

SCHOOL PLANNING

An Advice Paper to support the School
Improvement and Accountability Framework

November 2009

SCHOOL PLANNING

Schools plan by making evidence-driven decisions about the actions required to maximise student achievement. School planning responds to student and community needs, addresses policy requirements, accommodates departmental imperatives and engages all school staff.

There are three levels of school planning:

- The School Plan (Strategic Plan)
- Operational planning
- Classroom planning

Differences between Strategic and Operational Planning

Characteristic	School Plan (Strategic Plan)	Operational Planning
Definition	<i>Establishes overall objectives for the school in relation to school context</i>	<i>Supports the School Plan by specifying details of how school objectives will be achieved</i>
Audience	Public (School Council endorsed)	Internal
Purpose	Strategic (what?)	Active (how and who?)
Content	Overview	Details
Length	Succinct (max. 8 x A4 pages)	Longer
Components	Prescribed in policy	School-determined
Focus	Whole school	Sub-components
Period	Typically, a number of years	Typically, annual

SCHOOL PLANNING PROCESS

The process of school planning is arguably more important than the planning documents themselves. While it is important to document planning decisions (the School Plan is a public record of this), the effectiveness of the school planning process is best measured by the extent to which all members of the school community understand the school's purpose, have contributed to establishing the schools objectives, understand what these mean and are actively implementing and supporting what has been planned.

Because school planning should be focused on improved student outcomes and because teachers will have the greatest school-level influence on student achievement, school planning must be connected to the what, how and when of classroom practice. Unless key elements of the School Plan and operational planning live and breathe in the daily work of teachers, then it is unlikely that planning goals will be achieved.

It is therefore critical that teachers are deeply involved in shaping school planning and are committed to achieving agreed outcomes. This will be demonstrated through classroom planning and performance management.

The *School Improvement and Accountability Policy* states that the responsibility for school planning lies with:

school principals, in collaboration with school staff (p.5)

and further, requires that:

School Councils take part in establishing and reviewing the School Plan (p.5)

This collaborative approach to school planning requires that schools develop a planning process that is consultative, inclusive and coherent. Proper attention and time dedicated to the school planning process will be rewarded with more motivated staff, stronger community support and involvement and, ultimately, better student outcomes.

Establishing a well understood, coherent approach to planning is a characteristic of strong leadership that requires time, effort and perseverance in building productive relationships within the school and between the school and the community.

SCHOOL PLANNING FRAMEWORK

It is important for schools to adopt a planning framework that meets the requirements of the policy but also produces a 'living' plan that is owned and used by school staff and that is flexible enough to respond to changes that will occur from time to time.

Adapting a planning framework developed for another purpose, such as the *Plan for Public Schools*, ensures that the School Plan aligns to system planning. However, a system plan is not a School Plan and schools should ensure that their School Plan is developed from and responds to school-based evidence. School Plans should be focused on identified school need. They should be referenced to systemic planning documents but not necessarily framed by them.

The *School Improvement and Accountability Framework* offers elements of a planning framework. The conceptual model (p.3) lists the five school operations, over which schools have some control, which are pre-requisites or enablers of successful students. These are the:

- quality of **teaching** – both what is taught and how it is taught
- safety and inclusiveness of the **learning environment**
- efficiency with which **resources** are allocated
- quality and distribution of **leadership**
- effectiveness of internal and external **relationships**

A planning framework that includes these five school operations will assist schools to consider all of the tools at their disposal that will contribute to improved student achievement.

The *School Improvement and Accountability Policy* requires that classroom planning be aligned to school planning and that this is monitored through performance management. It is essential therefore that the planning framework adopted speaks to teachers in ways that make explicit what they are expected to do and provides a mechanism to monitor alignment between school and classroom planning.

THE SCHOOL PLAN (Strategic Plan)

This is a public document that provides a direction-setting, strategic overview for the school. This plan is developed in consultation with the School Council, spans a number of years and is succinct.

