

Leadership of Strategic Improvement Planning and Self-evaluation

Guidance at a glance

This guidance is for senior leaders, governors and trustees responsible for strategic improvement planning and effective self-evaluation across individual schools and colleges, multi-academy trusts (MATs) and federations. It is intended as a general guide, not a comprehensive list.

Effective self-evaluation and strategic planning has never been more important in the education sector. For schools, there has been a growing focus on accountability mechanisms as a result of the increase in individual autonomy, driven in part by the growth in academies and aggregation into federations and chains. In colleges, tightening budgets and other pressures on the sector mean that defining clear priorities and understanding institutional strengths and weaknesses have never been more critical.

There is also now wider recognition of teachers' contribution to the core processes of assessing impact, self-evaluation and planning, together with a shift of ownership from being held accountable to being accountable as part of an overall strategy for improvement and self-assessment.

This paper looks in greater detail at the following:

Section 1 Defining your strategic direction

Section 2 Processes involved in improvement planning

Section 3 Purpose of self-evaluation

Section 4 Effective written self-evaluation

Section 5 Further information

1 Defining your strategic direction

Regional commissioners and HMIs focus on improvement planning and impact to monitor the progress of schools and colleges in categories or requiring improvement. However, it is worth noting that Ofsted has no preferred method of school improvement planning.

Defining strategy

Strategy sets the direction to achieve your core purpose, values and vision (vision being your identity, philosophy and values), and:

- is a process of looking forward to a new way of operating, and developing a journey of how to get there
- takes a long-term view about how to make realistic sense of the vision, and how you achieve this over a period of time
- aligns the organisation and its resources to this future direction

The 'how' is as important as 'what' is done to achieve successful change.

Understanding the route

- **Setting the direction:** poor strategies often emerge because of lack of clarification of core purpose, values and vision.
- **Medium to longer term:** writing a strategic plan should not replicate the detail of the two-to-three year school improvement plan. Think of strategy as a five year review.
- **Providing for long-term sustainability:** schools and colleges will not be able to deploy longer-term strategies if short-term ineffectiveness drives them into crises. The ideal, therefore, is to ensure that shorter-term effectiveness is complemented with a longer-term effective strategy. Good strategy needs to be built on sound, short-term operational planning.
- **Broader institution-wide trends and actions:** strategy development should be a way of the whole community focusing on the key issues fundamental for successful future development.
- **Thinking strategically and taking a strategic perspective:** requires the skills of looking forward whilst knowing where your organisation is currently to inform your actions
- **A template for current actions:** constantly refer back to your strategy as a template and set of benchmarks to reflect on whether activities in the short-term also enhance the long-term capability of the school or college. Use these strategic benchmarks as a framework for current decisions.

2 Processes involved in improvement planning

There are three components that contribute to developing and sustaining a strategic focus:

- Strategic processes (conceptualising, engaging the people, articulating the strategy and implementing the strategy).
- Strategic approaches (planning and target setting).
- Strategic leadership (leading and managing the changes).

Strategic process

The strategic process consists of four elements:

- a) Conceptualising
- b) Engaging the people
- c) Articulating the strategy
- d) Implementing the strategy

Conceptualising

- **Reflecting:** too often leaders are under pressure to act rather than think and reflect.
- **Strategic thinking:** envision a future and outline the processes in getting there. Look at the bigger picture and the major developments that need to be undertaken.
- **Analysing and synthesising:** use self-evaluation, analyse the type of institution you are at the moment and create a structure that enables people to see what you want to be.
- **Constructing a mental model:** create a model or map of where the institution wants to go that provides a basis for discussion and action.

Engaging the people

- **Strategic discussion:** make time or opportunity - both formal and informal - to engage the wider community about the core issues driving the school and how these will develop in the future.
- **Strategic participation:** involve and share ideas with everyone so they feel they own the vision as well.
- **Strategic capability:** develop the capability of staff through the culture you create; developing a learning focus takes time and resources but increases sustainability and capacity within the whole organisation.

