

**MAKING A SHARED VISION
A SHARED REALITY:
THE STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS**

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MAKING A SHARED VISION A SHARED REALITY: STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

It is strategic thinking and acting that are important, not strategic planning. If any particular approach to strategic planning gets in the way of strategic thought and action, that planning approach should be scrapped.

Bryson, J. (1995) Strategic Planning for Public and Non-profit Organisations.

What is Strategic Planning?

This is a valid question and one which must be answered if we are to be assured that this is not just another trend, or a management theory being applied to schools, or a compliance response to government legislation. The reasons for engaging in such an activity must have **real** benefits for the students and the school as a whole.

Strategic planning is about 'big picture thinking'. It is likely to involve major new initiatives, doing things differently or placing a stronger emphasis on something that is already in place. It should be future oriented and focussed more on tomorrow's opportunities than today's problems. It should be about establishing a long-term direction for the school.

It will look different from any annual or operational planning. Annual plans are about actions that are more immediate, actions that will take place within a school year and are generally quite specific and task-orientated. In contrast, strategic planning differs from this ongoing, routine planning in three respects:

- the timeframe of the planning
- the scale of the planning
- the scope of the actions that result

Strategic planning is concerned with the longer term rather than the shorter term and is most likely to span a 3 to 5 year period. If the plan covers a shorter timeframe, it is easy to lose sight of the bigger picture. Any longer than five years and the goals tend to become vague and unrealistic. The scale is broader in the sense that the plan must take into account wider issues of national and probably international impact rather than just local issues. In its scope, strategic planning will have school-wide implications as well as implications for particular syndicates, departments or other areas of the school. **Every** staff member may be affected and should have a commitment to the direction in which the school is heading.

Successful strategic planning is based on the vision that the key stakeholders - trustees, staff, parents, and students - have for their school. A vision describes the kind of school the stakeholders want and will answer, in broad terms, questions like: What will be happening in classrooms and the playground? What will teachers and students be doing? What kinds of relationships and interactions do we want to encourage? What will the school look like? Typically, a school's Charter outlines a school's vision and, very often, will also contain the key values to which the school subscribes. Even without a Charter there is value in making sure that strategic planning is based on a shared vision and a set of values that have been agreed to and that they sit comfortably together as statements about the direction of the school. As Barth describes:

Nothing so professionalises work in schools as educators who create within the schoolhouse visions of good education. Everyone who works in a school is not only entitled to a unique and personal vision of the way he or she would like the school to become, but has an obligation to uncover, discover and rediscover what the vision is and contribute it to the betterment of the school community.

Barth, R. (1990) Improving Schools From Within.

It is important to realise that the vision, and for that matter, the strategic plan, is not only the Principal's. It is crucial, in fact, that they are owned by everyone - staff (both teaching and non-teaching), students, parents, trustees and the wider community - in order for it to become reality. The strategic planning process should be organised so that ownership grows with the plan. While this might seem like a daunting prospect, it is also important to recognise that ownership can be developed through different levels of involvement. For some, such as neighbouring schools, it may be enough to keep them informed, while others will need to have a closer involvement in the decision-making process. Nonetheless, it is crucial to keep in mind that the true value of a strategic plan lies in the strategic planning process that is undertaken, and the actions that are taken as a result of that process, rather than in any document that may be produced. Engaging the hearts and minds of the people in the school community is essential to successful strategic planning.

The timeframe and scope of a strategic plan is a signal that it requires a commitment, not only of time, but also of money. This is an attitude that must exist, and the commitment must remain, regardless of changes in Principal, staff or trustees. A commitment to a long-term view is mandatory. Nonetheless, a strategic plan should be a dynamic. The concepts of evaluation and review are important to the strategic planning process and it is important that the plan be flexible. Decisions that are made now, for five years hence, may no longer be appropriate as that time approaches. New issues may develop, new information or requirements may emerge and it is important that those involved in the planning process are prepared to change and to explore other avenues, as they become apparent. Conversely, things may often take longer than predicted and this again calls for flexibility and an alteration to expectations.

