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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 culture and climate of a school are the pivotal foundations for building a successful organisation.

I like Andy Buck’s really simple definition of these terms in his book *Leadership Matters* (2018). He states that culture is what we do in schools and climate is how it feels. I also like the thought of a healthy school culture as being “what everyone does, without having to be asked to”.

Schools thrive on the discretionary effort of diligent and committed staff and this can only be achieved through establishing a healthy school culture where staff are treated with respect, as professionals and feel valued.

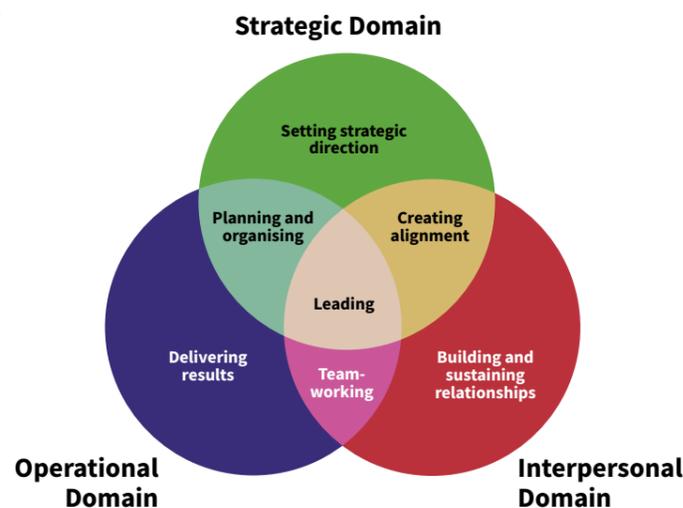
Culture has to come before strategy because even with the greatest strategic plan ever created, a headteacher cannot achieve it alone.

However, schools cannot fully thrive on culture and climate alone. There has to be a plan. The plan needs to be thorough, meticulously organised and focus on the right things for the right reasons.

The plan should not be the sole property of the headteacher, it

should be high-profile and transparent across 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 *Future, Engage, Deliver* (2008), which provides a simple, no-nonsense model for strategic planning. Both of these ideas have helped me develop my own

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).

systems for creating a strategic planning framework in schools.

This article is divided into three core sections, focusing on how school leaders can effectively operate in the three core areas of the Pendleton Venn Diagram, namely the Strategic Domain (by setting a strategic vision, creating alignment and designing a strategic plan), the Interpersonal Domain (how we can create highly effective teams), and the Operational Domain (how we actually get things done in schools).

The Strategic Domain Vision

It all starts with a vision. There should be a simple, one sentence vision that describes the raison d’être of the organisation in a coherent, concise and memorable statement. Distilling everything a school is aiming for into a meaningful sentence is extremely hard and should not be done in isolation.

In my first week of headship at Uppingham Community College (UCC), I spent a lot of time talking to staff as individuals, in small teams and collectively before I condensed everything I had learned about the organisation into a vision statement that could be adopted by the entire school community.

Values

All schools will have values, but the acid test is whether everyone in the organisation can name them and genuinely claim that they demonstrate them each day. I look at many school websites and wonder if even the headteacher can recite the long list of very credible values that the school has listed.

It is hard to disagree with any of the values school use, they are almost exclusively ethical and speak to the altruistic nature that one would expect from educators. However, my belief is that schools should select a manageable number of values and these should form the foundation of everything the school does.

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



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and reinforcing their importance daily so that the staff know and understand what is expected. The values should permeate every aspect of a school strategic plan and carry significant currency throughout the school.

Creating alignment

I frequently hear the term “buy-in” used to describe the notion of getting everyone in school pulling in the same direction. I prefer to use the term alignment. It is crucial for headteachers to create alignment throughout the organisation and this encompasses more than just the staff signing up to the vision statement.

Alignment, in simple terms, is ensuring all staff are working towards the same vision, aiming for the same objectives, using the same strategies and working within the cultural expectations of the school community.

Alignment is achieved when all staff embody and consistently display the school values in all aspects of their role in school. Alignment is about creating a critical mass of staff who genuinely subscribe to the vision of the school and then work diligently towards achieving it.

This cannot be achieved if the headteacher creates the strategic plan in isolation; if this happens then people are likely to resist the plan as they feel they have not been involved. Heads need to strike the skilful balance of being somewhat consultative, in order to understand the opinions of staff, but then decisive enough to identify the main strategies that will be used.

Another key aspect of creating alignment is communication. A successful headteacher always communicates effectively and I frequently turn to the words of Sir John Dunford: “Leadership is 10 per cent doing things and 90 per cent explaining why you’ve done them.”