Articulating the strategy

- **Oral articulation:** communicate the strategic approach, summarise and explain significant aspects to staff, governors and parents, and frequently reinforce the main strands of the strategy, both formally and informally.
- **Written articulation:** a written strategic document should be separated from the short-term development or improvement plan. Deal with broad major issues and be concise and focused.
- **Structural articulation:** organise groupings so that you retain a strategic group that considers the longer-term development, separate from the operational planning and monitoring group.

Implementing the strategy

- **Focus:** have a limited number of strategic objectives that can be delivered.
- **Delivery:** translate the overall broader aims into the shorter-term activities so that the community can make sense of current actions and the way that they link into longer-term strategic frameworks. This involves making strategy everyone's job.
- **Leading by example:** ensure leaders demonstrate commitment to the strategy by reinforcing its key factors at regular intervals.
- **Make strategy a continual process:** don't articulate and then leave it; it should involve a process of continual review and development.

Strategic planning approaches

Strategic plans are not the same as the development or operational plans. Strategic plans:

- are proactive in that they set out to shape the future
- deal with broad themes not disaggregated detail
- focus on core developments and not every development

The purpose of the short-term plan is to focus the energy of the institution on the key improvements to student outcomes (or groups of specific students) that need to be made.

The head/principal and chair of governors must ensure the improvement plan is in continuous use by:

- constantly reviewing milestones in governors' meetings
- linking performance management objectives – those of the staff as a whole and those of individuals – to its priorities and action plans

Focus everyone's energy

If the purpose is to focus everyone's energy, the plan must be accessible. It should:

- contain a small number of headline priorities (because this is energising and a long list is daunting)
- be a one-page summary that everyone carries and that is displayed everywhere, backed by more detailed action plans available to those who need them
- be written in clear, simple English – not to patronise but to include governors, support staff, parents and perhaps students
- have a clear rationale with an explanation of why these must be the priorities
- success criteria that are clear and make monitoring simple

Setting success criteria

You need to decide exactly what you want to achieve and how you will know you have done it.

What evidence can we produce to show that we are succeeding and how do we get this evidence?

Success criteria should always refer to the aim rather than the actions to achieve it. Ask yourself the question: "how will we know we've been successful?"

For instance, if the aim is to improve boys' writing, the success criteria should ensure that staff monitor how much boys' writing improves, not look at whether the resources were purchased, the course attended and the visit made to another school.

The plan must have performance indicators against which the governing board can regularly monitor and review the strategy as part of their key activities and agenda setting.

Monitoring and evaluation

A distinction needs to be made between monitoring and evaluation. Monitoring, like the everyday use of the term, is checking that things are going as planned. It needs to be built in, and asks: "what is happening and is it according to plan?" In short, it's checking up.

5 | Leadership of Strategic Improvement Planning and Self-evaluation

Evaluation is the deeper study of the impact and outcomes of the actions, it is judging the worth of something. In terms of the improvement plan, ask: “what was the impact – did it work? What were the unintended consequences? Could we have done it better?”

Remember that impact must always be evidence-based. Constantly check for impact and have a schedule for review by departments, senior team and governors.

Strategic leadership

There are five actions that strategic leaders carry out:

- 1 **Set the direction:** define where the institution or group needs to be in the future.
- 2 **Translate strategy into action:** make sure things happen, concentrate on fundamental issues and delivery, lead by example, see strategy as a continuous process and constantly review it.
- 3 **Align the people, the organisation and the strategy:** work on changing the mind-set, culture and behaviour, have iterative conversations, allow time and break down the barriers of ‘them and us’: “is it what we want?”
- 4 **Determine effective strategic intervention points:** knowing when to make a strategic change is as critical as knowing what change to make. For example, when individuals are ready for change, when change is needed, and when the external constraints and conditions force the change.
- 5 **Develop strategic capabilities for the institution:** these need to be deep-rooted. For example, the fundamental understanding of teaching and learning rather than the ability to deliver the latest curriculum innovation.