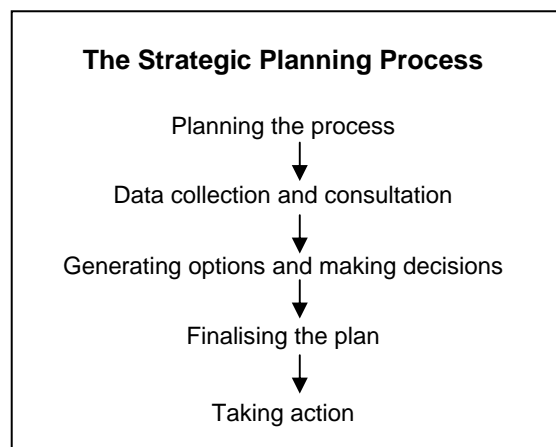
The key principles that underpin strategic planning are:

- ◆ it should establish a long-term, broad view of the direction of the school

- ◆ it must be based on the educational needs of the students
- ◆ it requires a commitment of time and resources to set up and then implement
- ◆ it must be 'owned' by all members of the school community
- ◆ the plan must be dynamic and be reviewed, fine-tuned and changed as it is implemented.

The Strategic Planning Process

How then, do you begin to develop a strategic plan so that it encompasses these key principles? The following diagram illustrates the key components of the process.



Phase 1: Planning the process

This may be initiated by the Board of Trustees or by the Principal, but should see the establishment of a small Planning Group. The role of this group is to coordinate the process in an ongoing way, to do homework between the meetings to ensure that momentum is maintained and to keep the Board, staff, parents or any other participating group informed and involved. Invariably, it is this group that will draft the plan and, after further consultation, prepare the final document.

The membership of this Planning Group should be drawn from key people on the Board, including the Chairperson, and the staff, including the Principal. Some schools we have worked with have also included a representative from the PTA or a parent with expertise in an area that will assist them with their particular process. Decisions about the make-up of such a group will be dependent upon the way in which things are done in the school, but it is important that whoever is involved has the commitment, the time and the energy to make the process

work. The use of consultants and/or a facilitator is another possibility for consideration and they also can be used in a range of ways - to oversee the whole process or to work on specific segments of it.

Firstly, the group needs to decide what is going to drive the strategic plan. We have already discussed the importance of basing decisions on the teaching and learning aims of the school. It may be, then, that an education strategic plan is developed first, after which, decisions can be made about other areas in the school. The scope of the process need not be restricted to one area. All areas of operation can be examined but, at some stage in the process, priorities will have to be identified based on the outcomes of the data collection and analysis.

It is important that during this setting-up phase consideration is given to strategies that will enable ownership to occur. For example, the group needs to make sure that the strategic planning process to be followed is shared with the staff and the Board of Trustees. It is probably important, even at this early stage, for the planning group to understand that, because strategic planning involves change, some people will feel threatened and that there is a real possibility that conflict may arise during the process. How this is dealt with should be a further consideration for the Planning Group.

Another preliminary task for the Planning Group is to make sure that any current documentation the school may have that could inform the process is gathered together and, if necessary, key ideas extracted and added into the thinking and decision making. Such documents might include a current Charter, school review documents, a recent parent or student survey, property plans or student entry or exit data.

A final consideration for the group, and one which has worked well for a number of schools we have worked with, is the establishment of a Reference Group. This group would have input into the plan two or three times during the process - probably at the beginning for an initial brainstorm; for the clarification and prioritisation of goals and generation of strategies once the goals are beginning to firm up; and possibly once the draft is completed. The group would comprise between 20 to 40 people and would act as a community sounding board. They would represent the different groups in the school and the wider community and would include the Board, key members of staff and representatives of the PTA. In a secondary school it could include students. Other groups that may need to be represented are contributing schools, other local education organisations such as early childhood centres, ethnic groups, local Maori, local businesses or anyone who has particular expertise or knowledge important to the school. It is essential that these people have the long term interests of the school at heart and are prepared to be open-minded and creative.

