PRIMARY PRINCIPALS' SABBATICAL REPORT

TERM 3 2012

Examine the characteristics of strategic planning that make it effective, and investigate how schools evidence its impact on improved student achievement and school improvement.

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Executive Summary

Over the past 10 years, since the introduction of Planning and Reporting, which launched the requirement for schools to include a strategic section in their charter, experienced principals have needed to make a paradigm shift. A change in their thinking that requires an understanding of how key documents, created within the school, by the school and for the school, can underpin effective change in student achievement and school improvement. A change in their thinking that gives life and effect to "plans" that in the past may have been created only to achieve the compliance tick.

This investigation is examining the characteristics of strategic planning that make it effective, as well as investigating how schools evidence its impact on improved student achievement and school improvement.

Background

Strategic planning was first introduced as part of "Planning and Reporting" requirements. This required new thinking for most principals, and while for some it provided a framework for what they were already doing, for many at that time, it was seen simply as an additional compliance requirement.

The "Planning and Reporting" framework required a detailed plan, goals and targets to be developed against which a school's progress and effectiveness could be tested. These changes, when acted on, and implemented well, would give effect to the Charter. The introduction of strategic planning requirements provided a scaffold for future-thinking planning, a basis for ongoing self-review, a reason to engage and consult with the school's community and a framework for reporting progress and reassessing directions.

The Education Act 1989 requires every school to complete a charter, and each year furnish the Ministry of Education with a copy of the annual charter updates. The Ministry of Education views the Charter, (which incorporates strategic planning) as a key-planning document for schools.

In 2002 the Ministry of Education mandated that schools submit a strategic plan, along with other revisions to charter requirements, as part of the amended Education Act. The Ministry of Education assured the sector that it was developing tools and guidelines to assist schools. Specific training was to be provided in the second half of 2002 to ready schools for the implementation of the new planning and reporting standards from 2003.

The clear message that came from the Ministry of Education was that annual targets were to be set around student achievement, with identification of the curriculum area targeted, and identification of the specific year levels and groups of students to be targeted. The Ministry of Education was also careful to express that the new planning and reporting requirements were aimed at improving student outcomes and school accountability for those outcomes. To avoid this initiative being seen as a "compliance activity" the Ministry of Education provided guidelines and broad templates that encouraged schools to reflect their unique learning environments, needs and directions. This meant that each school's charter could vary in content and style within the determined parameters.

"Planning for Better Student Outcomes" was released by the Ministry of Education in July 2002 and provided schools with detailed information about the new requirements including possible models for schools to consider. In this document the Ministry of Education states: *"Strategic planning is a constant process of planning, monitoring and review. In consultation with the community each school establishes its vision and sets both long and short-term goals".*[1]

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[1] *Planning for Better Student Outcomes*: Ministry of Education, July 2002.

The Ministry of Education aligned the planning and reporting requirements to the National Education Goals and the National Administrative Guidelines and charters were evaluated with these in mind.

The introduction of National Standards in 2010 brought another level of reporting requirement. The Ministry of Education provided schools with some training on the National Standards and provided schools with two further planning and reporting publications to support implementation of the new requirements. *"Annual Reports: Guidance for Reporting on Student Progress and Achievement",* October 2011, and *"Strengthening Targets: Resource for Boards",* October 2011.
Both of these publications indicate the raising of the stakes for schools. They inform Boards of Trustees of their *"important and vital role"* and state, *"Boards of Trustees have a governance responsibility to provide strong strategic leadership to lift the educational achievement of the students at their school."* [2]

Both publications reinforce the role of the charter and the importance of a strategic approach to student achievement and school improvement.

Current Ministry guidelines state this:

> *The purpose of a school charter is to establish the mission, aims, objectives, directions and targets of the board that will give effect to the Government's National Education Guidelines and the Board's priorities.*
>
> *Under the National Administration Guidelines (NAG2(a)), a board is required to develop a strategic plan which documents how they are giving effect to the National Education Guidelines through their policies, plans and programmes, including those for curriculum, National Standards, assessment and staff professional development.*
>
> *A charter must contain all annual or long-term plans or a summary of each plan or reference to it. The strategic plan required by NAG2(a) must be included in the charter (or summary of or reference to it).*
>
> *Section 61 of the Education Act 1989 provides the required content of a school charter. A full copy of the Education Act 1989 can be found at www.legislation.govt.nz.[3]*

The Ministry of Education asks schools to plan for success, to document and submit that plan, and to be accountable to that plan.

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[2] *"Strengthening Targets: Resource for Boards"* Ministry of Education October 2011 & *"Annual Reports: Guidance for Reporting on Student Progress and Achievement",* Ministry of Education October 2011,

[3] http://www.minedu.govt.nz/Boards/LegalObligations/Charters.aspx

The Ministry of Education is clear about what it requires a charter to contain and also about the importance of strategic planning in giving effect to the Charter.

Following are 4 examples of information that can now be found on the Ministry of Educations Website:

1) *Charters. What does a charter contain?*

- *An introductory section: this will include your school's mission, vision and values.*

- *A strategic section: this shows your school's direction for the next three to five years. It shows how your board will give effect to the National Education Guidelines, with a focus on increasing the rate of progress and raising achievement for students.*

- *An annually updated section: this shows your board's plan for the coming year. It contains its aims to improve progress and achievement for all students, in particular Māori and Pasifika students, and students with special education needs. This section will include student achievement targets and actions, and resources to meet these targets.*

- *A section showing how your board will evaluate progress against the aims and targets set.*

- *Your charter must be updated every year and sent to your local Ministry office.*

- *It needs to include a long-term strategic planning section for the next 3-5 years?*

- *It should establish, for the next three to five years, your board's aims for intended student outcomes, school performance and use of resources. This means your 2012 charter must include a strategic planning section from 2012 to at least 2014 (inclusive). This should be reviewed and updated every year, so it is relevant for the next 3-5 years (rolling).[4]*

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http://www.minedu.govt.nz/Boards/SchoolPlanningAndReporting/QuestionsAndAnswers.aspx

2) Elements of the charter.

