I bump into her former pupils their inevitable first question is, “How’s your mum?”

My own educational experience was better than most, within an excellent comprehensive school system, and I have enjoyed a 30-year career in the financial services sector. I don’t need to walk very far from my desk in the City to realise that not everyone has had that same educational opportunity, but like so many of us, I didn’t believe that I could find the time or skills to make an impact.

### Enthusiasm

I was drawn in by BofAML’s partnership with Inspiring Governance to volunteer and joined the board of governors of a local authority primary school in Camberwell. My choice was motivated by the infectious enthusiasm of the teaching staff I met, the clear need to help fix things and the simple pleasure of being greeted by the happy smiling faces of some very well-mannered children.

## “If you make the commitment you need to stick to it”

I am now vice chair of governors and, somewhat inevitably, chair of the finance and premises committee. The time commitment is manageable, with regular board and committee meetings and papers to be read in advance. But the more you put into it the more you get back. Importantly, if you make the commitment you need to stick to it and my employer understands and supports that concept.

Our school has a really interesting and engaged group of governors and everyone brings something fresh to our debates. In my time on the board we have had to deal with some important issues, including developing a remedial



Schools benefit from having a diverse governing board

Photo: courtesy of Osmani Primary School

Download the BITC paper from <http://www.nga.org.uk/Guidance/Research.aspx>

action plan to support the school in its successful drive to address a ‘requires improvement’ judgment from Ofsted. We called it the Return to Good committee. We also have to balance the budget with an ever-decreasing income and the challenge of maintaining educational as well as safety and welfare standards.

### Challenges

There is never a dull debate or a dull day, but people contemplating taking up a role as a governor/trustee should not be fooled. Schools are small businesses with many of the same challenges you might find in a large corporation, only without the same degree of support or financial reward. There is a huge need for new governors/trustees with experience in financial, legal, IT, operational, commercial, education, parenting and common-sense backgrounds – the list is endless.

I know we have made a difference to many aspects of the daily life and future of the pupils and teachers at our school. Doing small things that change a child’s day are often the most pleasurable. Finding myself pressganged on one visit to help a small group of enthusiastic pupils dress their Christmas tree is

truly my most rewarding memory.

I have had a remarkable experience that has genuinely opened my eyes to aspects of society, the economy and, yes, politics that I would not have believed possible from the warmth of my office. More fundamentally, I have developed an even greater appreciation for teachers and the resilience of kids. I also have a concern that not enough lay people are getting involved in shaping the future of our schools.

I am very pleased that several of my friends and colleagues have followed the same path, probably in part to stop me nagging them about how important and rewarding it is. I’m still sadly amazed when people ask me: “Why on earth would you do that?” My experience tells me simply: “Why wouldn’t you?” ●

**Ian Ferguson** is head of investment banking UK & Ireland, Bank of America Merrill Lynch, and vice chair of governors at Comber Grove Primary School in Camberwell, south London

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