The *School Improvement and Accountability Policy* requires that Schools Plans include:

- Objectives
- Priorities
- Improvement targets
- Major strategies (particularly whole school strategies)

- Resources
- Reference to systemic policies and directions
- Evaluation measures
- A timeframe (including provision for annual review)

Values and Beliefs

Stating a set of shared beliefs about learning and teaching and/or the values that underpin the operations of the school is a useful way of committing school staff and the school community, represented by the School Council, to those beliefs and values.

Because the School Plan is a public document, the inclusion of beliefs and values can also assist in the recruitment and induction of new staff, new parents and new students by clearly and publicly stating the school's educational philosophy.

Objectives and Priorities

The requirement for objectives and priorities comes from the *School Education Act 1999*, section 63 (1) (d) under the functions of principal which states:

The functions of the principal of a government school are – (d) to establish a plan for the school in consultation with the Council and the school's teaching staff setting out its objectives and how the objectives and priorities will be achieved.

School objectives and priorities can be viewed as statements of intent – what the school intends to achieve. Many School Plans do not specifically state their objectives but instead frame a set of priorities with broader goals or outcomes of schooling. In such instances the school's priorities typically serve as a proxy for their objectives.

The School Plan (Strategic Plan) may include all of the things the school intends to achieve or only those that will be a significant focus during the period of the plan. Either approach is acceptable.

If a school chooses to include all of its objectives then the priorities will typically be a subset of that list. If a school chooses to include only those objectives that are a focus, then the objectives and priorities will typically be one and the same. All priorities should be evidence-based and selected according to identified need.

It is possible for objectives to have equal priority, in which case they are addressed simultaneously. It is also possible that some objectives need to take priority over others. An example of an objective given priority might be one related to student behaviour or student attendance, where the school takes the view that unless student behaviour or student attendance is comprehensively and immediately addressed it will not be possible for other objectives to be achieved.

It is also possible that school priorities may address part of a school objective. An objective that focuses on improving student writing may have a priority focus on, for example, the conventions of writing. This would be based on evidence from student performance data that spelling, punctuation and grammar require greater and more immediate attention than other components of writing.

How Many Objectives and How Many Priorities?

The short answer to this question is as few as possible, though the number of objectives will be determined by identified need and the capacity for change.

While there is no specified number of priorities, experience suggests that more than four is likely to be too many. It is generally better to have fewer priorities and to ensure that focus is maintained on a small number of things rather than to dissipate energy and enthusiasm over many things. Fewer priorities also make it easier to align the three levels of school planning and, in particular, to ensure that classroom planning reflects the School Plan.

Using Objectives from Existing Sources

There are a range of existing documents that provide useful starting points for developing school objectives. In utilising these schools should be aware that a School Plan must be distinctive for each school. It is not sufficient for schools to appropriate, for example, the objectives from the *Plan for Public Schools*. Rather, such objectives should be shaped to take account of local context and to identify how these systemic objectives will be enacted in this particular school.

Because the School Plan should be about maximising student achievement, the *Curriculum Framework* (1998) is a useful foundation source for developing school objectives. The Principles of the *Curriculum Framework* (pages 16-17) and the Overarching Learning Outcomes (pages 18-26) amount to goals of schooling from which school-based objectives may emerge.

Improvement Targets

Improvement targets are indicators of progress towards achieving an objective. They should have a timeframe, be measurable or observable and be sufficiently challenging to stimulate change, but also achievable so that effort is rewarded.

Establishing measurable improvement targets can result in targets that specify a percentage improvement in student achievement. Extreme caution should be exercised in setting such targets. Just because a target is measurable doesn't mean that it sets the correct quantum of improvement.

For example, a target that seeks to improve by 5% the number of Year 5 students achieving at or above the national minimum standard in reading is easy to measure. However, unless some detailed analysis has been undertaken, such a target appears to be arbitrary. A 5% improvement may be too easy or too difficult to achieve and, in either case the school won't know if the strategies employed to reach the target contributed to the outcome.

Improvement targets need to be anchored to a realistic baseline and standard that gives some sense of what should be achievable if a concerted improvement strategy is employed for long enough.

There are a number of ways that standards-based improvement targets can be established. Schools should select only those methods that are applicable and useful. There is no expectation that all of the following methods will be used by schools and a number of these methods may be used together to set a target.