Charter goals / Strategic goals

A school's charter goals may also be called its strategic goals. They are goals to be achieved in a 3–5-year timeframe, and take into account factors such as learning resources, professional development, development of teaching practices, staffing needs, school organisation, policy priorities, and infrastructure needs (such as ICT and building development). The strategic/charter goals state the school's priorities for development and for improving teaching and learning, and address the National Education Priorities stated in the National Administration Guidelines (NAGs).

Strategic plan

The strategic plan takes each charter/strategic goal and identifies the actions anticipated over a 3–5-year timeframe to achieve the goal. Strategic plans can take a variety of formats. The most important part of strategic planning is the thinking, analysis, and discussion that take place in the process of identifying and prioritising the goals and the actions required to achieve them.

Annual plan

The annually updated section of the school charter. It identifies in detail what needs to be done during the current year as a series of action plans related to the charter/strategic goals.

Targets

Targets for improving teaching and learning are measurable. They are based on an analysis of current student achievement data, or they identify the factors that may contribute to improving student achievement. Targets for the current year may be a combination of those that need to be continued from the previous year, and new targets resulting from the analysis of the previous year's achievement (analysis of variance), the introduction of a new learning programme (such as the Numeracy Project), or new strategic goals for improving teaching and student learning.

Analysis of variance

These report on achievement against the annual targets for improving teaching and learning. The format for the analysis of variance report should address annual targets for improvement, actual achievement in relation to each target, an analysis of possible reasons for any differences (variance) between the target and actual achievement, and an evaluation of the implications of the variances for the following year's annual plan and targets.[5]

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[5] Ministry of Education Website: Strategic planning

3)

Relationship of charter, plans, and reports

Planning for, and reporting on, improving teaching and learning is an integral part of a wider planning process involving the school's charter (mission, values, and vision statements), strategic plans, and annual plans.

The relationship between the planning and reporting process is represented in the diagram below.

Diagram 1: Relationship of charter, plans, and reports

- The **mission, values and vision statements** cover information about the school, its vision, and how it will recognise New Zealand's cultural diversity.

- The **strategic section** of the charter deals with planning ahead and setting out the board of trustees' objectives for student achievement. This 3–5-year plan includes long-term priorities, financial objectives, and plans for the school's learning environment.

- The **annually updated section** of the school's charter is essentially the school's annual plan. It sets out short-term priorities and targets for improving student achievement. It must be updated every year.

- The **action section** of this diagram is not dealt with here. However, it is a vitally important part of the school's programme, and will include staffing, curriculum, timetabling, and other details of the day-to-day life of the school.

- The **analysis of variance reports** on actual achievements is compared with annual targets, so that appropriate improvements may be made to teaching and learning within the school.
  The annual report is a report to the whole school community, including parents, caregivers, whanau, and boards of trustees.

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[6] http://www.educationalleaders.govt.nz/Leadership-development/Leadership-programmes/First-time-principals-modules/Module-1-Planning-and-reporting

4)

Strategic plan

The strategic plan takes the charter goals and identifies and prioritises, in broad terms, actions to be taken to achieve them over a 3–5-year timeframe. The strategic plan forms the basis for the annual plan and budget.

The development of the strategic plan is a core responsibility of the board of trustees.

The principal will be expected to lead the strategic planning process, to contribute ideas, and to be the key link with the staff and students. It is also the principal's responsibility to work with the board to implement the strategic plan and report on its progress to the board.

A good strategic plan:

- clearly links to and implements the charter/strategic goals

- addresses both the National Education Priorities and the school's priorities

- draws on the present and future capacity of the school to implement (resources, staff, finances, available expertise)

- is a clear guide to action (states what will be done and is not merely a 'wish list')

- is known to the board, staff, and community.

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[7] http://www.educationalleaders.govt.nz/Leadership-development/Leadership-programmes/First-time-principals-modules/Module-1-Planning-and-reporting/Strategic-goals-and-plan

There is a wealth of information available on the Ministry of Education website if one takes the time to seek it, and schools have received relevant publications over time. However, while this information is available, it has predominantly been up to individual principals to find it, engage with it, interpret it, act on it, and with their Board of Trustees, determine what it might look like in reality for their school.

Research Method

A very simple inductive inquiry approach was used to undertake this research. This is an information-seeking process to help establish background facts, determine questions relevant to this inquiry, develop a way to investigate these questions, and create a meaningful picture based on personal observations, the observations of others through targeted discussion, and to use this information to build some explanations and draw inferences. [8]

Purpose:

- To investigate the underlying principles of Strategic Planning as they relate to New Zealand Schools.
- To investigate how selected schools have embraced the processes of Strategic Planning and to examine how they evidence the impact of this on 'student achievement' and 'school improvement'.
- To investigate what it is that these schools do, how they go about implementing the Strategic Plan so that this guiding document gives effect to school improvement and improved student achievement, as well as establishing the link between the plan and intended outcomes.
- To provide a snapshot of how strategic planning and strategic leadership is perceived and managed in a range of schools.