Strategic leaders also share certain characteristics, namely they:

- challenge and question
- have a dissatisfaction or restlessness with the present
- prioritise their own strategic thinking and learning and build new mental models to frame their own and others’ understanding
- display strategic wisdom based on a clear value system
- have powerful personal and professional networks
- have high quality personal and interpersonal skills

Advice from successful heads

“The challenge is to reconcile organisational and individual perspectives. Staff have to both understand the strategy as well as commit to it.”

“Ensure your staff can articulate broader school aims as well as their individual targets.”

“Planning the timing of significant strategic change is as critical to success as choosing the right strategic change to make.”

“Provision of time and resources at the outset is a key issue in school improvement- set a chronometer of improvement.”

“Monitoring the impact of your plans has to be constant and focussed.”

“Be ambitious about where you want to be in each section.”

“Have a succinct summary and a detailed reviewing schedule.”

“Be realistic about where you will find the capacity.”

“Staff can own the solutions if they are involved in the consultation.”

Ofsted also has advice about strategic planning. It says: “The school improvement plan is detailed and includes precise priorities for improvement clearly linked to the previous inspection report. Success criteria are quantifiable achievement data and regular milestones for checking improvements are embedded in the plan. There is clear indication of who is accountable for evaluating the progress of each priority. The plan is used as an iterative document, regularly updated and colour coded for quick and easy tracking by leaders and governors.” (Ofsted website, 2015)

3 Purpose of self-evaluation

Self-evaluation should be central to any strategic planning process. Its primary goal should be to help schools develop and improve through critical self-reflection. Self-evaluation approaches should be bottom-up, starting from practitioner level, augmented by peer review and validated by instructional leaders.

Self-evaluation is an important part of the process of strategic planning; it is fundamental to where you are, what you are achieving and where to move forward.

Why do schools self-assess?

The primary goal of self-evaluation is to help schools maintain and improve through critical self-reflection. It requires a critical review of the quality of one's own performance and provision, using known criteria and a set of standards.

Effective self-evaluation can equip teachers with the ability to evaluate the quality of learning in their classrooms, and it informs and supports the inspection process.

Questions to consider

At the start of a self-evaluation cycle, you may wish to consider the following questions for your organisation:

- To what extent do the structures and processes that are in place promote the conditions for an internally driven, bottom-up approach to self-evaluation to promote student and professional learning?
- To what extent does the leadership have the appetite for this approach?
- What are the relationships and politics across the system, school or college, and classroom?
- To what extent is the capacity for improvement at an appropriate phase of development to ignite and sustain this approach?
- To what extent does your organisation engage in self-evaluation?
- How do different members of the school or college community experience the process?
- Where would you locate your organisation's self-evaluation process in terms of internally or externally driven, for accountability or improvement?

Initial steps to effective self-evaluation

Evidence to inform the self-evaluation process may include:

- pupil performance data
- lesson observations
- scrutiny of pupils' work
- learning walks
- scrutiny of planning
- questionnaires to pupils, parents, carers and staff

The next step is to analyse the evidence, looking for patterns and meaning. Finally, collate and synthesise the evidence, bringing the parts of this complex mass of evidence together into a coherent whole.

The product should be a set of judgements about your quality that are:

- clear
- well-reasoned (justified by the evidence)
- coherent

Data and information to inform self-evaluation

In self-evaluative organisations, using data to learn about practice is habitual. Systematic data collection and analysis take place alongside more spontaneous enquiry.

This requires coordination of different strands of activity, for example by guiding questions for enquiry relating to overarching aims and key priorities to gain a range of evidence over time.

Types of data and information you might collect include:

- views from learners, parents, teachers and other stakeholders about the quality of the organisation's provision
- outcomes of groups
- evidence of the impact of professional development on the quality of teaching as reflected in student outcomes
- local and national comparative data on finance, staffing, attendance, exclusions and the impact of extended services
- results of monitoring undertaken by governors, including the impact of performance management

4 Effective written self-evaluation

A self-evaluation should be evaluative rather than descriptive and it should use evidence to make judgements. On its own, a statement that something is good is an assertion, to become a judgement it needs supporting evidence.

