

 **Pathways Research Series:**
Understanding Effective School Improvement

Strategic Planning

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“School improvement is a complex, multi-faceted endeavour that is probably best planned and coordinated from more of a long-term or at least longitudinal perspective.”¹⁹



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Forming a strategic plan

Part of the process of building capacity during the school improvement cycle generally involves drawing up a strategic plan. It is widely accepted in school improvement literature that formulating a plan of any description usually begins with an audit¹ or self-evaluation.

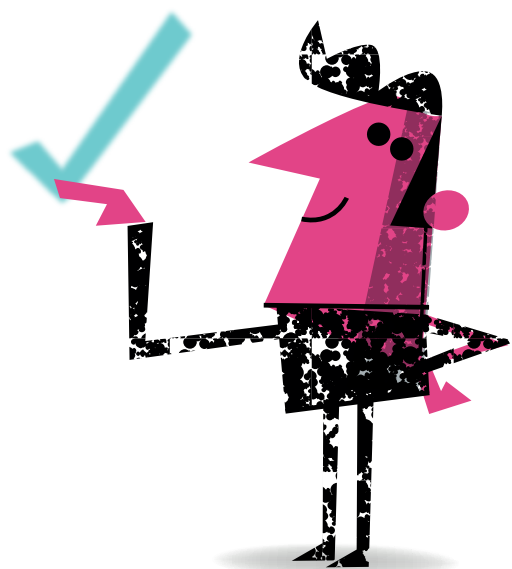
Strategic planning generally involves two main phases:²

- 1 strategic positioning: a review of the school's current status within its particular context and setting, both from an internal and external perspective
- 2 systems analysis: a detailed examination of the school's objectives and the sequence of processes that it proposes to achieve them.

Another approach to planning recommends that three or four major priorities are identified, where the following criteria are considered:³

- a differentiation is made between urgency, desirability and need
- estimation takes place of the size and scope of each priority
- making a distinction between 'root' and 'branch' innovations
- forging and documenting links between priorities, to identify in advance possible overlaps, potential synergies or indeed gaps.

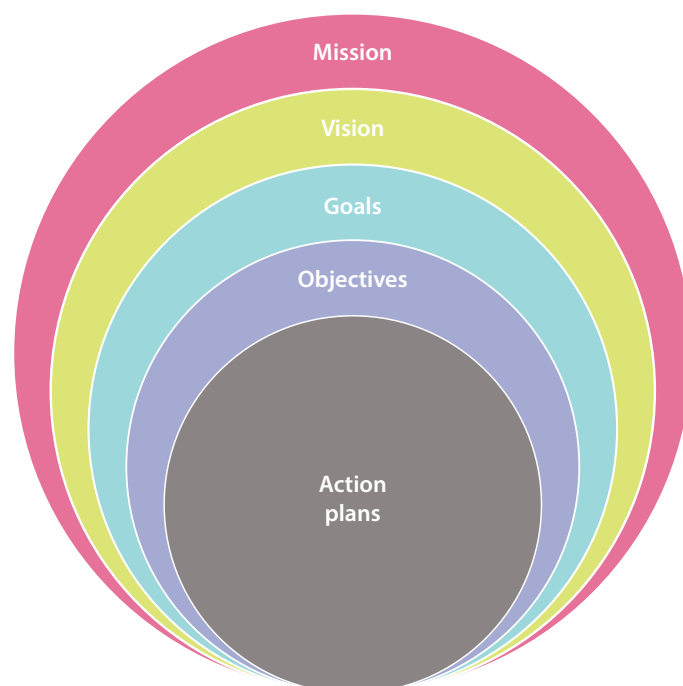
The *Pathways* approach offers a three-stage model for strategic planning.⁴



Defining school missions and action plans

Here it might be useful to present some commonly used definitions of key terms:

Figure 1: The interconnected relationships between the different layers of strategic planning, moving from broader, far-reaching features such as a school's mission to more specific, narrow, outcome-driven action plans.



Mission – defining a school's mission involves the framing and communicating of a school's goals,⁵ including the school's relationships with individuals who have a stake in its management and success (pupils, teachers, parents, governors and so on).⁶ There is a risk that 'mission statements', if taken in isolation, may become mundane or worse still, invisible. So along with a school's mission, you need to be aware of some of the following principles.