Inquiry Focus:

Theoretical and Practical Understandings

Theoretical Understandings

o *What are the important theoretical understandings and perspectives that schools should consider when developing a strategic plan?*

o *What does the current literature have to say about the process of development, implementation and review of strategic planning?*

Practical Understandings

o *What leadership structures, practical understandings, attitudes or actions promote the successful development and implementation of the strategic plan?*

o *What systems do schools utilize to evidence the effect and impact of planned 'strategy' to achieve improvements in student achievement and school improvement.*

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[8] http://olc.spsd.sk.ca/DE/PD/instr/strats/inquiry/index.html

Theoretical Understandings

- o   *What are the important theoretical understandings and perspectives that schools should consider when developing a strategic plan?*

- o   *What does the current literature have to say about the process of development, implementation and review of strategic planning?*

Key Activity: Literature research, reading and reflection

Ministry of Education and ERO published materials, (including reports) provided a basis for research into Strategic Planning requirements, best practice examples and also provided a starting point for the selection of appropriate New Zealand primary schools for the purpose of visit and on site research/investigation.

The focus of other reading was principally on current literature from New Zealand, Australia, the United Kingdom and Europe.

This included a recent case study (2008) undertaken by Neil Harray looking at "The challenge of strategic management and leadership in the case of three New Zealand secondary schools."   While the cases are secondary schools, the underlying challenges remain the same for primary school and it provided a wealth of appropriate, accessible research references and inspiration for this study.[9]

Harray explores the developing history of strategic planning in New Zealand, and unpacks the elements of effective strategic planning. Harray also makes the point that there is limited research in to strategic planning in a New Zealand context. (Harray 2008).   What is interesting is that four years on from Harray's paper there appears to be a noticeable change in thinking, in that while the principals interviewed for this investigation still felt that the annual plan was the most relevant part of their strategic document, from a day-to-day perspective, they were considerably more confident about, and capable of, visioning and planning out to 3 years, and had a clearer understanding of the necessity for, and the impact of, ongoing-review on meaningful future planning.

While Harray's research-schools were secondary, the underlying principles remain the same. Both sectors are required to follow the same legislative requirements and the Ministry of Education has the ultimate goal of school improvement and student achievement gain. The wealth of research available does not distinguish between the sectors. Good practice is good practice and good leaders are good leaders. Harray draws four main conclusions from his study. In brief:

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[9] *The challenge of strategic management and strategic leadership in the case of three New Zealand secondary schools.*   Neil Harray: A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Educational Leadership and Management, Unitec Institute of Technology, 2008.

- The principal is the key person in leading and determining the nature of strategic management within the school;
- Consultation and engagement within the school and with the community is critical to success;
- Strong supporting, (middle) leadership within the school that is, involved, engaged and empowered is essential; and
- Annual planning is effective, but planning for 3-5 years ahead is problematic due to changing government priorities, under resourcing of schools, and the environmental dynamics of individual schools.

The first three points are certainly well supported by current research.

Gwang-Chol Chang [10] would tell us that that, *"we cannot say that there is a "perfect way" to conduct strategic planning"*. He does however tell us that any management involves four basic stages: analysis, planning, implementation and evaluation. Chang describes strategic planning as a continuum of successive stages, including critical analysis, policy formulation and appraisal, action planning management and monitoring, review and evaluation. But he also stresses the importance of experience learnt from the implementation, and the value of the feedback for adjusting the current programme for the next cycle of direction setting and action planning.

Chang claims that the meaning of term "strategic planning" is meant to capture the strategic (comprehensive, holistic, thoughtful or fundamental) nature of this planning. In saying this he also expands on the thinking required to move us on from the 'assumption of planning in a stable environment', to a paradigm where 'strategic planning assumes that a system must be responsive to a dynamic and changing environment."[11] (2008). We are in an environment where schools are being required to be "strategic" in their planning, and we must accept that the terms being used have been chosen carefully. In 2012 the Ministry of Education is expecting schools to look at the past and the present, and predict what actions need to be taken to improve schools and raise student achievement. Chang finishes his paper by stating that merely, *"mastering the concepts and methods of strategic planning is an enabling factor in order to cope with the educational demands and challenges faced by education leaders, though this by itself is not sufficient."* (Chang 2008)

If strategic planning is to have an impact on school improvement and student achievement clearly it needs to be much more than just a pretty plan.

There is certainly a drive in New Zealand schooling to increase accountability through monitoring schools' data around student achievement. The introduction of National Standards has definitely raised the stakes. There has been a move toward measuring the outputs, improvements in student achievement outcomes and school performance. Dr Ken Rowe[12] explores the rationale behind such reform activity and cites how government policy impacts on the activities of school management.

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[10] Programme Specialist, Division for Education Strategies and Capacity Building, Education Sector, UNESCO Paris

[11] *Strategic Planning in Education: Some Concepts and Methods,* Gwang-Chol Chang 2008.

[12] Dr Ken Rowe, research Director Australian Council for Educational Research

Governments like to see a return for their expenditure in education, both in improved student achievement and public confidence in their policy. The rights or wrongs of this are not for discussion as part of this paper, however, as a result, schools now need to explore ways to manage this.

Rowe suggests that student-learning outcomes are prime performance indicators of education systems and the services they provide, and these (along with others), constitute useful bases for informed planning and decision-making, followed by implementation and reform. Consequently if decisions for school improvement are to be formulated around these, dependable and timely information on these indicators is required.

He tells us that these performance indicators provide evidential basis for, "*determining the extent to which specified goals and targets are being achieved, and that they serve various purposes, the most notable of which are for* **monitoring, policy formulation, target-setting, evaluating and reforming.**" It is what Rowe concludes that is most important however. One of the most important lessons learned in relation to this performance data and its usefulness is around "ownership" and "control' that schools have over their own data.