- Everything must be evidence based.
- Focus on outcomes rather than input (provision).
- Make links to evidence kept elsewhere.

8 | Leadership of Strategic Improvement Planning and Self-evaluation

- Use the judgements of a previous external report, like the previous Ofsted inspection report, to form a baseline.
- Use feedback from pupils, staff and parents frequently.
- Include the contribution made by extended services or effective school partnerships and trusts.

Each section should start with a clear judgement linked to the grade awarded. Use evidence that shows the impact/outcomes for pupils, not that which describes provision or intentions.

Use phrases like:

“...as a result of which, pupils’ achievement...”

“...and the impact has been...”

“because we..., ...happened.”

- Ensure there is a coherence of grades. For example, if outcomes are not yet good, how can the quality of teaching be good, or the impact of leadership and management?
- Where there is a clear rationale for a variance in grades, this requires an explanatory narrative.
- Ensure areas of weakness in your self-evaluation appear as priorities at the end of each section and then as the priorities in the improvement plan.
- Illustrate, don’t exhaustively list – make the judgement and evidence it with a few significant and varied examples.

Think of each sentence as an impact statement and use the “so what” test rigorously: what has been the impact? What has been the impact on achievement? For example, you re-shaped SLT roles – so what?

Be precise. This often, but by no means always, involves quantification. For example, “Our planning is consistent across the school and ensures that expectations of work and behaviour are consistently high; behaviour management is consistently good, so that classes are calm and purposeful.”

- Use the same terminology throughout (particularly around performance data).
- Write in a structured way – sort text into clear subsections.
- Ensure you make reference to your current work.

Talk about trends because these show improvement and hint at systematic procedures for monitoring:

“Over five years, performance has improved from...to...”

“at the time of the last inspection..., now, three years on...”

“our termly reviews show...”

Show aspiration and a bias towards action. Be ambitious in each section. Even when you have judged something to be good, where is the headroom for improvement? What would make it outstanding? Use phrases like:

“there is scope for further improvement in...”

“we recognise that this isn’t good enough and so we...”

- In your style, aim for rigour, impact, clarity and precision, quantification, systematic procedures, trends, aspiration and action.

- Be rigorous, face up to weaknesses and be honest and analytical.

Creating a culture of self-review

The most successful organisations establish a culture of self-review so that the school, as well as its pupils, learn and improve. It is a vital component of the learning ethos.

Pupils are taught to evaluate their own and others' work, how to learn independently and how they can play a part in the development of others' learning and of the school as a whole. Staff are given opportunities to take responsibility beyond their own areas, evaluate their own and others' performance and contribute to area and whole-school evaluations.

Advice from successful headteachers

"Ensure your SEF is a working document and plan when you will review it (once a term)."

"Don't be complacent and think things are really embedded."

"Always focus on the quality of teaching."

"Provide an accessible summary of the SE."

"Ensure you detail the actions and impact between inspections."

"Impact should always be followed by next steps."

"If you are grading sections of your SEF, be clear about what each grade means."

"Moving departments from description to analysis can be slow."

"Ensure all areas of the departments self-assess so this is bottom up and feeds into quality improvement plans."

"Keep everyone apprised of the findings from evaluation and self-assessment, and the actions required as a result."

Ofsted's guidance on self-evaluation

Ofsted does not require self-evaluation to be graded or provided in a specific format. Any assessment that is provided should be part of the school's business processes and not generated solely for inspection purposes.

5 Further information

Joint Wellcome Trust and NGA guidance: A Framework for Governance: A flexible guide to strategic planning
<http://www.nga.org.uk/getattachment/1af9e9b3-e599-409a-8b19-e067c671b0ce/FINAL-Framework-for-Governance.pdf.aspx>

ASCL's self-evaluation tool

<https://www.ascl.org.uk/professional-development/additional-support-services/ascl-self-evaluation-tool.html>

Supporting PowerPoint presentation *Leadership of Strategic Improvement Planning and Self-evaluation*

<http://www.ascl.org.uk/LSIPS>

ASCL Curriculum and Assessment Specialist Suzanne O'Farrell