Vision – a description of what a school would "look like, sound like, and feel like when it is carrying out its purpose;"⁷ a "mental picture of a preferred future – which is shared with all in the school community and which shapes the programme for learning and teaching as well as policies, priorities, plans and procedures pervading the day-to-day life of the school."⁸ Research indicates that an "intelligent school" places learners and learning at the centre of schooling, which in itself is value-driven; and in recognition this clearly articulates

their vision to reflect these values and school context.⁹ More importantly, an “intelligent school” has the capacity to mobilise the school community into action in a systemic way; i.e. where “the whole really is greater than the sum of the parts.”¹⁰ However, the communication of the vision is vital in determining the success of this leadership strategy; being able to explicate what the vision ‘means’, and how far the vision is embedded within the institution’s practice.¹¹

Goals – the outcomes of a vision¹² and generally seen as a statement of broad direction, purpose or intent.¹³ Goals are also formulated with a view to change aspects of learning experiences and outcomes of both students and teaching practitioners, as well as management processes.¹⁴

Objectives – the more specific and narrow manifestations of goals. Objectives are usually generated using data in order to allow for measurement of outcomes. You may come across different types of objectives such as those of a more ‘operational’ nature, which are akin to the specific, action-oriented function outlined here, and ‘strategic objectives’, which tend to be more whole-school related,¹⁵ explaining in broader terms the ‘how’ and longer-term direction of a particular initiative.¹⁶

Action plans – “bring life to goals, objectives and strategies.”¹⁷ Some equate the action plan to a ‘school improvement plan’ which invariably includes information related to the people responsible for particular strategies, associated timelines, resources required, potential barriers and preventions (and contingencies), evaluation of procedures and ways or activities to celebrate success.¹⁸

So to summarise, school improvement is a complex, multi-faceted endeavour that is probably best planned and coordinated from more of a long-term or at least longitudinal perspective. An appropriate approach may wish to clearly conceptualise the various structures, relationships and operating procedures to a high level of detail but still be viewed as part of a holistic, organisation-wide effort.¹⁹ There needs to be awareness of where change is set to take place from and where to, and the roles and views of stakeholders in the process. Of course, policies, initiatives and conditions change at various points of a school’s ‘lifespan’. One key message here is to consider your school and what its particular ‘conditions’ are, its features and composition, its external pressures and influences and, importantly, where your school is starting from in its improvement ‘journey’²⁰ and its next destination.

The school improvement movement

It is interesting to note the evolutionary paths of the school improvement movement²¹ and how different points on the ‘timeline’ seem to resonate with current debates around school improvement effectiveness. Within the UK, the enterprise originated from a ‘teacher as researcher’ group of initiatives;²² questioning the nature of educative action to educative knowledge and the promotion of teachers’ professional development through action research activity.²³ This was followed by the emergence of school self-evaluation and review²⁴ and, later still, attempts to develop an “integrated, holistic process that linked the review/diagnosis of organisational health with subsequent work on the organisation and culture of schools.”²⁵ This was undertaken by the British arm of the International School Improvement Project (ISIP) and others such as the Guidelines for Review and Institutional Development in Schools.²⁶

Three key elements were found in an educational development project involving a group of 40 schools

from different local authorities that attempted to apply a ‘blend of approaches’, encompassing (for the first time) initiatives from both the effectiveness and improvement traditions:²⁷

