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[Blog article](#) by Deborah Howe, Senior Policy Officer, Equality Commission NI

What can school governors do to help end bullying?

Part of my job in the policy team at the Equality Commission is to develop recommendations for Government and public bodies that would, if implemented, better promote equality or tackle inequality. In two significant areas of education policy, where there is potential to do that, decision-making and oversight has been delegated to boards of governors. The areas are **admissions criteria** and **bullying**.

School governors have been described as the 'largest volunteer workforce in Northern Ireland' with around 11,000 people involved. Their role, as outlined in Every School a Good School, is to 'manage the school with a view to providing the best possible education and educational outcomes for all of the pupils'.

This blog considers the role of boards of governors and how, through their ongoing actions and leadership, they can play a key role in making Northern Ireland a more equal and welcoming society. This includes when discharging their duties under the Addressing Bullying in Schools Act and developing and applying admissions criteria.

Admissions criteria

Governors, whether in nursery, primary or post primary settings, have their responsibilities as regards admissions prescribed within Department of Education circulars. These circulars also set out criteria that should and should not be adopted. Though not mandatory, a failure to follow them can result in schools not being indemnified should legal action ensue. The criteria adopted for admissions have the potential to unlawfully discriminate, particularly where family ties to the school are sought. It can be difficult to justify anything but the closest of ties, or risk a finding of racial discrimination. Judicial review proceedings in the high court closely examined the reasoning of a number of boards when the criteria they used in the absence of academic selection in 2021 were reviewed. Governors should fully consider the impact of criteria across the equality grounds.

Addressing Bullying in Schools Act

The Addressing Bullying in Schools Act came into force in September 2021. It places a duty on boards to:

- ensure that policies designed to prevent bullying are followed in the school

- determine and review the measures needed to prevent bullying
- consult with the Principal, pupils and parents before drafting or reviewing measures
- prepare an anti-bullying policy and make it freely available.

In addition, they must make sure that a record of all incidents of bullying or alleged bullying, including the motivation for it, is kept.

Monitoring the volume and nature of bullying incidents provides opportunities to assess the effectiveness of interventions in creating an anti-bullying culture. The nature of bullying could relate to equality characteristics such as disability, gender, religion, sexual orientation or ethnic origin. Interventions may include ensuring the participation of learners and their parents / carers, staff training, relationship and sexual education (RSE) and using curriculum opportunities to cover controversial topics.

Governors' duties are significant and can improve the lives of children and young people by making sure the policies, procedures and practices are in place to get them into the school and to thrive there. They are also legal obligations, and governors are accountable for how they discharge them.

Governors should be proud of the important role they play in making sure schools are well run, particularly given the voluntary nature of the role. They should also be fully aware of the legal responsibility and liability that goes along with it. It is essential that they receive all the training and guidance required to support them to secure equality of opportunity across their areas of responsibility. Their decisions contribute to outcomes that have lifelong impacts on those affected.