

Key elements of a School Improvement Plan



School Improvement Plans in many schools are weak. This is because they are:

- Too long
- Lack focus
- Are not drawn from an honest self-evaluation
- Do not focus on the most important areas for the school
- It is not clear how success will be measured

The impression given by a well-created document is one of leadership competency. It is not the document per se which is important, but that the thinking represented within it is the thinking of the leadership of the school.

Why 'School Improvement Plan' (SIP) and not 'School Development Plan'?

The aim is for the school to seek continuous improvement in specific, focused areas, rather than developing them.

'Improve' – 'make or become better'

'Develop' – 'grow or cause to grow and become more mature, advanced, or elaborate'

Oxford languages

As focus shifts from one area to the next, it is an organisational skill to maintain quality elsewhere. Where there needs to be a continuing focus, this can be included in a 'Maintenance plan'.

The focus of all school improvements should always be on pupil progress and attainment.

If, for example, a school is building a new classroom, that is a fairly easy justification. However, it is an improvement which would take place anyway, and so is not an appropriate objective for a SIP.

However, painting a classroom costs roughly the same as an hour of TA time per week over the year. How do you justify painting the classroom in terms of progress and attainment, over employing the TA time?

Number of objectives

It is always recommended that there are three objectives across the year. Sometimes, outstanding schools have two.

Where there are three, stakeholders will remember the generalities of what the school is trying to achieve;

Where there are four, they will have some idea, but will be vague or muddled;

Where there are five or more, stakeholders will not remember what the school is trying to achieve, or their role in it.

Several lesser objectives can be bundled together under one heading.

Objectives can then be worked on all at the same time, or one at a time. If one at a time, when the objective is largely achieved, a new one should be set on a rolling programme. Where objectives are consecutive, they should be worked on like this:

	Term	Objective 1	Objective 2	Objective 3	Objective 4	Objective 5	Objective 6
Year 1	1	Prepare & plan					
	2	Introduce	Prepare & plan				
	3	Roll out & embed	Introduce	Prepare & plan			
Year 2	1	Review & evaluate	Roll out & embed	Introduce	Prepare & plan		
	2		Review & evaluate	Roll out & embed	Introduce	Prepare & plan	
	3			Review & evaluate	Roll out & embed	Introduce	Prepare & plan

Some schools try to link their objectives to the Ofsted framework. This is not a good idea because:

- No other framework ('the golden thread') groups the elements of a school's work in the same way – the Ofsted framework is unique;
- The school's areas for improvement may not match those of the Ofsted framework;
- Ofsted are keen to point out that 'nothing should be done for Ofsted: Ofsted do not require schools to work in any set way'. Therefore, a school's SIP objectives should be matched to the school's greatest need for improvement.

Length

A SIP should be as short as possible. In general, they should not exceed four sides of A4. Some are only one. The detail is set out in the accompanying action plan for each objective. Whilst all stakeholders can see the SIP, only those who need to take action need to see the action plans. The whole governance body can approve the SIP, but only the appropriate Link governor needs to see the relevant action plan.

Format

A SIP is usually tabular and landscape. However, this is not the only format. What is important is that the SIP is effective, and works for your school. The format should be that which gives governors the information they require, so that they can be clear about the school's intentions for improvement, and how they will know when the objectives are met.

Essential:

- Objective title
- Success criteria/ Impact: how will governors know when the objective has been achieved?
- Resources above those usually assigned to this area

Useful:

- Time for completion
- Person responsible

May be included:

- Person reviewing
- Key actions
- Lesser objectives, under the main objective heading

Objectives should be SMART, as should any success criteria:

- **S**pecific
- **M**easurable
- **A**chievable
- **R**ealistic
- **T**ime-related

I, for Impact, can also be added (so, SMARTI)

There should be no repetition within the SIP. Therefore, information which can be found elsewhere, does not need to be repeated here. A mistake school leaders often make is to write long documents to demonstrate how hard they have worked. However, they have not considered their reader, and the extra time it will take them to go through unnecessary information. The SIP should not include:

- Contextual information;
- A review of the previous year's objectives
- Action plans (they should be in a separate document)
- Key Ofsted issues (these should be in a separate document, or included within the SIP objectives)

The SIP should be:

- Brief
- Non-repetitive
- Concise
- SMART
- Precise

Link to self-evaluation

Objectives must always be drawn from the school's self-evaluation. A proper, honest evaluation will look at the most important areas in the school, which are:

- Areas where a weakness has been identified during the year
- Areas which have not been looked at for a long time
- Areas identified on a rolling programme of review
- Areas where the school thinks practice could be even better.