Phase 2: Data collection and consultation

There are several aspects to this phase. To begin with, it is critical that the data collection is far-reaching. Both international and national issues need to be considered and questions asked about the social, economic and education issues that could or will impact on the school in the next few years. It may be important to source research information or other material to help ensure that the

scope of the plan is sufficiently broad. It is the task of the Planning Group to make sure that any issues that arise from these deliberations are included in any of the discussions with stakeholders during the consultation process.

As described earlier, the most important aspect of strategic planning is the education plan. It is possible to work on other aspects of the plan at the same time but they must be driven by what will happen for students in classrooms and in the teaching and learning programmes.

As with all the other stages there are options about who will be involved. As the instructional leader in the school the Principal must play a pivotal role but others may also be involved. For example:

- ◆ The Senior Management Team could co-ordinate the education plan
- ◆ It could begin with syndicates or departments looking ahead at directions for their subject area. For example:
 - one school began the plan by asking Curriculum Leaders to write a position paper projecting future needs
 - another school began with key questions that were discussed in syndicate meetings and then feedback was given to the planning group
- ◆ If the school has curriculum committees or a Board curriculum sub-committee it could play a key role in the process
- ◆ Input from outsiders with expertise and/or experience could be helpful
- ◆ If a Reference group is established this is one of the areas into which it they could have input
- ◆ In secondary schools, students can play a key role

It is probable that some staff will have unrealistic hopes or expectations for their subject or areas of interest and some hard decisions will need to be made. Some direct feedback may need to be given also. If the education plan is going to suggest any major shift in emphasis for the school or a major change in systems, there will need to be a consultation and information sharing process. In the end, the clearer the direction and the more specific the plan, the easier it will be to make decisions about staffing, buildings and resources.

The second major aspect of data collection is factual data of which the following are just some examples:

- ◆ Student achievement data - aggregated across the school or for particular groups such as Maori and ESOL students

- ◆ Statistical data on population trends from the local council, the Department of Statistics or the Ministry of Education will give you knowledge about projected roll figures.
- ◆ An accurate site plan with boundaries. Don't assume the fence or the tree line is the legal boundary. We know of at least one school which had land that belonged to it that it did not know about. Land contours will be important if the site is sloping and if buildings are relocated or new ones built. How extensively this data is collected will depend on the cost but an investigation of this nature can be a valuable long-term asset for a school.
- ◆ Data on how the school building and teaching spaces are used at present:
 - what subjects are taught in which rooms?
 - what percentage use does each space have?
 - are some spaces under-utilised?
 - are current teaching spaces ideal for current or projected teaching and learning needs?
- ◆ Use of the grounds - it is possible through observations and head counts to establish which areas are traffic bottlenecks and favoured spaces. Changes in timetabling may improve the situation. Re-locating the cafeteria or office may make dramatic differences.

The third type of data collection relates to people - their behaviour, expectations, opinions and attitudes. You will need to consider from whom data will be collected: students, staff, parents and caregivers, the Board of Trustees' members, contributing schools, and special groups within the school such as ethnic groups, parent associations and special units. Key questions to ask when planning how these groups will be involved are:

- ◆ What information do we need/want from each group?
- ◆ To what extent will we involve each group?
- ◆ How can we collect the data?
 - what methods are appropriate?
 - what is practical?
 - what can we afford in terms of time and money?

With students, data can come from student councils, class representatives or from individuals through a questionnaire or group discussions. In our experience, students are very insightful and have perceptive feedback and useful ideas that can add immeasurably to any strategic plan.

With staff, some of the existing systems can be used to gather feedback, such as staff meetings or syndicate/department meetings, or individuals can answer questionnaires or be interviewed. If the decision is to interview, consideration needs to be given to which particular staff will be involved - the Senior Management Team, Deans, Curriculum Leaders/Heads of Departments or student support staff such as the RTLB or Guidance Counsellor.

