From vision to impact: Strategic school leadership

A school’s strategic education plan brings together its vision and values, achieving buy-in from the staff and community. In this Best Practice Focus, headteacher Ben Solly sets out his approach and offers practical advice. He discusses his vision, values and priorities, how to create highly effective teams, and how this all links to impact and outcomes.
Culture eats strategy for breakfast: Vision, values & team

Ever since I heard the phrase “culture eats strategy for breakfast”, I have worked hard to establish a healthy culture in each of the schools I have led. The vision and climate is the soul of the organisation. Teachers need to be able to feel valued. The plan should not be the sole property of the headteacher; it should be high-profile and transparent throughout the organisation, a document that all staff know about.

This article is aimed at schools leaders, aspiring and new headteachers who are considering how to construct their strategic plans in the coming years.

Three leadership domains

I am certainly not advocating this as the best way, or the only way, to construct a strategic plan. It is merely the process I have developed over time, having stolen as many ideas as possible from people with whom I have worked and collaborated during my time as a headteacher.

I have taken inspiration from the Venn diagram model – illustrated here – put forward in the book Leadership: All you need to know (Pendleton & Furnham, 2012). The model is similar to Steve Radcliffe’s (2018) no-nonsense model for strategic planning, less is more. I often say to our staff, if your plan is too long it means that it is not well thought out and this is not what you want anyone reading your plan to feel. The word “plan” should mean planning, and not just as an excuse to write a lengthy document. It is not a strategy document; it is a plan for action.

Three domains: The Pendleton-Venn Diagram states that leadership always requires attending to three domains: strategic, operational and interpersonal. The diagram contains seven tasks that leaders need to achieve (graphic adapted from Pendleton & Furnham, 2012).

All schools have values, but the academic success of everyone in the organisation can name them and genuinely claim that they demonstrate them. I look at many school websites and wonder if even the headteacher can recite the long list of values school use, they are too thin. It is not that they do not exist, but that they are not part of the school culture. For the values to have credibility and authenticity among the school community, every adult should model them in every interaction they have, every email they write, every lesson they teach, every staff meeting they are part of. This starts and finishes with the headteacher, modelling the values and the values school use, they are form the foundation of everything the school does.

Impact identifies how we will measure success.

This starts and finishes with the headteacher, modelling the values and explaining why they have been done. When it comes to communicating a whole school strategic plan, it is important for staff to know what the school is aiming for (the objectives), how they are going to achieve them (the strategies), and what success will look like (impact).

Ben Solly

Ben Solly is principal of Uppingham Community College in Rutland. He has been a school leader for more than six years and has been teaching for 16 years. You can follow him on Twitter (@ben_solly). Read his previous best practice articles for SecEd via http://bit.ly/sec-ed-solly.

Below is a recommended format for constructing a concise but comprehensive strategic plan.

Introduction and rationale

This is the head’s opportunity to create alignment by articulating a powerful message that inspires the staff body and leaves them wanting to know what the plan contains.

It should embody the school vision and values and speak from the heart. It should be no longer than one side of A4.

The strategic priorities

I tend to use only three or four main objectives. These are the four main areas that we do a school should be working towards. I often say to our staff, if we are investing our time, energy or resources into something that does not contribute towards one of these priorities, we should stop doing it. As an example, the three education strategic priorities for my school in our current plan are below (note that there are other school priorities pertaining to resources, site and finances that are in a separate Resources Plan):

- ATUC create the conditions for everyone to thrive.
- ATUC students make excellent progress in their education and holistic development.
- ATUC we have excellent student behaviour and effective safeguarding.

From these priorities, the basis of the plan is formed. I use a simple structure that will be used to achieve the identified priorities.

- Provision includes all the main strategies that will be used to achieve the identified priorities.
- Impact identifies how we will measure success.
- Evidence is where we will communicate all of this for external scrutiny of governors or Ofsted.