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).

However, it is essential they understand why those objectives have been selected and why those strategies have been chosen. Headteachers should put considerable thought into how to communicate this in the most effective way in order to develop a high degree of alignment.

Finally, alignment within a school community is only possible if the strategic plan is realistic and achievable. I have seen many strategic plans that are extremely lengthy, to the point where I question whether the senior leadership team or even the head themselves could remember everything that it contains.

This overloading of strategies might look thorough and comprehensive, but the reality is that a lengthy plan will stretch a senior leadership team too thinly and the impact is that nothing gets done to a high standard, as the team is trying to achieve too many different objectives.

Essentially, when it comes to strategic planning, less is more. I encourage my team to try to get any document they present to me, staff or governors onto one side of A4, and while this is not always possible, it certainly encourages leaders to use concise language and distil ideas and strategies into a succinct, easy-to-digest format.

“This starts and finishes with the headteacher, modelling the values and reinforcing their importance daily”

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

Introduction and rationale

This is the ideal opportunity to introduce the purpose of the plan. What is it for? Who is it for? What are the educational philosophies that underpin it? How have the wider staff body been involved in its creation?

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 everything we do as 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):

- At UCC we create the conditions for everyone to thrive.
 - At UCC students make excellent progress in their education and holistic development.
 - At UCC we have excellent student behaviour and effective safeguarding.
- From these priorities, the basis of the plan is formed. I use a simple system I call Provision, Impact, Evidence – PIE for short.
- 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 document 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 ➤

that is updated on a half-termly basis, using a BRAG format:

- Blue: Objective achieved and embedded.
- Green: Objective achieved.
- Amber: Objective on course for completion.
- Red: Objective requires further intervention.

Selecting the strategies is a critical aspect of the plan (provision). In simple terms, these are the things that the school will do in order to achieve the identified school priorities. The responsibility for most of these strategies will reside with the senior leadership team, therefore it is essential they have ownership of the areas they will be leading.

Employing a distributed leadership model with the senior leadership team – I have written previously in *SecEd* about distributed leadership (Solly, 2018) – will ensure they have the autonomy and authority to lead these strategies; it is the headteacher’s responsibility to ensure they are accountable for delivering the desired impact.

Making the plan a reality

I cannot recall ever seeing a school’s strategic plan until I joined a senior leadership team. I think it is counterproductive to hide these documents away from staff, but I know that in many schools this still happens.

I believe that the plans should be available for all staff to see at any time if there is any chance of the strategies being achieved. Some schools publish their plans on the website for an additional element of transparency to their school community.

Ultimately, an enormous amount of leadership resource is invested into the construction of a strategic plan. As such, the worst possible thing to do is file it away or lock it in a draw for the rest of the year. The best plans are tweaked, refined and updated regularly throughout the year – they are living, collaborative documents that multiple leaders contribute to.

The Interpersonal Domain

I will now recommend the next steps which lead towards the delivery of the plan. I will focus on the people in schools and how we can most effectively utilise the skills, knowledge, motivation and

“*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*”

commitment of our workforce to ultimately deliver a superb education for the young people we serve.

Building the Social Capital in a school

If you consider the term “capital” in a business context, it refers to any value added to an organisation 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 me 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 lessons.

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 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.

This is a critical element of the Interpersonal Domain in the Pendleton model. There is powerful research that points towards schools making significant and sustainable improvements due to an investment and dedication towards developing the social capital within the school. 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.

Where human capital focuses on the talents and skills of individual teachers and decisional capital draws upon their 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 give to staff to collaborate on joint planning or joint evaluation activities?
- How much time do we spend in unnecessary meetings 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 observations 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 buying in external resources?

It is unrealistic that the social capital of a school will naturally increase or improve. It should be deliberately planned for by leaders as part of a strategy to develop a highly effective workforce.

Putting staff first

Many schools proudly state that

they always put their students first. However commendable this might seem at first, it can actually be counterproductive. If the students in a school are always considered first, when it comes to key decisions, strategies and policies, what can transpire is that staff suffer from unworkable conditions and subsequently this can lead to burn-out and a high staff turnover. This, in turn, will result in students’ education becoming compromised because:

- Staff are too exhausted to perform their roles effectively.
- Staff are absent because they are unable to sustain the levels of performance required by school policies.
- Staff turnover becomes high because of the unrealistic conditions; this leads to an inconsistency of adults in school and potential recruitment problems.

Instead, if the emphasis is flipped and schools put staff first, everyone in the school community can benefit.