Parents and caregivers are not 'on site' and so it takes more effort to hear their views. While a Reference Group may be a preferred source of parent input, it may be more appropriate to canvass parent and caregivers more widely. The more effort made and the greater the variety of ways they can be involved, the greater the feedback, interest and ownership. Meetings will attract the more confident and mobile people. Some like the opportunity of a questionnaire but for others - such as some ethnic groups - this may not be the most effective way of collecting feedback.

We have seen 'workshops' used effectively in several schools involving people from all the groups mentioned earlier. Staff can also be involved in this exercise. One school began their strategic planning with a workshop day which was used to collect data and to begin goal setting. Another school used a workshop at a later stage when options were being generated for each of the goals and some decision making was needed.

From our experience there are some things to remember when collecting data from the stakeholder groups:

- ◆ Each group will bring a different perspective. Teachers often do not know what parents want or think. Students do not always think the same way as their parents and often have some wonderful ideas for their school.
- ◆ Several processes can begin and run alongside each other. They do not have to follow one after another.
- ◆ Designing a questionnaire is a highly skilled job. Answers will be given to any question asked but if it's not a good question the answers may be invalid and misleading.
- ◆ Don't collect data for the sake of it. Work out in advance how you will deal with what you collect.
- ◆ The data collection always seems to take longer than you think - allow realistic timeframes.
- ◆ Be open-minded - habits, pre-conceptions and assumptions close off options.

Phase 3: Generating options (or strategies) and making decisions

Once the data is collected it needs to be collated and analysed. It is important that the analysis is written up into a summary that can be used by any group

involved in making the decisions. The summaries should indicate which areas are considered important, which are widely supported, which are controversial and whether the data provides any detail that will help with decision making.

At this point, a school is ready to generate options for achieving their goals and making decisions. This can be done in a number of ways - on their own or in combination. Some schools have held a workshop and invited parents, staff and trustees to attend. If there is a Reference Group, this is an ideal point to call them back for input. Several schools with which we are familiar have set up a series of working parties to do this task, each with their own area (eg Education, Personnel, Property, ICT, Community), a brief and a timeframe for reporting back to the Planning Group. It is important to remember that some of the best ideas may seem radical at first and that others may be raised by only one person, or one group, but should not be discounted for that reason.

Throughout this stage it is essential that proposed initiatives be costed, at least approximately. Costings and budgeting are major considerations when prioritising and making decisions about what goes into the plan, what is dropped, and timeframes for implementation. They transform a wish list into a strategic plan. Not all changes will cost money and some very expensive initiatives may not be able to be actioned immediately. Nonetheless, if they are important enough, they should be included in the plan even if they are scheduled for the longer term. In the interim, planning for fundraising and sponsorship can begin.

Once the options have been discussed and costings completed, the next step is to carry out the detailed planning:

- ◆ Priorities should be identified.

These may not be the same for all groups but the decision making buck needs to stop somewhere.

The School's Charter and Education Plan should give direction to these decisions.

- ◆ Set priorities and objectives in a time frame

Do some things need to occur before others? For example:

- a new subject option developed before another is replaced
- new staff hired or some staff retrained
- a road shifted before a classroom can be re-located

- ◆ Devise an Action Plan

You have decided what will happen, now decide how it can be done.

- Who will do it?
- Who will have responsibility to ensure it is done?

- When will it happen?

It will be the enthusiasm of the person or people who oversee the action plan who will keep the strategic plan alive.

Phase 4: Finalising the plan

There is not right way to format a strategic plan. Some schools include a summary of their process so that future Boards and Senior Management Teams can refer back to the ways in which the current plan was devised. Any questionnaires or interview schedules can be included in the appendices for future reference.

Some schools include a rationale for each section so that anyone reading the plan for the first time or an implementation team can be reminded of the basis for decisions.

The headings used can also vary. Some use 'Goals' and 'Targets'; others use 'Objectives' and 'Strategies'. Some include columns to show when a strategy will be implemented during the timeframe of the plan.