I tend to present this in a tabular format, with one page of A4 for each school priority. The table becomes a working document...
This is a critical element of the Interpersonal Domain in the Pendleton model. There is powerful research that points towards the value of significant and sustainable improvements due to an investment and development of the social capital within the school. The more resources are committed to working as a team and collaborating in research-based learning activities, the more effective the school becomes.

Where human capital focuses on the talents and skills of individual teachers, social capital draws upon its capacity to make effective judgements, the concept of social capital is concerned with the way in which teachers work together within an organisation. Schools can structure their CPD programmes and internal meeting structures to allow teachers to work more effectively together and as a result social capital can develop. We should ask ourselves questions such as:

How much time do we have to collaborate or joint planning?
How much time do we spend in unconnected meetings or discussing things that do not make the difference. Could we use this time together more effectively?

The pandemic has forced us to strip away many of the events and processes that clutter a school calendar and eat away at teachers' time. How many of these will we re-introduce when normal service resumes?
How do we use processes that can be viewed as oppressive or punitive, such as lesson observation or performance management, to positively impact on our staff and develop social capital within our teachers?

Are our CPD programmes focused on harnessing internal expertise within the school or do we rely on external expertise?

In contrast, interpersonal capital is the development of positive relationships with colleagues, students, parents and other stakeholders. It is the foundation of effective leadership and is critical to the success of any educational organisation. High-quality interpersonal capital is essential for the effective delivery of the school's strategic priorities. However, it is often the case that schools underestimate the importance of interpersonal capital and fail to develop it adequately.

The Interpersonal Domain in the Pendleton model focuses on the relationships that exist between individuals within the school. It is concerned with the nature of the interactions between staff, students, and other stakeholders, and how these relationships can be developed and sustained over time. The Interpersonal Domain in the Pendleton model is critical to the success of any educational organisation, and it is essential that schools make a deliberate effort to develop and sustain high-quality interpersonal relationships.

The more teachers are encouraged to work together, learn from each other and collaborate in research-based learning activities, the more effective the school becomes. This is because it is through collaboration and shared learning that teachers can develop the skills, knowledge, motivation and commitment of their workforce to ultimately deliver a superb education for the young people who serve.

Building the Social Capital in a school:
If you consider the term “capital” in a business context, it refers to any asset that a business organisation has that increases its net worth. In educational terms we can easily understand the term “value-added” in relation to student progress, but my experience has shown that we do not always implicitly understand how to recognise and develop the professional capital of the staff in our schools.

Hargreaves and Fullan (2012, 2013) helpfully dissect professional capital into three distinct components: human, social and decisional capital.

Human capital is the talent, ability and skill of the staff within a school – essentially I interpret this as how effective your teachers are in the classroom in terms of their subject knowledge, understanding of pedagogy and their ability to unite these into high-quality learning.

Decisional capital is the capability of your teachers and staff to make effective judgements within their work – judgements on how to deal with situations, on the quality of your student work, on how to manage and lead individuals and teams. I think of decisional capital as something that evolves and develops over time as we accrue experiences and learn from mistakes.

And perhaps most important is the concept of social capital – the way in which teachers and other members of staff within a school collaborate and work together in a collegiate and supportive culture.

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Mike Hawkins

Operational Domain.

can achieve. We need to dissolve this myth once and for all. The simple fact of the matter is that no amount of time spent planning, working with our colleagues, or dealing with additional responsibilities will achieve anything. This is why I advocate for a more collective and collaborative approach to leadership. 

There is no question that the education system we work within is challenging. It can be cutthroat, ruthless and unforgiving. Accountability measures, league tables, financial pressures and the pressure associated with schools’ inspection make up just a few of the many burdens.

The role of a headteacher has become akin to that of a Premier League football manager and shelf-life for some can be brutally short. In simple terms, the pressure is on us to deliver results quickly. However, the most effective headteachers are "architects", not "surgeons" (SecEd, 2018), who build sustainable self-improving systems in school that allow teachers to deliver the curriculum in a classroom that is disruption free.