Individual Student Case Studies

This approach is particularly suited to schools with small populations or for small identified cohorts of students. It involves making a careful evaluation of the capacity for improvement of individual students and is usually accompanied by the development of a personalised learning plan for each student.

The improvement target may be set by the extent to which individual student goals in personalised learning plans are achieved or by identifying only those students for whom the target is intended.

For example, an improvement target might focus on six Year 5 students who have demonstrated reading achievement below the national minimum standard. An analysis of the full range of characteristics of these students may reveal that one has an intellectual disability and one has a poor attendance record.

An intervention strategy may be employed to address the reading needs of all six students, but the improvement target would focus on the four students the school is confident it can lift above the national minimum standard.

If other strategies to address attendance are successful it is possible that the intervention will also raise the performance of the student with a poor attendance record. This would result in the school exceeding its improvement target rather than failing to reach a target that had little to do with the intervention proposed.

An improvement target of this kind might be framed as follows:

Increase by four the number of 2008 Year 5 students achieving the national minimum standard in reading, as measured in the Year 7 2010 NAPLAN testing.

Longitudinal Cohort Comparison

This approach compares student achievement over time to establish an historical trend for the school. To be useful in setting improvement targets schools require at least five years of comparative data.

In this way it is possible for schools to predict the typical achievement of student cohorts and set targets in relation to that long-term trend. A true 'improvement' target will seek to change the trajectory of the long-term trend, arresting a downward trend, increasing the rate of growth or reducing the differential between cohorts.

Improvement targets of this kind might be framed as follows:

Arrest, then reverse the downward trend in Year 12 Physics by 2011.

Raise the longitudinal trend of Year 3 students by 30 NAPLANs in reading by 2011.

Reduce the gap by 40 NAPLANs between the longitudinal trends in reading for Year 3 and Year 5 by 2011.

Matched Student or Stable Cohort Comparison

Predicting the achievement of individual students over time by matching an individual student's achievement in the past with her/his current or future achievement is a useful way of setting realistic improvement targets.

This approach deals with individual students or stable clusters of students and so eliminates cohort variation and instead assumes that, all things being equal, achievement in the past, will predict achievement in the future.

Of course, this assumption will not hold true for all individuals. Schools should be able to identify atypical achievement and adjust their target accordingly.

The Student Achievement Information System (SAIS) offers ways of matching student performance, using both teacher judgements and system test data.

An improvement target of this kind might be framed as follows:

The achievement of matched students equals or exceeds their predicted achievement as measured across two or more NAPLAN tests.

Same Cohort Comparison

This approach sets improvement targets on the basis that, on average, the same cohort of students should achieve similar results across the curriculum. While this assumption will not hold true for certain individuals, it is reasonable to assume, for cohorts of about 15 or more students, that the average achievement of the group will be similar for reading and writing and even reading and numeracy.

An improvement target that seeks to match the performance of a cohort with its own performance in something else is realistic given an appropriate intervention strategy and enough time.

An improvement target of this kind might be framed as follows:

The writing achievement of Year 5 students tested in 2008 will be equivalent to the same students' reading achievement when they are tested as Year 7s in 2010.

Relative Performance Comparison

Schools Online provides a relative assessment calculation that plots actual student achievement over time against predicted achievement using the school's Socio-economic Index (SEI) and the previous achievement of students (where this is available).

This calculation enables schools to set realistic and potentially achievable improvement targets that aim to reach or to exceed predicted achievement.

An improvement target of this kind might be framed as follows:

The reading achievement of Year 5 students tested in 2008 will be equivalent to or above their predicted achievement when they are tested as Year 7s in 2010.

Like-school Comparison

This approach matches the performance of students in one school with that of a like-school group. Like-school groups are based on socio-economic factors that are known to correlate with student performance.

An improvement target that seeks to raise student achievement to match or exceed like-schools is realistic given an appropriate intervention strategy and enough time.

An improvement target of this kind might be framed as follows:

The reading achievement of Year 5 students tested in 2008 will be equivalent to or higher than like-school means for the same cohort when they are tested as Year 7s in 2010.