Whichever way the plan is formatted, it is important that it is a 'living' document. In order for it to be accessible to parents, it may be necessary to summarise the key points in a brochure that can be distributed easily when visiting contributing schools or early childhood centres, placed in enrolment packs and given out on Open Days. One school had a copy of their plan posted in corridors outside classrooms so parents could read it as they waited to collect their children after school. Another school had their plan displayed prominently in the staffroom and a highlighter pen was used to update it from time to time. Staff and trustees gained great satisfaction from seeing the progress they were making with the changes they had planned.

Phase 5: Taking action

After decisions are made, the fourth phase involves checking policy to make sure that there is nothing that will stand in the way of achieving the targets. It may be necessary to review existing policy and in some cases even write policy, if none exists. It is important to stress that everything does not need to be actioned all at once. Decisions about actions to be taken will have been put into a time frame - some will happen immediately and some in the longer term. As each item comes up for action, so the policy must be checked. This is especially important in areas related to personnel, appointments, property and curriculum. It might also be important to consider writing a policy which covers the process of strategic planning itself, in order to ensure that any changes in Board personnel (for example in an election year) or in staff, do not disrupt the continuity of the process. Actioning the strategic plan and witnessing the ideas and the efforts come to fruition will always be the most exciting phase.

As we have already said, it is important to remember that the plan should be dynamic - open to review, evaluation and change if necessary. At the same time, however, it is also important to remember that the reason for putting it in

place is to ensure some continuity and sense of direction. Changes of direction, therefore, need to be well thought out and discussed fully.

The current Board of Trustees needs to consider putting some time and energy into educating a new Board if it is an election year and there is going to be a changeover of trustees. It is crucial that any incoming trustees understand the reasons why certain directions have been taken and that they have an opportunity to discuss these and develop some ownership of them.

Strategic Planning Traps

Like any process, there are some traps which are easy to fall into. The first is that the strategic plan becomes a 'wish list' rather than an action-oriented document. It is easy for strategic plans to get caught up in operational issues and this is sometimes the case in the initial discussion phase when people have the opportunity to say what they would like to see happen in the school. It is important that whatever process is developed, it allows for some decisions to be made on a day-to-day basis within allocated budgets, without becoming a major issue for the strategic plan.

Strategic planning involves more than just budgeting. As we have discussed, it is about visions and directions for the future - possibilities, rather than just what can be achieved in the current situation. Budgets will form an important aspect of the planning process, nevertheless.

The analysis and data collection needs to be thorough and done in depth. Major decisions will be taken based on this information and it just doesn't make good sense for it to be done superficially. However, everyone is aware of the overload for many staff and parents and it is important that this is remembered when the data is collection is done. Meetings must be purposeful and efficient and consideration given to their timing. Surveys should be easy to respond to and participants given a summary of the key outcomes. They need to know that their time was well spent and that their input is valued.

At the risk of putting too much emphasis on the competitive nature of the current educational environment, it is important to define what is different about your school, what can be emphasised and strengthened as something special.

The end goals need to be kept in full view and any action taken needs to be working firmly towards this. There may be diversions along the way, but it is important to keep returning to the focus.

Conclusion

What we have outlined is a comprehensive process of strategic planning which could and is taking place in schools.

It is important to reinforce our core beliefs that a strategic plan must have:

- ◆ a basis in educational goals and objectives
- ◆ an involvement of a wide range of people which results in ownership by everyone
- ◆ a commitment to the time, energy and resources to make it happen.

If these things occur, then we believe a vision is achievable and that energy and commitment to the school and the people in it will become almost tangible. Schools with a sense of direction are exciting places to be in and we challenge school leaders to think about their strategic thinking and acting processes and the benefits of such processes for their schools. When Stoll and Fink (1996) talk about vision they include the concept of strategic planning. They emphasise the profound effect it can have on how change happens in a school, its impact on school effectiveness and, ultimately, on outcomes for students.

The importance of vision to school improvement has been frequently stressed. Vision helps schools define their own direction and to develop an attitude that says 'we're in charge of change'.

Stoll, L. and Fink, D. (1996) Changing our Schools.