In his book Education Exposed (2020), Ben Solly takes a low-level disruption to a school's teaching and learning. He argues that the key to achieving disruption-free schools is by focusing on the "S" in the 4Ps: Support. Then, the focus should be on enabling teachers to deliver the curriculum and improve their practice in a way that works for their students.

What does success look like? When we teach, we often spend a considerable amount of time modelling a desired response or answer. For students to achieve this, they need to see the model being demonstrated.

We do this to show students what the success criteria is, and then provide them with a series of steps in how to achieve the desired outcome. However, we often do school leaders to do this with the staff they lead? How explicit are we with what our success criteria is for a particular objective, and how much time do we spend modelling or coaching the person that is delivering it? We do this without thinking for our students, why not for the adults in school? The art is to make sure that the effective modelling for the staff in schools is achievable by striking a balance between not being too patronising, alongside being really clear about what works, and what doesn’t.

From experience, I know that staff appreciate clarity and crystal-clear expectations. It is the role of school leaders to identify the success criteria of a particular objective during the planning stage.

For less experienced leaders, they may require slightly more explicit modelling, whereas more experienced colleagues will be more than happy to deliver the strategies and achieving the desired impact with less direct support.

Removing all the nonsense

One of the most important roles of the modern headteacher is to remove as much red-tape, bureaucracy, and formality from the professional life of a teacher as possible. Teachers are our most expensive resource, from a financial perspective, but I feel that too many heads do not place as much emphasis on developing our teachers. If we create the conditions in which their teachers’ effectiveness can be optimised, we will be doing everything we can to support our teachers.

If we are serious about delivering results, we need to strip away everything we possibly can do to improve teachers’ effectiveness in the classroom. The average school leader devotes a considerable amount of time modelling for the staff in schools is as effective as possible.

School leaders must decide the key strategies that will be deployed in order to achieve their desired vision, and then create a culture in school where all staff can develop and deliver these strategies to the highest possible standard. However, in order to create a school that continues to grow and develop beyond our own tenure, we must "trust the processes" that elaborate these outcomes.

For us, this is simple; we should teach students really well, as well as responsibly can do, and therefore the vast majority of our time, energy and resource should be directed at supporting highly effective teaching.

Conclusion

Ultimately, whatever our role is in a school, most of us entered the education profession because we wanted to make a difference in the lives of young people. There is an unquestionable desire of altruism that comes hand-in-hand with being a teacher, and I know from experience that teachers take great pride in the outcomes their students achieve. The same can be said of most school leaders who I have encountered, although there is no doubt that the pressure of leadership is sometimes clouded the judgement of headteachers.

The most effective schools have a clear and authentic and sustainable quality-assurance cycle that is owned and valued by middle leaders.

Intelligent accountability

Holding colleagues to account is an important aspect of leadership in schools. We all have a responsibility to deliver results and have impact in our roles. However, the manner in which we go about this is critical.

The most effective schools have systems and routines, which are crystal clear and within which all members of staff know their roles and what is expected of them. This starts with the most basic model of getting people’s job descriptions right. This is a painstaking process but is the most effective starting point for making people accountable.

The second step is to design and implement quality assurance systems within the school that are supportive, collaborative and not punitive. They exist not to catch people out, but to ensure the school is focused on incrementally becoming more effective.

In conclusion, this is an area where the systems must be fair, mutually agreed, understood and owned. These systems must be robust. They must be owned by all leaders in school and should be completed with senior leaders working alongside middle leaders, and with middle leaders working alongside teaching staff. They should be considered as part of a developmental process.

A good example of this is the Department Staff Review process that we operate at our academy. In the design of this process, we took the previous model of quality-assurance, which involved each department being reviewed by the senior leadership team every two years, and created a yearly cycle, in which each department reviews their practice every term.

The senior leadership team is used to coach the middle leaders towards setting up priorities and delivering the selected strategies in order to achieve the outcomes. We then flip the system from being a “done to” process, to one that is “done with”. This is an authentic and sustainable quality-assurance cycle that is owned and valued by middle leaders.