If a school can create the conditions in which the staff can thrive in their professional roles, the students will subsequently receive a great education because

all staff are performing to a high standard.

In this school, we have highly motivated teachers, who have their workload considered and managed effectively by the school leaders, and whose professionalism is valued and trusted. Compare this with a tired, unmotivated and undervalued workforce – which set of teachers would you want teaching your own children?

Developing leaders

If we are to develop and sustain strong relationships in schools, as outlined in the Interpersonal Domain of the Pendleton model, then school leaders play a critical role.

The headteacher cannot do this alone. Indeed it is unrealistic for the senior leadership to take on this responsibility all for themselves; it is a collective leadership effort across the school. Of course, everything starts with the headteacher demonstrating highly effective leadership behaviours, which are then modelled consistently by the senior leadership team. This can then permeate into the middle leadership layer within a school, who in turn develop and sustain

strong relationships with the staff in their departments.

Andy Buck explains this expertly in his blog on discretionary effort (2018), where he outlines the single most influential factor in determining discretionary effort in an individual member of staff is their relationship with and respect for their direct line manager.

Therefore, it is essential for the school to take the development of leaders seriously. Are there progression routes mapped out for those aspiring towards leadership positions? Are staff able to access National Professional Qualifications for leadership, or does the school organise its own leadership development programme?

The development of leaders is not something that happens by magic, it is again something that should be deliberately planned for within a school’s strategic plan. I refer you again to my previous *SecEd* piece on developing leadership capacity through a distributed leadership model (Solly, 2018).

Once a school begins its journey towards developing a sustainable and authentic leadership model, they have a much greater chance

of building strong relationships across all departments within the school, ultimately ensuring that all staff are working collaboratively towards the school vision and strategic objectives.

Building discretionary effort

I personally define discretionary effort as the work that people in schools complete that falls outside of their substantive role. This is work that is done for free – no extra pay and no time in lieu accrued.

In many jobs outside of education the basic premise will be that there are a set number of hours per week, those hours are completed and at the end of each shift the employee goes home. However, the teaching profession relies heavily on teachers working hours way beyond those of the school day.

There are the obvious imperatives such as planning and marking. However, there are so many other activities that occur within the school environment that enrich the lives of students and create a positive atmosphere for learning.

Such activities will only occur because of the goodwill of teachers; people going above and

beyond what is detailed in their job descriptions because they know it will have a positive impact on their students. Schools can only thrive when their workforce collectively delivers a significant level of discretionary effort.

This is an essential ingredient in the Interpersonal Domain in Pendleton’s leadership model. If we are to build and sustain positive relationships and highly effective teams, then discretionary effort must be high across the school.

The question is, how do we create an environment where school staff freely contribute large amounts of discretionary effort? Creating a culture within a school where discretionary effort is high takes a long time, and it can be eroded very quickly with the wrong approach.

The headteacher has a crucial role to play here, the most important in the school. The head sets the tone for everyone in the school community and is responsible for establishing the conditions and culture where everyone can thrive. Staff need to feel valued and trusted and the working practices across the school need to be sensible and appropriate.

There are many, many notable quotes regarding team-work that most school leaders could cite as pertinent mantras to live by. However, one that perennially resonates with me is from Henry Ford, who said: “Coming together is a beginning, staying together is a process, working together is success.”

For school leaders, creating alignment among your staff and supporting everyone to collectively work together in a highly effective and impactful manner is perhaps the most important aspect of the job and is one we should take very seriously indeed.