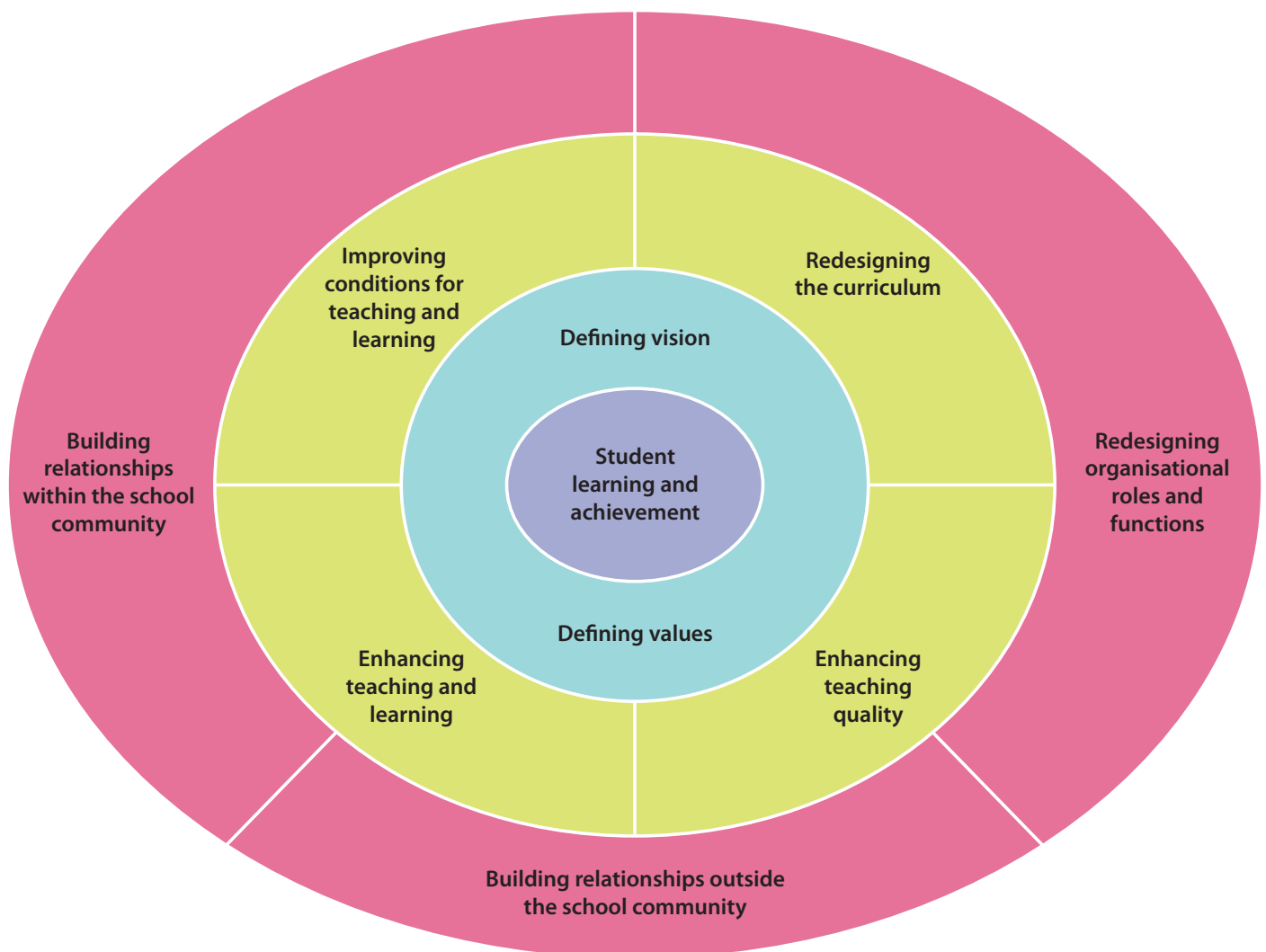
- “reconstructing externally imposed educational change in the form of school priorities;
- creating internal conditions that would sustain and manage change in schools;
- embedding these priorities and conditions within an overall strategy.”

The schools also appeared to be taking the opportunity provided by the notion of ‘centrally-imposed change’ in order to improve student outcomes. The researchers went on to discuss their holistic blend of approaches that bridged the traditions of effectiveness and improvement:

“Whole school supportive conditions are concerned with staff development, inquiry and reflection, leadership, co-ordination and planning. On a day-to-day basis, the curriculum focus, the work on the internal conditions of the school, the various combinations of strategy, and their impact on student achievement, combine in the minds and work of teachers to present a uniform whole.”²⁸

The diagram below shows the multidimensional context of educational development initiatives surrounding the ultimate aim of improving student learning and achievement. This is based on a major study of improving primary and secondary schools in England.

Figure 2: Strategies for improving student learning,²⁹ incorporating a multi-perspective approach



Ending on a cautionary note, we should also mention the notion of ‘fitness-for-purpose’, recognising whether innovation is required in every instance, and being prepared to question ‘to what degree?’ and ‘in what form?’

“Transformation of schooling may be an attractive idea in some respects, but has the potential to exact very high costs for very uncertain returns in

that there is no agreement about what needs to be transformed, how that would happen, or how much benefit it would yield relative to the clearly enormous effort it would require. The more rigorous use of existing knowledge seems a surer basis for continued progress in education and for increased benefits to students.”³⁰

Endnotes

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