

A guide to setting your school's Strategic Direction

Hello; my name is Cath Bufton Green. I am an Education Consultant who helps Governing bodies to better support their Heads, and their schools.

I have made a series of 'Governors' Shorts' on the six fundamental ways you can add real value to your school.

There are three core functions for any school Governing body:

- To ensure the school's clarity of vision, ethos and strategic direction
- To be responsible for overseeing the financial performance of the school
- To act as a critical friend to the Head, holding them accountable for the educational performance of the school

The first of these videos covers the subject of setting out your school's strategic direction.

Every business needs a plan. In the words of Yogi Berra "if you don't know where you're going, you'll end up someplace else". In today's heavily competitive environment, having a robust strategic plan is fundamental to your school's achievement.

I have written this first session from a Head's perspective. With over twenty years of experience in a variety of schools, I can reflect on what, as a busy Head, I would have found most beneficial in terms of Governors' support and I am happy to be sharing this with you.

1 – why your involvement in the strategic plan is important.

Your strategic plan is what sets your school apart from its competitors.

The plan should outline what your school does differently to its competitors or, the things your school does that are the same, but are done in a different way.

Often, the plan is seen as the Head's responsibility. They draft it themselves and the decision to involve others, such as the leadership team or whole staff, is left to chance.

Creating your school's strategic direction should involve the entire Governing body. It is this document that will determine your school's priorities. Priorities which you, the Governing body, have the responsibility of monitoring and evaluating.

What better way to be up to speed on its intricacies than by being a part of its conception?

2 – where to start.

There are so many regulations, reporting requirements and initiatives for schools to adhere to, it is often a challenge to identify the most important aspects to monitor.

It is good practice to start at the beginning, regardless of the status of your current plan.

Begin by holding a strategy day. This day should include you – the Governors, your Head and the senior leadership team.

The purpose of the day is to carve out the school's strategic direction for the next three to five years.

Aside from being purposeful in creating the school's strategic direction, the day will also provide a valuable opportunity for the two bodies – the Governors and leadership team – to get to know each other better.

The day should begin by creating alignment between the school's **values** and the **vision**. This is to ensure that everyone approaches the discussion from the same understanding.

3 – Values.

Values are the principles that guide our thinking and behaviour. As a Governing body, you are responsible for the **values** of your school.

Your school's **values** underpin its culture, strategy, policies and procedures and should be held at the heart of all decision-making.

The values are basic, fundamental beliefs that guide, or motivate attitudes or actions. They should be meaningful, talked about and lived by everyone in the school community.

Values help us to determine what is important to us.

It is likely that your school's values are already in circulation, but they may well have been created some time ago. It would be good practice to review them, make sure they still hold true and adapt them if necessary.

Ask yourselves:

- are your values reflective of the current climate?
- do your values resonate with every member of the school community?
- are all your decisions and actions consistent with your school's values?

Next you need to consider your school's **vision**.

4 – Vision.

The vision should express your school's core beliefs; the efforts your school has pledged to make to improve the experience for all pupils, parents and staff.

The vision should be inspiring and motivating. It needs to create buy-in from the whole school community.

The vision should be succinct in describing what the school wishes to achieve, and what that achievement will look like in three to five years' time; any less than this does not provide enough time for the impact of its implementation to be felt.

Your school's vision does not need to be rewritten annually, but it is good practice to review it regularly.

Ask yourselves:

- is the vision challenging, yet achievable?
- does the vision fit with the school's values?
- does the vision reflect the views of all stakeholders – pupils, parents and staff?
- how will the vision be communicated to the whole school community?

Once the overarching school's values and vision are aligned, the **strategy** can be created.

5 – Writing the Strategic Plan.

The Strategic Plan is the document that sets out how your school's vision will be achieved.

It is important to give this stage the gravitas it requires and ensure that everyone at the strategy day contributes.

You need to allow enough time during the day to reflect, discuss and consult before any decisions are made.

It is key that a high level of integrity, trust and openness feature in order that everyone feels involved and that all ideas are considered.

It is important to work through the challenges, risks and barriers for each idea in order to road-test its suitability in realising your vision.

The strategy will reflect the upcoming year. Try to keep it succinct as it will provide the backbone for the school's more detailed development plan.

The strategy will cover a number of subjects, such as:

- Staff
- Pupils
- Engagement with parents
- Financial performance
- Facilities
- Communication

The subjects can be further broken down into sub-divisions, for example: Staff, could be broken down into:

- Quality of teaching
- Morale and wellbeing

- Leadership

Pupils, could be sub-divided into:

- Progress and attainment
- Curriculum
- Extra-curricular offering
- Wellbeing
- Preparation for the next stages

For each of the subjects, the strategy needs to:

- identify improvements that will help to achieve the vision
- outline what success looks like, based on the desired outcome
- involve others – staff, pupils and parents, where appropriate
- ensure each aspect is measurable and with considered timeframes
- outline how you, the Governing body, will monitor it; how often and by what measures?

6 – Measurement and review.

Once the **strategy document** has been checked to ensure the appropriate level of budget and staff resource have been provided for each aspect, it is the responsibility of the Head and their team to create an operational plan, also referred to as a **school development plan**.

The **school development plan** clearly outlines the actions that demonstrate how the strategy will be implemented into school life.

We recommend that you, the Governing body, monitor the **strategy document** termly. Measurement is best done by receiving reports on its implementation and progress from the Head.

The **strategy document** should then be reviewed, with the Head, at the end of each academic year. At the same time the next year's strategy document can be created, in conjunction with the leadership team.

It is important that the **strategy document** clearly defines what success looks like, with each aspect identified together with how it is to be measured.

When determining what success looks like, it is important to ensure that the outcomes are SMART:

- specific
- measurable
- achievable
- realistic
- and time-bound

Do not be limited to measuring outcomes by academic methods alone. Not all areas for improvement will be quantitative. For example, pastoral initiatives such as mental health and wellbeing could be monitored through reports from staff or findings from pupil surveys.

When assessing the impact of the strategy, consider the following:

- do we have access to all the data and information we need to monitor the improvements?
- are we able to access that information independently, or do we depend on members of the school staff?
- do we have the skills on the governing body to interpret data, or do we rely on senior leaders to do this for us?
- is the information at the right level of detail – detailed enough to tell us what we need to know, but not so detailed as to make it difficult to read?
- is information available on all the aspects that we agree are important, or only on those aspects that are easy to measure?

It would be best practice to have these questions in mind when creating the strategy and the monitoring expectations, to ensure that the evidence, data and information is captured in the best format and at appropriate time intervals throughout the year.

As well as monitoring the school's strategy it is yours, the Governors', responsibility to also evaluate the effectiveness of policies that ensure legal compliance. These range from safeguarding to General Data Protection Regulation (or GDPR to you and me), but further Video Shorts will cover these aspects in more detail.

Summary.

I appreciate I have covered a lot of ground, so here's a recap:

- your strategic plan is what sets your school apart from its competitors
- creating your school's strategic direction should involve the entire Governing body
- begin by holding a strategy day, to include the Governors, Head and senior leadership team
- use the day to carve out the school's strategic direction for the next three to five years and for the Governors and senior leadership team to get to know each other better
- the day should begin by creating alignment between the school's values and its vision
 - **values** are the principles that guide our thinking and behaviour
 - **the vision** is an inspiring and motivational expression of the school's core beliefs
- The **strategy document** is used to create the **school development plan**, otherwise known as an operational plan
- The **strategy** should be monitored termly via a progress report from the Head
- The **strategy** should be reviewed at the end of each academic year

I trust you will find this guide useful. .

Thank you for your time.