With access to, ownership of, and control over their own data, sustained improvement can be achieved by schools via leadership support and teacher professional development practices that maximize the quality of teaching, learning and achievement. Under such circumstances, school leaders and teachers themselves become the empowered agents and purveyors of change, having consequent positive effects on the teaching quality of other staff. (Rowe 2005)[13]

Harray cites Robinson (2007) who identifies five key practices/dimensions that leaders of learning engage in to make a difference to their students. These include:
- Establishing goals and expectations, *Whaia te iti kahurangi*;
- Strategic resourcing, *Mā te huruhru ka rere te manu*;
- Planning coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum, *Kai pai te whahatere I te waka*;
- Promoting and participation in teacher learning and development, *Ko te waka mātauranga, he waka eke noa;* and
- Ensuring an orderly and supportive environment, *Ka tika a muri, ka tika a mua*.

Robinson, Hohepa and Lloyd (2009)[14] unpack these dimension in detail in, *School Leadership and Student Outcomes: Identifying What Works and Why, Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration [BES]*. What becomes clear is the strong suggestion that the involvement and understanding of leadership in the promoting of these dimensions is critical. It leads one to suggest that while the school leader needs to be instrumental in the development of a school's strategic planning documents, the actions and depth of involvement of the leader in its implementation, especially including 'promoting

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[13] *Evidence for the kinds of feedback data that support both student and teacher learning.* Ken Rowe 2005
[14] *School Leadership and Student Outcomes: Identifying What Works and Why, Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration [BES],* Viviane Robinson, Margie Hohepa, and Claire Lloyd 2009

and participating in teacher learning and development', is paramount to school improvement and student achievement.

Figure 2. Relative impact of five leadership dimensions on student outcomes
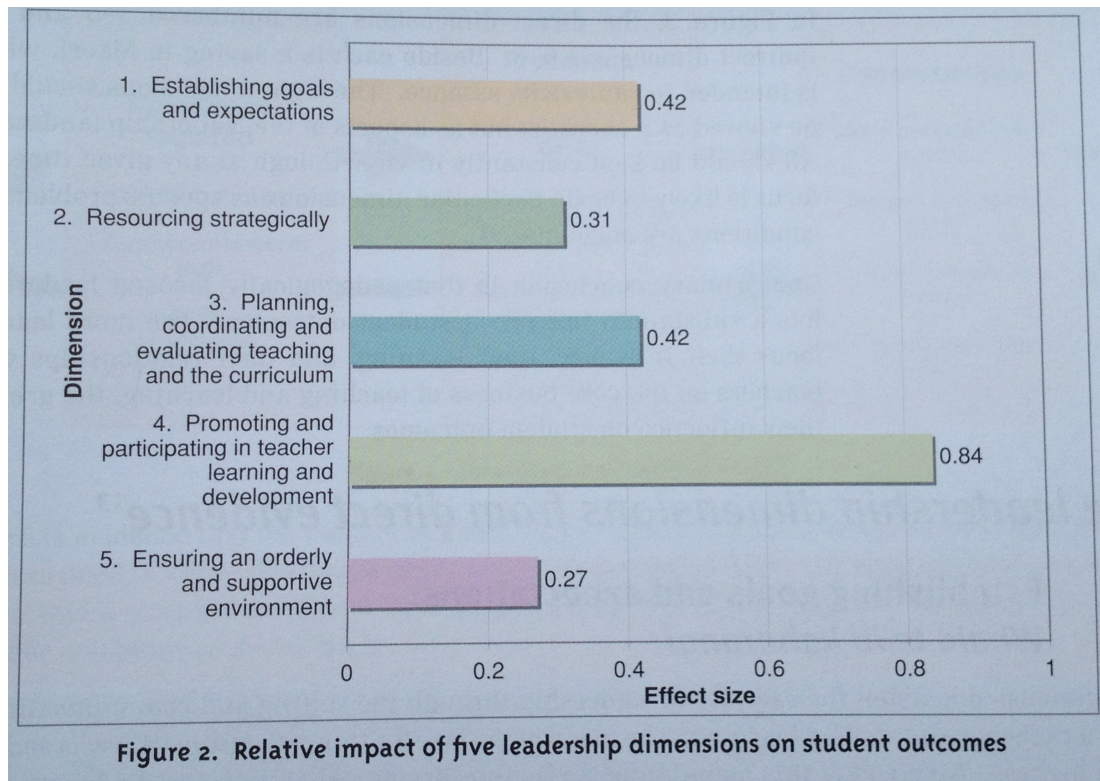
The above figure shows the relative impact of the five dimensions on student outcomes. An effect size is a standardised measure of the strength of relationship between two variables. The greater the effect size the greater the influence of the practices or interventions on the desired outcomes.

Source: *School Leadership and Student Outcomes: Identifying What Works and Why, Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration [BES],* Viviane Robinson, Margie Hohepa, and Claire Lloyd Pages 38 & 39.

It would be fair to say that if the requirements set for charter development by the Ministry of Education are followed and implemented, it is more likely that these five dimensions would be incorporated. A match up of these five dimensions against the Ministry of Education's charter, guidelines listed earlier in this paper, possibly indicates the intentsion of charter design. The key components for success however, are active engagement in the process, effective implementation and ongoing-self review, and these components are the responsibility of the principal.

Practical Understandings

Key Activity: School visits, interviews with key personnel, discussion around, and viewing of the key indicators of success of implemented plans in order to make some sense of the questions posed.

- *What leadership structures, practical understandings, attitudes or actions promote the successful development and implementation of the strategic plan?*

- *What systems do schools utilize to evidence the effect and impact of planned 'strategy' to achieve improvements in student achievement and school improvement.*

Process/Implementation Issues

In order to manage this investigation a model of inquiry was created and set of interview questions was developed around this model. Research and other reading undertaken provided insight into the key areas of focus that influenced the adaption and simplification of a model. Neil Harray (2008) used Johnson, Scholes and Whittington's (2006)[15] model of the elements of strategic management for his paper.