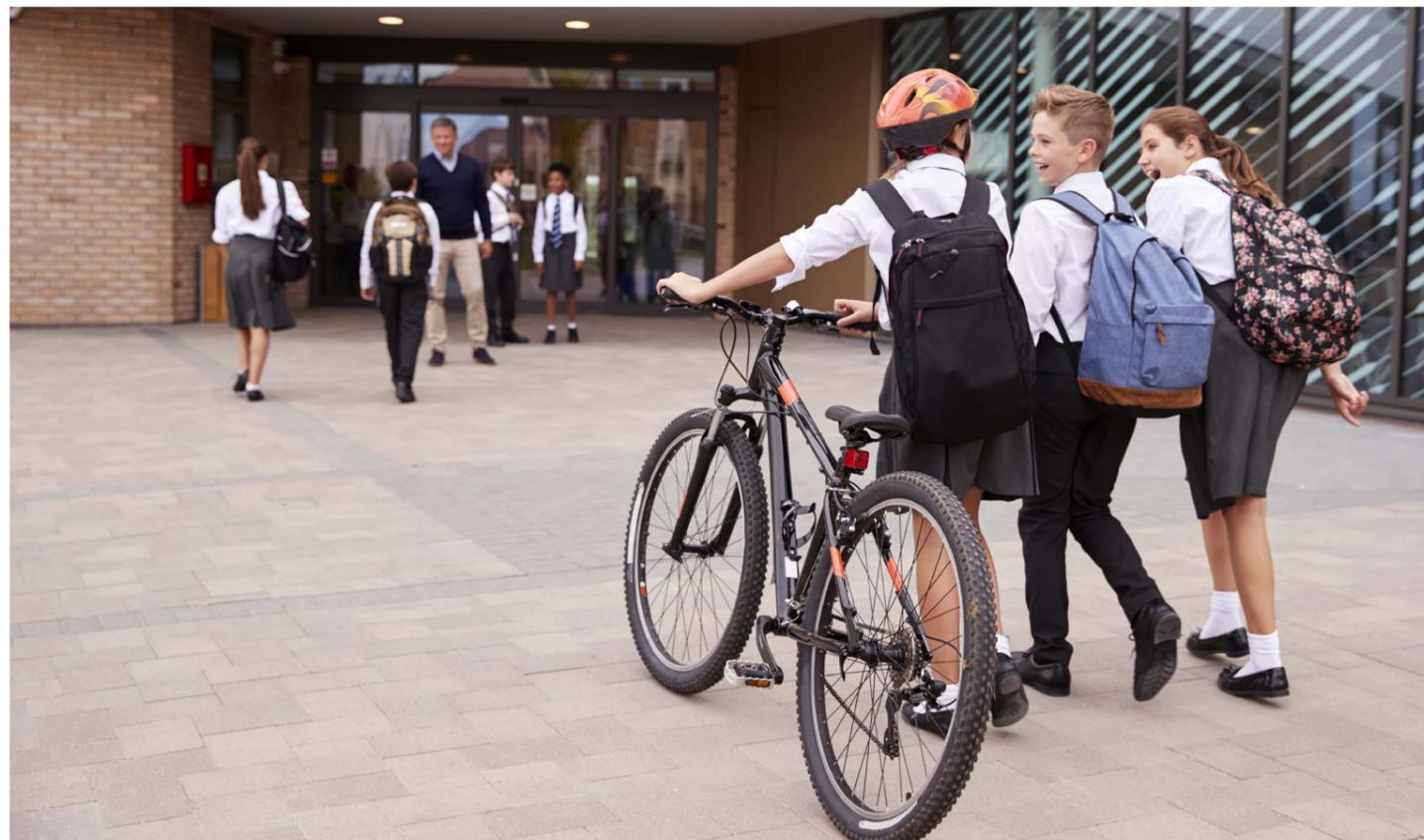
The Operational Domain

The final section of the Venn diagram concerns how we actually get things done in schools. It is about delivering results. It is about impact.

Delivering results

“*However beautiful the strategy, you should occasionally look at the results.*” Winston Churchill

Like it or loathe it, our education system is a results-based



business. Headteachers are ultimately accountable for the results achieved by students each year. It is up to school leaders to develop a vision, create a strategy, deploy an effective team and then deliver impact. Sounds simple doesn't it? Far from it.

The high-stakes, high-accountability nature of the English education system has certainly increased the pressure on school leaders to deliver results rapidly. Occasionally, this has driven perverse incentives across the system, with some schools taking decisions which are often questionable, sometimes unethical.

Thankfully, the days of playing qualification games with the curriculum are gone, and a bright light has been shone on shameful off-rolling practices. Nevertheless, the pressure on heads to deliver impact quickly is often overwhelming and it takes a brave school leader to put their faith in long-term, sustainable school improvement strategies, over quick-fixes and short term gains.

However, this long-sighted approach to leadership is exactly what I am advocating, and as Dave Harris points out in his book *Brave Heads* (2012), we must work out how to lead our schools without selling our souls.

Coming back to that phrase, "culture eats strategy for breakfast", I believe a strong school culture is more powerful than any strategic plan. There does, however, need to be a plan so that we can align all of our well-meaning, committed and talented staff in the same direction, and ensure they are all striving for the same goals.

This covers the Strategic and Interpersonal Domains of the Pendleton model. However, unless school leaders actually make things happen, the objectives of any plan will not be delivered and little will be achieved. This is why the Operational Domain is the important, final aspect of this leadership model. Here are my practical tips on how to successfully navigate the Operational Domain.

Trusting the process

"You don't get results by focusing on results. You get results by focusing on the actions that produce results."
Mike Hawkins



There is no question that the education system we work within is challenging. It can be cut-throat, ruthless and unforgiving. Accountability measures, league tables, financial pressures and the pressure associated with school 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 for us to deliver results quickly.