National Comparison

The introduction of Australia-wide NAPLAN testing in 2008 means that the achievement of all WA students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 can be compared to the achievement of students in other States and to an Australian mean. This offers another standard against which to set achievement targets.

Because all students do the same test at the same time, any difference in achievement between States can be accounted for by differences in student populations, different populations being advantaged or disadvantaged by the tests and/or different curriculum and pedagogy, producing different results.

If a school judges that their students are essentially the same as those in similar locations in other States and that their students have not been obviously disadvantaged by the tests, then it is reasonable to expect that these students will achieve about as well as students in other States.

Any significant difference to the national mean or the mean of the highest achieving State, provides an opportunity to establish improvement targets that will seek to close that gap. This approach also guides improvement strategies that will focus on curriculum scope and sequence and pedagogy.

This method can be particularly useful for schools with consistently high standards of achievement by comparison to expected achievement, like-schools and State means. Targets linked to the national mean or to the mean of the highest achieving State may be more appropriate for these schools.

An improvement target of this kind might be framed as follows:

The reading achievement of Year 5 students tested in 2008 will be equivalent to the Australian mean when they are tested as Year 7s in 2010.

Strategic and Operational Improvement Targets

Strategic Improvement Targets specified in the School Plan typically set medium- to long-term targets that will be achieved over a number of years. It may therefore be helpful to derive from these strategic targets, operational targets that specify progress towards the strategic target in a given school year.

This can be very important when student improvement is dependent on strategies that seek significant changes in pedagogy and practice. In such instances, operational targets may be end-loaded. That is, little or no student improvement is expected in the first year of implementation, but significant and rapid improvement is expected in subsequent years, as the strategy is fully enacted.

Improvement Targets and Strategies

Student achievement is the centrepiece of the *School Improvement and Accountability Framework* and the ultimate purpose of school accountability processes. For this reason, improvement targets in school planning should be about student achievement.

This distinguishes improvement targets from strategies in that improvement targets should always be framed in relation to student achievement while strategies may, and frequently are, about staff development.

In this way, improvement targets will always be seeking improvement in student achievement – both academic and non-academic, while the strategies implemented to reach the target are likely to focus on what teachers and school support staff do.

Major Strategies (particularly whole-school strategies)

Strategies are the ways that objectives and improvement targets will be addressed. Usually, strategies belong in operational planning, although some strategies are so fundamental to achieving the objective or the improvement target (for example, a whole-school approach to behaviour management), or so pervasive (for example, a whole school adoption of a learning approach such as TRIBES) that they warrant inclusion in the School Plan.

Long-term Strategies

Some significant strategies for improving student achievement require long-term implementation. This is particularly true of whole-school approaches to pedagogy that require extensive professional learning and practice before they can be fully implemented. It is important that long-term strategies are monitored both for the progress of implementation and, ultimately, their impact on student achievement.

To monitor the implementation of a long-term strategy, schools may choose to set implementation milestones. These milestones are not targets because they are not about student achievement. Milestones may, for example, set goals for the number of staff attending professional learning, changes to classroom practice as a result of professional learning, changes to organisation structures and practice, the attitude of staff, students and parents to the implementation. Milestones for the implementation of strategies would typically be included in operational planning.

Ultimately, long-term strategies must be evaluated in terms of their impact on student achievement. However, setting implementation milestones recognises that the impact of a strategy on student learning may not be immediate and that implementation may, initially, result in a dip in student achievement.

Resources

There are three types of resource available – human, fiscal and physical. Directing available resources to identified need, as described in objectives, priorities and improvement targets, is a requirement of the School Plan.

The School Plan does not require a detailed school budget or chart of accounts but should indicate the human, fiscal and physical resources that are directed to the school's objectives or priorities.

Reference to Systemic Policies and Directions

Public schools are part of a system that itself has strategic plans, policies and direction-setting statements. While it is not expected that each school will mirror system priorities or planning structures, School Plans should identify what contribution the school will make to systemic planning and direction.