The model used in this investigation is a very simplified adaption of this model that focuses on three key elements:

- Strategic Planning
- Strategic Leadership
- Strategic Planning in Action

And two key outcomes:

- Student achievement
- School improvement

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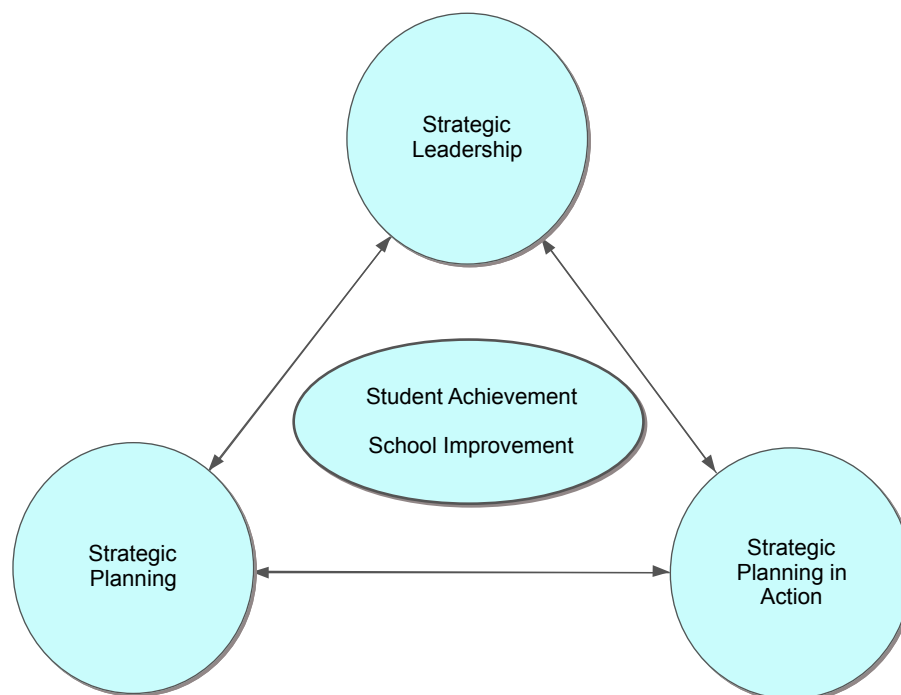
[15] *Exploring Corporate Strategy: text and cases (7th Edition)* Harlow: Pearson Education. Johnson,G, Scholes, K and Whittington, R (2006)

Methodology

For each of the elements questions were developed. The set of questions was then used with each of the participating principals in a semi-structured interview, with supplementary questions being used to tease out further detail or clarification as necessary.

The Strategic Plan
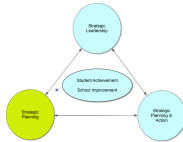
- What process have you undertaken to develop your school's Strategic Plan?
- What has been your role in the development part of the process?
- Who else has been involved and how?

Leadership and Strategic Planning
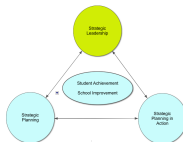
- With the Strategic Plan "created" how does it impact on how you lead the school? (How could this be seen? Some examples?)
- Are there particular leadership structures in place to support the implementation of the strategic plan? (Describe or explain?)
- How does leadership of the school share the intent of the Strategic plan with:
    - Staff?
    - Parent Community?
    - Students?
- What level of awareness do you think these groups would have of the Strategic Plan?
- How does the Leadership of the school manage the "review" of the strategic plan?

Strategic Plan in Action

- What is the process for implementation of the Strategic Plan?
- In what ways can the Strategic Plan be seen as a living and practical document within the school?
- In what ways has the Strategic Planning process, and its implementation improved student-learning outcomes? How do you know this?
- What specific aspects of student achievement or school improvement can you link to effective Strategic Planning?
- To what extent do you think that: Staff, Parent Community, and Students have an understanding of the school's strategic goals?

Supplementary Questions

- Have you received sufficient Professional Development to make you feel confident about the processes and purposes of Strategic Planning?
- What is your Personal Professional view on the value and usefulness of Strategic Planning?
- Do you believe Strategic Planning can have an impact on student achievement and school improvement?

The Participating Schools

Eleven schools were chosen for the study. The schools were selected based on recommendation from the Ministry of Education, by reputation, and micro-selected to obtain a range of schools. The schools vary in size from 52 pupils to 800 pupils. They range from Decile 1 to Decile 9, and include a mix of intermediate, full-primary, contributing schools, as well as state and state integrated schools. Each school was from the Canterbury region. The experience level of the principals ranged from "First-Time" principals, through to "very experienced" principals.

Each principal agreed to provide a copy of their school's Charter and Strategic plan, and most supplied additional supporting documentation as they saw necessary. Each principal also agreed to have the conversation recorded for reference purposes only. Principals were each asked the set of questions, and, as necessary, supplementary questions were asked to qualify, clarify or amplify the given response in an attempt to ensure that each participating principals reply was thorough.

Without the contributions of these principals this report would not have been possible and I wish to acknowledge their invaluable input and contributions.

Findings and Discussion

Section 1: The Strategic Plan
- *What process have you undertaken to develop your school's Strategic Plan?*
- *What has been your role in the development part of the process?*
- *Who else has been involved and how?*

The processes implemented by most of the schools were similar, and for most it began with some level of consultation. How the process was managed, how deep, wide and inclusive the consultation was, was however, dependant on the individual style/belief of the principal.

