



What Is A Futures Focused School?

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A futures focused school is not one set in another time – the future. Rather it is a school parked solidly in the present but with an attitude and a commitment to engage with the future in order to discover alternatives as a context for making choices today. A futures focused school wants to choose and create a future for itself and its students. The alternative to being futures focused is to wait for the future to happen and then respond, or worse, to view the future as no more than an imagined glorious past, which the school seeks to recreate.

We cannot predict the future. Who foresaw 9/11 or the sub-prime crisis and what massive impacts they would have on our community? But while we cannot predict the future, the reality is that we define it each day in everything that we do. By basically continuing with what we have always done and improving it as best we can, we are assuming that the environment in which schools exist is not changing to any great extent. But the reality is that our community, country and world are changing rapidly. The environment for schools is undoubtedly changing whether as a response to the macro issues of terrorism, globalisation, equity, technology and climate change or to the more immediate shifts in family, social, cultural or community values.

In a futures focused school there is a pre-eminent capacity and willingness for staff and other stakeholders to keep abreast of trends and issues, threats and opportunities in the wider environment, nationally and internationally; discerning megatrends and creating scenarios; and anticipating their impact on education generally and on the school in particular. This capacity is certainly a requirement of the principal and members of the leadership team, but these school leaders also share their knowledge with the school's community, and encourage other leaders to do the same in their areas of interest. There are structures and processes which enable the school to gather evidence and other intelligence, set priorities and formulate strategies which take account of likely and / or preferred futures, with the school's leaders being sources of expertise as these occur. They ensure that the attention of the school's community is focused on matters of strategic importance. There are processes to monitor the implementation of strategies as well as emerging strategic issues in the wider environment. There is an ongoing process of review. A futures focused school defines and articulates its values and beliefs. These provide a foundation on which a future is described and a strategy planned. The 'how' of strategy is not designed until the 'what' is determined.

A focus on the future is just one aspect of a comprehensive approach to strategy. The metaphor of 'seeing' is helpful but it is 360° and multi-dimensional. A futures focused school 'sees ahead', but it also 'sees behind', honouring and extending its accomplishments in the past. It 'sees above' in the sense of understanding the policy context. It 'sees below', demonstrating a deep understanding of the needs, interests, motivations and aspirations of students and staff. It 'sees beside' by networking professional knowledge to take account of best practice in other schools in similar settings. It 'sees beyond' by seeking out best practice in other nations and in fields other than education. It is consistent and persistent; it 'sees it through'.

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The metaphor of 'sensing' is also helpful given that 'seeing' refers to what is already in place or is projected. A futures focused school is alert to signals in its internal and external environment that may influence what may occur in the future and that may subsequently be 'seen'. These signals may be strong or weak and a high level of sensitivity is required to distinguish among them.

There is a particular climate or culture in the futures focused school. Staff and others are comfortable in conducting informal unstructured conversations about strategy as much as, if not more than, they engage in the more formal processes of strategic planning. They endeavour to make sense of or construct a narrative around events that are unfolding, broadly in society and more specifically in education. These 'strategic conversations' are frequently evidence-based; futures-focused schools are comfortable with the increasingly data-rich environment in which they must operate. Above all there should be a disciplined commitment to strategy in the futures focused school.

In the futures focused school, scenarios are constructed and discarded with ease, but the school locks itself into particular scenarios when it is strategically possible or necessary to do so; for example, to embark on a long-term building project that takes account of developments in technology or commitments to a particular vision in fields such as the arts.

The futures focused school understands that its evolution is not logical and linear but is a complex interaction of a host of possibilities in which options are taken up or set aside. In systemic terms, what occurs in schools is not solely the product of government policy, ministerial preference or bureaucratic requirement, but is also the outcome of creative action by people at the school level. Furthermore, the actions of one school can make a difference in other schools. However, for new practices to emerge there needs to be innovation and that means grappling with the future and always looking for new approaches to learning and teaching and the support of learning and teaching. The futures focused school invests in innovation so that it becomes an 'incubator' of new ideas and new practices.

Innovation and creativity do not always sit comfortably with the demands of the present yet the futures focused school accepts the need to set and meet targets and ensure that it is compliant with societal and systemic requirements, whether these are in curriculum, pedagogy or health and safety. More often than not it will exceed these targets while it seeks to create opportunities for sustainable success in a future of changing context and considered choice. Leading and managing a futures focused school means wrestling with the competing demands of short term goals and delivering outcomes today and long term goals and creating opportunities in the future. At times it will be uncomfortable with what the data are telling it about progress and outcomes and will be prepared to change course to realise its goals.

There is robust but respectful debate in a futures focused school. While convergence of ideas is not always possible or even desirable, every effort is made to develop a shared understanding of what is important to create and sustain success. A test of whether it is a successful futures focused school is its track record of adaptability, flexibility and sustainability in the past. It is adept at 'strategic positioning'. It has a reputation for success in these matters.

Related reading

Bear, H. (2001). *Creating the Future School*. London: Routledge.

Caldwell, B. J. and Harris, J. (2008). *Why not the Best Schools?* Camberwell: ACER Press.

Davies, B. (2006). *Leading the Strategically Focused School*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.

Loader, D. (2007). *Jousting for the New Generation*. Camberwell: ACER Press.

Mintzberg, H. (1995). 'Strategic thinking as "seeing"'. In Garratt, B. (Ed.) *Developing Strategic Thought: Rediscovering the Art of Direction-Giving*. London: McGraw-Hill. Chapter 5.