Many school's self-evaluations are entirely positive, and therefore very weak evaluatively. If a school is not outstanding, a self-evaluation must explain why the school is not at the top grading.

If the self-evaluation is not accurate, then the school's resources are likely to be used in the wrong areas.

Link to actions

The actions, or the action plan which underpin the objectives, must be evidence-based, and designed to improve pupil progress and attainment. In a number of schools, the actions appear to be plucked out of thin air, as there is no obvious reason why they have been selected above possible alternative actions. In other schools, actions, whilst not appearing to have an evidence base for their use, at least give an impression that they may have a positive impact if they become practice in the school. Better, by far, to use actions which have a sound basis, so those which:

- Have been tried before, or in another area, and worked;
- Have been seen in action in another school;
- Were used successfully in a previous school by a new appointee;
- Have a sound basis in research evidence;
- Are recommended as part of government, LA or Trust guidance;
- Are recommended by a school leader on the basis of professional intuition.

Some actions are precursors to improved progress and attainment, but do not represent a direct improvement. For example, improvement in attendance, or behaviour. For this reason, such areas for improvement should not be used as the school's main objectives, but can be a part of another.

Resources

Only resources which are well above the norm, or those usually spent in this area and which are above the usually-assigned financial budget, need to be included within the resources column on the SIP. There is little point in including minor amounts such as '20 photocopies'. The resource column should include:

- Finance
- Human resources (time, seniority, etc.)
- Educational resources (equipment, scheme costs, space, the look of the space, etc.)
- Teacher workload.

In assigning actions to individuals, the creator of the SIP should be aware that subject leaders will also be implementing their own action plans at the same time. There is a danger that teachers will be asked to make multiple changes at the same time, unless this, and therefore teacher workload, is coordinated across all leaders.

The use of language

The use of personal pronouns should be avoided. This is because it is not clear who 'we' or 'our' is. If it refers to 'our school', for example, which stakeholders is it referring to, exactly?

All objectives, actions and success criteria should use such language that there can be no dispute when it has been achieved. Therefore, it is not appropriate to have the aim 'All staff are clear', or 'Teachers are confident' because what represents clarity or confidence for one person, is not the same for the next.

The language used must be purposeful and stand the test of being asked:

- So what? If you carry out this action what will its impact actually be? It doesn't seem important – is it?
- How does this improve pupil progress and attainment?

Care should be taken when using some phraseology, that its intention is the same as that meant nationally. So, for example, 'ambitious curriculum'. This would imply that, at the end of Y6, pupils attain higher than might be expected from the school's IDACI index (social profile). So if the IDACI index is average, then Y6 SAT outcomes would be above average.

Other commonly-used language in SIPs and how it might be interpreted:

'Improve' – from what to what?

'Effective' = progress and attainment rises

'Shared school expertise' = progress and attainment rises

'Leadership at all levels evident' = progress and attainment rises

Tightness of school documentation and impact

Are all school documents coherent? Does the SIP represent outcomes from a recent inspection report? Do teacher performance management objectives link across the year? Does the SIP link to the SSE, and is this reported to governors through the headteacher's reports? Are the school (and Trust) objectives reflected in subject leader action plans, where they are appropriate?

The school's focus should be keen on achieving its most important objectives.

The impact cannot always be ascribed to one set of actions, and is often the result of all of the school's work taken together, including the appointment of new staff, building work, etc. However, where pupil progress and attainment has risen in the desired area, this should be noted as a successful impact for the key objective.

Overarching objective 1:				
Underlying objective/s	Key actions (5 max)	Success criteria (SMART, 5 max)	Timescale	Person responsible

Variation for a Subject Leader's Subject Improvement Plan

Most of the principles set out above apply. However, the action plans are likely to be shorter, and the objectives lesser, unless improvement of the subject is a major objective for the school. In addition, greater emphasis should be made on teacher workload, so that the timing of introduction of any change does not coincide with that of several other subjects.