All of the principals identified that they were still developing, refining and improving their processes for developing the strategic plan. Their process was predicated by their belief, or otherwise, of the usefulness of the document they were engaging in the creation of. In all cases the principals said that what they were doing now was better than what they had done previously. Most were striving to make the process, and the plan *"meaningful", "real"*.

In general terms, each principal had an understanding of the importance of the document. Each principal appeared to have come to this understanding in a different way. Some were naturally inclined to plan in a strategic way and document that plan. Some were naturally inclined to be inclusive and understood the value of a shared approach. How understandings differed was reflected in how each principal approached the process. Where principals saw that the strategic plan was a useful tool for achieving future vision, change, school improvement and improving student achievement, their process, and their role in the process was quite different.

The principals could be placed on a continuum. At one end of this continuum were those who seemed to believe that the document was essentially, (though not entirely), a compliance exercise. This was reflected in the level of personal investment and engagement with the document and the process for achieving it. At this end of the continuum, there was little consultation within the school, or with the school community. Where consultation was carried out it appeared token and "compliance-driven". Even the role of external facilitators engaged to support the process differed. At this end of the continuum they seemed to be creating a 'document' the principals could use to describe "their" plan for the school. At this end of the continuum the strategic plan did not appear to be a key document. What does need to be noted is that, in general, the quality of the actual charter and strategic planning documents shared by the schools involved was high. What differed was "inside the process" undertaken to create that document. At this end of the continuum "ownership" of the document was mostly limited to the principal, and shared with the Board of Trustees.

At the other end of the continuum were principals who had found value and importance in the charter and strategic plan of the school. Here personal investment was much higher, but most significantly it also extended into actively engaging other stakeholders in the development and ongoing review of the document. How these principals viewed the usefulness and purpose of the document impacted on the inclusive nature of the process. These principals were involving staff, students, Board of Trustees, parents and the wider school community, with the view that shared

"ownership" would assist alignment and increase the likelihood of the strategic plan being realized in the future. In these schools, if external facilitators were used, they guided the 'thinking' of the Board of Trustees and principal about process, purpose and outcomes, and rather than furnishing the school with a generic document, the school developed its own guiding document. These principals could more easily discuss the impact of the plan and draw connection between the strategic plan and school improvement.

Continuum of characteristics advantageous to the strategic plan development process:

Less likely To Lead to School Improvement	More Likely to Lead to School Improvement
• Principal's view on usefulness of strategic planning	• Principal's view on usefulness of strategic planning
• Principal manages a "document" creation process	• Principal the key leader in an inclusive process
• External facilitator manages the strategic planning process for the school	• Use of external facilitator to guide/enhance the thinking of the Board of Trustees
• Principal's document	• The school's document
• Mostly a compliance document	• Key document for setting direction and achieving action within the school
• Limited consultation	• Extensive, inclusive, well-managed consultation process, (multiple tools used to collect meaningful information from all sectors of the school's community)
• Limited or token inclusion	• Process inclusive of staff, students, Board of Trustees, parent and wider community
• Limited on-going review	• On-going review built into the process
• Limited communication/promotion of the process	• Process well advertised and communicated
• Strategic plan is a stand-alone document	• Strategic plan is supported toward implementation by effective leadership systems and structures

Section 2:Leadership and Strategic Planning

- *With the Strategic Plan "created" how does it impact on how you lead the school? (How could this be seen? Some examples?)*
- *Are there particular leadership structures in place to support the implementation of the strategic plan? (Describe or explain?)*
- *How does leadership of the school share the intent of the Strategic plan with:*
  - *Staff?*
  - *Parent Community?*
  - *Students?*
- *What level of awareness do you think these groups would have of the Strategic Plan?*
- *How does the Leadership of the school manage the "review" of the strategic plan?*

Each principal, regardless of the process taken to create their strategic plan described the document as being pivotal. The principals described the strategic plan using phrases such as: *"The guiding document"; " A road map"; "Key living document", "Framework for success";* and being *"Real and central to the vision of the school".* One principal said of the strategic plan that, because of the process undertaken to create it, *"...it gives a mandate to move forward where the focus can be on implementation rather than "why" discussions."*

Principals cited the strategic plan as being central to their annual planning processes. It was clear that whether or not the principal felt strategic planning was simply another Ministry of Education requirement, it was extremely useful in setting annual direction for the school.

When this thinking was unpacked further with principals, the impact that strategic planning could have on how principals use it to lead their schools became apparent. Principals were informed by the "evidence-based" information that the school collected about student learning and achievement, and teacher performance. The evidence was used to set annual, as well as longer-term targets, and to determine the professional learning needs of the school as a whole, or part, short-term and long-term. Principals expressed that they were becoming more able to determine goals and direction beyond the current and upcoming year. It appeared that once a school had developed a "rhythm", in terms of its process, it enhanced the long-sightedness of the school, allowing the leadership of the school to plan for developments in school improvement in a more visionary way. Some principals were effectively able to set long term targets, and use their annual plans to incrementally draw closer to the vision collectively held for the future of the school. Some principals were much further advanced than others, and while it might have been expected that this was simply due to the experience of the principal, this was not always the case.

Those principals' who were the most advanced strategic leaders, had much greater peripheral vision, so to speak. They linked all aspects of their leadership through the strategic plan. They linked the professional learning of teachers with student achievement outcomes, they aimed to develop leadership capacity and specialist skills

to support the achievement of the schools goals, they linked performance agreements and job descriptions to the strategic goals of the school, short and longer term, they established accountability systems to keep leadership informed about progress or otherwise. Less and less was left up-to-chance, and more and more was deliberate.