The planning process should be undertaken with an awareness of the system priorities and directions but should be driven by evidence from the school's self assessment process. In this way the school's objectives and priorities can be mapped to the system's priorities as both a record and a check.

Evaluation Measures

The school improvement cycle requires that schools are able to evaluate the effectiveness of their planning. It is therefore essential that the ways an objective or improvement target will be evaluated are included in the School Plan. This will become the mechanism by which the effectiveness of the plan is evaluated and reported and will be the basis for the next planning cycle.

Evaluation measures cannot simply be about whether a strategy has been implemented. Ultimately the focus of evaluation measures must be student achievement, even if the strategy employed deals with teacher development. Schools need to be able to judge whether an improvement strategy made any difference to student achievement. In this way the evaluation should be of the objective or improvement target, rather than the strategy.

If, for example, a whole school strategy related to managing student behaviour is implemented it will not be sufficient to assert that all staff undertook the requisite training. Schools need to also judge whether the training led to changes in practice and whether that changed practice led to, in this case, improved student behaviour.

Because the effect of some strategies on student achievement may be long-term, often longer than the planning timeframe, it may be important for evaluation measures to set some interim student achievement milestones that would indicate that the strategy is on course and should be continued.

It may also be important to evaluate whether the appropriate strategy was chosen and whether it was implemented in a manner and over a timeframe that was likely to lead to improved student achievement.

A Timeframe (including provision for annual review)

School Plans are not typically annual, though they should be reviewed and adjusted annually. Annual plans do not look far enough over the horizon to focus on medium-term goals and are therefore not strategic in nature. This applies equally to schools with a high turnover of staff, including administrative staff. In such schools a strategic plan covering a number of years may provide the stability and direction that is not afforded by staffing stability.

Schools, in consultation with their Directors Schools, can adopt a school planning cycle that best meets their needs and circumstances.

Adjustments to the School Plan would typically be associated with an annual review of progress towards the achievement of objectives and/or improvement targets. However, any component of a School Plan can and should be modified if the evidence and circumstances justify it.

OPERATIONAL PLANNING

Operational planning sets out how School Plan objectives will be implemented. It is critical that there be a strong and obvious connection between the School Plan and operational planning. This is usually achieved by repetition in operational plans of objectives/priorities and improvement targets from the School Plan.

Operational plans are internal to the school and should be designed by and for school staff. They typically include:

- The School Plan objective, priority or improvement target being addressed
- specific strategies that will be employed
- who is responsible for implementing these strategies
- a timeframe for implementation
- resources allocated to support the strategy
- ways that the implementation will be evaluated.

There is no prescribed format or content for operational plans which may take the form of, for example, plans for learning areas, phases of learning, subject faculties, sub-schools, projects, priorities or whole-school commitments.

CLASSROOM PLANNING

Classroom planning is central to school improvement because it is what teachers do in their classrooms that impacts most directly on what students achieve. Any planned improvement of student achievement will generally require that some or all teachers change some aspect of what they do.

The *School Improvement and Accountability Policy* requires that classroom planning, undertaken by teachers or groups of teachers, must be aligned to the agreed objectives of the School Plan and to school operational planning. This is the main mechanism by which school improvement will be enacted.

Many schools have found that collaborative planning processes supported by the provision of planning time, administrative support, staff allocation and other resources, is a powerful tool for implementing school planning strategies in classrooms. Collaborative planning ensures that clusters of teachers are focused on the implementation of the School Plan while at the same time workload for individuals is reduced and peer and other support structures are provided.

The *School Improvement and Accountability Policy* makes explicit that the implementation of school planning is to be a component of teacher performance management.

School principals, in collaboration with school staff:

- *monitor the alignment of classroom planning to school planning through performance management*

The performance management of teachers requires a conversation between the performance manager and the teacher about how school planning is being implemented by the teacher.

Teachers are accountable for the progress of students and expected to undertake classroom planning. A documented classroom or collaborative plan is a useful focus for a performance management conversation.

There are other ways of ensuring that school planning strategies are being implemented in classrooms. These include classroom visits, collaborative planning processes and student and parent interviews. Information collected in these ways may be fed into the performance management of teachers.