However, the most effective headteachers are "architects", not "surgeons" (SecEd, 2018), who build sustainable self-improving schools that focus on the core purposes of teaching and learning in order to improve results. They do not play games with the curriculum, they don't work staff to within an inch of their lives. Instead, they carefully design authentic and sustainable ways of working that enable their staff to thrive and deliver a great education for their students.

Given the competitive conditions within our education system, schools are perennially at the behest of an outcomes-driven culture. Therefore it is no surprise that many school leaders become obsessed with achieving the

highest possible performance outcomes in the shortest possible time. However, in order to create a school that continues to grow and develop beyond our own tenure, we must "trust the processes" that generate these outcomes.

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

School leaders must decide the key strategies that will be deployed in order to achieve their desired vision, and then create a culture in

“They do not play games with the curriculum, they don't work staff to within an inch of their lives. Instead, they carefully design authentic and sustainable ways of working that enable their staff to thrive”

school where all staff can develop and deliver these strategies to the highest possible standard.

As a result, we stop chasing outcomes and focus on the process of teaching. In simple terms, if we want our examination outcomes to improve, then the focus should not be on chasing decimal points in a Progress 8 calculation, it should be on enabling teachers to deliver the curriculum in the most effective way possible.

What does success look like?

When we teach students, we will often spend a considerable amount of time modelling a desired answer or response for them. This is to show them "what a good one looks like" and the most effective teachers will break this modelling down into simple, memorable "chunks".

We do this to show students what the success criteria is, and then provide them with a series of steps which will enable them to achieve the desired outcome.

However, how often do school leaders 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 of professional modelling for the staff in schools is achieved by striking a balance between not being too patronising, alongside being really clear about what is expected from people. From experience, I know that staff appreciate clarity and crystal-clear expectations, so it is important for 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 capable of delivering 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 nonsense 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 as they should on creating the conditions in which their teachers' effectiveness can be optimised.

If we are serious about delivering results, we need to strip away everything we possibly can that impairs a teacher's effectiveness in the classroom. This should start with creating systems in school that allow teachers to deliver the curriculum in a classroom that is disruption free.

In his book *Education Exposed* (2020), Sam Strickland likens low-level disruption to kryptonite for teachers. It is incumbent on headteachers to take a leading role in ensuring low-level disruptions, or "white noise", in classrooms are dealt with swiftly and effectively so that the teacher can focus on delivering the curriculum and sharing their expertise.

Another practical step headteachers can take to support teachers in being highly effective is to make some of the more traditional processes in school work for teachers, rather than against them.

An example of this is performance management and

performance-related pay. Perennially, these are the bane of a teacher's life, when they are set data-driven targets that are probably unachievable and inevitably demoralising.

Instead of this process, why not introduce an annual cycle of Personal Improvement Planning, where each teacher identifies an area of their pedagogy that they wish to develop and then their CPD programme is personalised towards achieving this? Why do we continue to embark on judgemental lesson observations, when we could instead offer developmental coaching opportunities for our staff and harness the internal expertise that already exists within our schools? For more on the CPD culture at UCC, look-up my previous *Best Practice Focus* for SecEd (Solly, 2020).

Finally, given that many school calendars have become completely "decluttered" during the pandemic, we should be seriously questioning which events, meetings and time commitments for staff will be re-introduced when the world returns to some form of normality.

Finding opportunities in the school calendar and the 1,265 directed hours that free teachers up to focus on planning, providing quick and effective feedback, or developing resources will be highly valued by staff and contribute significantly towards schools actually being able to deliver results in a sustainable manner.

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 element 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 order to achieve this, the systems must be fair, mutually agreed, understood and consistent. 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 learning and development process and they should form an authentic aspect of the way a school operates.

A good example of this is the Department Self Review process that we operate at my school. 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 own provision every term.

The senior leadership team is used to coach the middle leaders towards identifying the right priorities and delivering the selected strategies in order to achieve a positive impact. By flipping the system from being a "done to" process, to one that is "done with", we have created an authentic and sustainable quality-assurance cycle that is owned and valued by middle leaders.

Conclusion

Ultimately, whatever our role is in a

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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 degree 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 leading a school can sometimes cloud the judgement of headteachers.

I strongly believe that schools can achieve genuine, long-term, sustainable growth if they commit themselves to aspects that make the biggest difference. This means prioritising teaching and learning, establishing a school culture and climate where discretionary effort is high, and retaining an ethical values-based approach to school improvement.

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