All schools appeared to have "supporting management structures", relative to the size of the school. For some, these were just the usual "syndicate leadership" positions. However, many schools had established specific leadership structures to support the implementation of the strategic plan. Where the more strategic schools differed was in how the leadership role was specifically linked to the school's strategic goals, and how the leaders were expected to be driving change toward the strategic goals. This was more than simple delegation. This was distributed leadership linked intentionally to the schools strategic goals. The strategic plan was the yardstick for measuring progress and a reference point for ongoing review.   There was coordination through regular, planned focused discussion, and scheduled opportunity for review, feedback and feed-forward. There was a sense of real purpose about leadership that was grounded in the evidence of success, or otherwise, against the schools long and short-term targets and goals.

The sharing of the intent of the strategic plan was an area all principals believed was done best with leaders, but in general, not as well with teachers, and much less well with parents and students. There was the usual information in newsletters and websites, and awareness was at its best during consultation. Those schools were consultation was thorough, and where there were higher levels of engagement with the community, felt that parents would be more aware. Students may only be aware of the strategic plans impact indirectly through a special programmes or interventions. Most principals said this was an area where more attention could be given.

How schools managed the review of their strategic plan varied considerably. Again this seemed to be contingent on how valuable the principal viewed the need for constant review.   Each schools' strategic plan included mention of review, but it was those schools that had aligned their leadership and management structures to better implement the strategic goals of the school that could discuss the impact of this with greater ease and authority. Review in these schools was ongoing, and appeared to be a part of the leadership and management psyche.

Section 3: Strategic Plan in Action

- *What is the process for implementation of the Strategic Plan?*
- *In what ways can the Strategic Plan been seen as a living and practical document within the school?*
- *In what ways has the Strategic Planning process, and its implementation improved student-learning outcomes?   How do you know this?*
- *What specific aspects of student achievement or school improvement can you link to effective Strategic Planning?*
- *To what extent do you think that: Staff, Parent Community, and Students have an understanding of the school's strategic goals?*

Principals were clear that a strategic plan, if it was to have effect, needed to be implemented systematically, with rigor, and with conviction. The strategic plan, while in the process of being developed, in some ways acts as an "advertisement" that readies the staff and community for possible change or development. Similarly, it would appear, so does ongoing review. The annual plan, derived from the strategic plan, is the *"key action-focused document"* that gives effect to the strategic plan in that year. It too is strategic in its nature, and will identify learning targets, areas for professional learning and development, curriculum priorities and initiatives, review and reporting cycles, assessment and analysis schedules and often much more. As one principal stated, *"The need to plan and report to that plan generates action"*.

The principal was the key driver of the plan "in to action". Principals used their management structures, to distribute the responsibility for the success of the plan across, and throughout the school. Teacher only days, senior management meetings, staff meetings, focus group meetings, drive team meetings, and a wide range of other meeting structures, some unique to a school, were systematically scheduled to ensure that the intent of the annual plan was given effect. The principal often acted as a *"stage manager"* or a *"conductor"*, referring constantly to the *"script"*, checking on outcomes, and in consultation with other leaders, and based on data received, modifying the approach to achieve the goal if this was necessary. The principals operating in this manner were more able to speak with confidence about "school ownership" of the strategic plan, and in these schools awareness and understanding of the strategic plan appeared to go well beyond senior management and teachers.

It was the structures that principals had in place to give effect to their strategic plan that made it practical and gave it life beyond being a document. Most of the principals were now being very deliberate about ensuring that the strategic plan was seen as being central to the direction and operation of the school. Beyond simply displaying the strategic plan in a prominent place, principals and senior leaders would reference from, or back to the document to ensure that the immutable goals and directions of the document were being implemented and maintained. In some instances the strategic plan appeared to be being used to *"mandate"* change and direction and provide an accountability requirement that aligned and linked staff and community toward a set vision for the school. This was about ownership, and where consultation and engagement with the staff and community were strong features in the development and ongoing promotion of the strategic plan, principals felt awareness,

understanding, support and commitment to the plan and the school direction were much more widespread.

One of the key motivations for the mandating of strategic plans, by the Ministry of Education, was to improve student achievement outcomes. Most surprisingly the majority of the principals interviewed were reluctant or reserved to state that they could emphatically evidence a direct correlation between the two. It was not necessarily that they didn't believe that it was so, but more that it was very difficult to provide the empirical evidence to prove that it was so. For some it was too early to say with any confidence. The changing nature and quality of student achievement data was another reason. (Several schools had been involved in "assessment contracts" and this had altered how teachers taught, as well as how they assessed, and this changed the "assessment landscape" for the schools and therefore blurring comparison judgments around yesterday's data and today's data.) One principal said, *"Finding the link is difficult …. and quite problematic. When looking a cohort is it the class, the teacher, or other factors?"* One other principal said *"I know when it's not"*(improving student achievement), *"but it's much more difficult to say when it is!"*.

Principals felt that the accountability structures and data collection procedures that they had developed and implemented, as a result of planning and reporting requirements, gave them a much clearer picture about teaching and learning, and student achievement in their school.

Principals interviewed were much more confident that strategic planning had contributed greatly to school improvement and all could cite several genuine examples. The culture of the learning environments, and the teaching behaviours of teachers had been most positively influenced. Being strategically focused meant less was left to chance. The unifying nature of an agreed plan for the school, the constant checks and balances through authentic leadership structures, the constant reference to the school's *'road-map'* and alignment of values, beliefs, direction and vision for the school, provided much greater opportunity for school success.

Few of the schools were confident that beyond the leadership and teaching teams that there was a strong understanding of the strategic plan. Some did not see this as a problem and had no motivation to change this. For most, however, this was an area where they felt that by building stronger partnerships and by more actively growing ownership and understanding of the strategic plan beyond staff, that they could have greater effect.

Section 4: Supplementary Questions

- *Have you received sufficient Professional Development to make you feel confident about the processes and purposes of Strategic Planning?*
- *What is your Personal Professional view on the value and usefulness of Strategic Planning?*
- *Do you believe Strategic Planning can have an impact on student achievement and school improvement?*

Considering the importance the Ministry of Education has placed on Charters and strategic planning it is surprising to hear from all but one of the principals that they feel they have receive very little or no professional development around the processes and purposes of strategic planning. The only exception to this had received professional development as part of the First Time Principals programme. Many remembered the one hour seminar introducing 'planning and reporting' in 2002, but felt that their continuing professional learning in this area had been up to their initiative and desire to engage. Most felt let down by the Ministry of Education, but did acknowledge the publications that arrived from time to time. This might explain why it has taken so long for so many to make the paradigm shift from seeing strategic planning as a compliance requirement to an important tool for managing change and raising standards.

The principals interviewed, by and large, believed that strategic planning was an essential leadership skill. Many acknowledged that their thinking had changed around its purpose, and more importantly, their desire to engage with the concepts. As stated earlier in this paper, we are in an environment where schools are being required to be "strategic" in their planning, and that the Ministry of Education is expecting schools to look at the past and the present, and predict what actions need to be taken to improve schools and raise student achievement in the future.

Below are just some of the comments that principals interviewed made about strategic planning:
"It is essential, but it must be contextual";
"It is now the core of what we do, it leads me to a mindful and purposeful, responsive planned approach";
"Provides the school with focus and structure";
"Gives me the mandate to move the school forward with confidence";
"The best leaders have to be strategic in their approach";
"Couldn't function without it";
"Central to the operation of the school"
"We used to just do things, but now its purposeful, we load, we aim and when know we have the right target, then we fire";
"It is crucial to school direction and alignment"; and
"I wouldn't be able to do my job without it, it specifies direction and keeps me focused, provides structure and gives form to the job.

These are just some of the comments. They are genuine expressions and indicate the vast move principals have made in their thinking over the past 10 years in the ways that they can use strategic planning to lead.

The principals interviewed strongly believed that strategic planning could make a difference to school improvement. There were some provisos however. I go back to Chang, as quoted earlier who states, that merely, *"mastering the concepts and methods of strategic planning is an enabling factor in order to cope with the educational demands and challenges faced by education leaders, though this by itself is not sufficient."* (Chang 2008)

The principals' sentiments reflected Chang's. Strategic planning needs to be carried out for reasons other than simple compliance. Principals agreed that it was an essential tool, but it also needed to be a genuine reflection of the school, its community and its aspirations. It needs to be "real" and it needed to be inclusive in its development and implementation, and it needed to be well communicated.

Principals said that the impact on school improvement was much easier to see and measure. Most principals believed that it was very likely that student achievement would be raised through strategic action, (and also because of the impact of strategic planning on school improvement), but that it was still problematic providing reliable, valid, longitudinal empirical evidence that emphatically linked strategic planning to improved student achievement. Some principals were prepared to say with confidence, that what had changed as a result of planning and leading in a more strategic way, was definitely improving the learning outcomes of students.

Conclusions

There is considerable literature on the nature of effective strategic planning, far more than can be considered in this forum. What is clear, however, is that while there may be competing theories around what may be best to include, or how the process needs to be developed and implemented, all this is worth nothing unless the leadership of the school engages with the process, develops a strategic plan that is authentic to the school and its community, and is consistent and rigorous in its determination to put this plan into action.

Effective leadership is a key-determining factor in strategic planning leading to school improvement and improved student achievement. Where strategic planning is most effective it is impossible to separate leadership, and how leadership gives effect to the strategic plan, from the plan itself.

Genuine consultation, and rigorous, focused ongoing review, ensures that strategic planning reflects, and is responsive to, the dynamic changing environments that schools are. School ownership of the strategic plan is critical to its successful implementation.

Where principals embrace and engage strategic planning as a leadership tool, and develop systems and structures to give it life, school improvement and improved learning outcomes for students become more likely. Leadership becomes deliberate about what it does, how it does and why it does. Improvements are planned, for and expected. Targets and goals are set so that improvements can be evidenced and measured, and planned reporting against the plan increases accountability and enhances responsibility for continued success.

When the key strategic documents are living guides to the long-term direction of the school and give structure and form to the day-to-day management of the school, school improvement is more likely.

This investigation has been a fascinating opportunity to look at the characteristics of strategic planning and its impact on improved student achievement and school improvement. The interviews with principals and their open, frank and honest responses given during these discussions, provided a practical and genuine insight into the views and practices of school leaders, as they relate to strategic planning. To have the time to explore the theoretical concepts through extensive reading, and contrast this conjecture with the practical experience of principals in action, in real schools has been most enlightening.

I come away from this sabbatical with the very strong view that strategic planning is an essential leadership tool, and when principals engage with, and are thorough in their strategic processes, from development through to implementation, then school improvement and improved student achievement will result.

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Section 61 of the Education Act 1989 provides the required content of a school charter. A full copy of the Education Act 1989 can be found at www.legislation.govt.nz

WebLinks

http://www.minedu.govt.nz/Boards/LegalObligations/Charters.aspx

http://www.minedu.govt.nz/Boards/SchoolPlanningAndReporting/QuestionsAndAnswers.aspx

http://www.educationalleaders.govt.nz/Leadership-development/Leadership-programmes/First-time-principals-modules/Module-1-Planning-and-reporting

http://www.educationalleaders.govt.nz/Leadership-development/Leadership-programmes/First-time-principals-modules/Module-1-Planning-and-reporting/Strategic-goals-and-plan

http://olc.spsd.sk.ca/DE/PD/instr/strats/inquiry/index.html