Strategic Planning as a Management Tool for School Principals in Rural Schools in the Motheo District

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KEYWORDS Planning. School Management. School Governing Body. School Reform

ABSTRACT Strategic planning basically includes a group of instruments, operations and concepts structured to help managers, leaders and planners think and act strategically. The planning process comprises a definition of the goals, a valuation of the resources available for meeting the goals, and the definition of definite plans or initiatives that are intended to achieve the goals. The process usually includes a classification exercise that identifies the highest priority initiatives. The study indicates how strategic management fits into the management process. Strategic planning ensures that the school is associated with the changing internal and external environment. This planning is formulated by top management and focuses on the entire organization. A qualitative design was followed in which the opinions of principals were sought through the use of semi-structured interviews. The findings of the study indicate that strategic planning does not occur in many schools in the Motheo district. If a form of strategic planning does occur, School Governing Body (SGB) chairpersons are often excluded in the drafting and implementation of these plans. Collaboration between School Management Teams (SMTs) and SGBs is needed to ensure the successful drafting and implementation of strategic plans.

INTRODUCTION

From the viewpoint of theory and practice, strategy is directly related to the management of the business or school. Strategic management is a comparatively recent discipline without a unified theory supporting its growing practice. Indeed, strategic management is as difficult to define as strategy is. According to French (2009), strategic management was first proposed in early 1980s with the specific purpose of defining a new paradigm for business policy. Strategic planning has also found its way into schools. The South African Schools Act (SASA) (Act No. 84 of 1996) prioritizes the role of the principal as an academic leader. In accordance with the SASA, the role of school principals is to be part of the process of strategic management and strategic thinking, which are derived from the process of strategic planning. The purpose of strategic planning for schools is to ensure they are able to face the challenges of a changing environment (both internal and external). Education in general and schools in particular has been and will continue to be affected by continual changes.

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The opportunities and the challenges of an environment characterized by increasing competition require that schools successfully position themselves to build a sustainable, competitive advantage. Through strategic planning, schools must establish high aspirations for themselves and focus intensely on the execution of such plans. The strategic planning process offers a setting where all issues affecting the school can be thoughtfully addressed. Cheng (2013) states that an organization often finalizes the strategic planning process, which then leads to the design of a strategic plan. Everybody involved has the best intentions, but when they are back at their sections, offices and classrooms, they are often overwhelmed with the details of their daily routine. Williams and Johnson (2013) indicate that all stakeholders affected by a strategic plan should be involved in its discussion and such a plan should then be made available to all concerned before its implementation. No strategic plan is completed just because it gets written. The success of a strategic plan is directly dependent on how it is implemented. Following are some important aspects to keep in mind when implementing such a plan:

- Interpret each initiative in the strategic plan by affirming five critical points: who, what, why, when, and resources needed. Irwin (2011) asserts that this explained version of the strategic plan now becomes the im-

plementation plan. When drafting it, distinct tasks must be assigned to specific individuals or groups within the school, who must develop a good rationale for each initiative, set deadlines, and decide whether funding is needed.

- Tie the strategic plan to the budgeting process of the school. Wanjala and Rarieya (2014) indicate that the resources and funds required to achieve all of the action steps in the strategic plan in order to implement the strategy need to be estimated. The resources normally include the people, facilities and equipment needed.

- The objectives of the strategic plan need to be prioritized and a realistic timetable must be set. Normally, strategic plans are drafted to cover a period of three to five years. Haines (2007) states that if this is the case with a school, it is not advisable to try and accomplish everything in the first year. The plan should be to address some of the initiatives in each of the years that it will be in effect, in order to elude being burdened or overwhelmed by all aspects of the plan. Being too determined to accomplish the plan right away may cause tension and frustration.

- The strategic plan must be communicated to all relevant parties (teachers, learners, parents) and these parties must be motivated to assist with its implementation. The plan must be shared within and outside the school. The best is to make use of several formats, modified to the audience (the Web, memoranda to parents and detailed action plans).

- It is important to recognize accomplishments, as this can create new levels of energy to do more. Do not wait until all actions in the plan are completed to recognize and celebrate. Recognize past actions, and identify milestones during the implementation of such an initiative.

Factors Influencing the Implementation of Strategic Planning at School

Wittmann and Reuter (2008) indicate that there is overwhelming support for the implementation of strategic planning in schools as it generates a new focus on the quality of education. Implementation of strategic planning at schools can however be influenced by certain factors.

The Vision, Mission, Goals and Objectives of the School

Depending on the vision and mission of the school, as put forward in the strategic planning, specific goals and objectives may be formulated to improve the effectiveness of the school. These goals and objectives will have an influence on the ability of the school to successfully implement the strategic plan (Le Roux 2002). For instance, if it is the objective of the school to grow by enrolling more learners, then strategic plans must be in place to ensure that provision is made for appointing suitably qualified additional educators to manage this growth.

Leadership of Managers

The leadership style of the principal and other managers at the school (School Management Team) may have an influence on the success of the implementation of the strategic plan. The manner in which managers motivate, guide and handle staff members involved in the implementation of strategic planning may contribute to the success or failure of such an implementation.

School Culture and Climate

The unique culture and climate at the specific school may also impact the success of implementing the strategic plan. A certain school culture (the way things are done at the school) and the related school climate (the general atmosphere prevalent at the school) may encourage or discourage stakeholders in the implementation of a strategic plan (Department of Education 2007).

Socio-economic Circumstances

According to Le Roux (2002), public organizations, such as schools, are dependent on the government for their funding. Funding (be it through subsidy, school fees or fundraising) for schools has a direct bearing on successful implementation of strategic plans of schools.

New and Amended Policies and Legislation

Policy changes and new or amended legislation on the national and provincial levels may have an effect on strategic plan implementation

(Elmore 2004). Many policy changes in terms of curriculum, as well as decentralization of management in schools may have an influence on how the implementation of strategic plans is influenced. A strategic plan in the process of implementation may therefore have to change to be in line with certain policy changes.

According to Tracy (2012), the essences regarding the successful implementation of a strategic plan are leadership, commitment, ownership, and accountability, belief in the plan, communication, monitoring progress, praise and recognition, and patience. To avoid failure, information should be gathered from all stakeholders, roles and responsibilities should be clearly defined, expectations must be communicated, interest must be maintained in the process and the progress and the process should continually be monitored.

Various role players within the school environment are involved with planning and implementing the strategic plan of a school. These role players are the School Governing Body (SGB), the principal and School Management Team (SMT), the staff (teachers), parents and learners, and lastly, the regional department of education.

Objectives

The objectives of this study is to determine the essence of strategic planning within the school management process, as well as to ascertain the factors, which influence the drafting and implementation of such strategic planning in rural school in the Motheo district of South Africa.

Statement of the Problem

An important task of the contemporary school is to stay ahead of change. Education in South Africa has and is still undergoing many changes with regard to curricula, decentralized financial management and administrative aspects. The managerial tasks of principals have also changed significantly. Universally, schools are increasingly being managed like businesses. For this reason, aspects such as marketing, cost-effectiveness and the needs of the client should receive attention. Strategic planning is a means for establishing and maintaining a sense of direction when the future has become more and more difficult to predict. A major problem that exists is that without having learnt the skills of strategic management and operational planning, principals are likely to find themselves involved in crisis management.

Research Questions

The above problem statement leads to the following research questions:
- What is the essence of strategic planning within the management process?
- Which factors influence the drafting and implementation of strategic planning in Motheo schools?

MATERIAL AND METHODS

A qualitative approach is followed where data is obtained from principals through semi-structured and SGB chairpersons through semi-structured interviews. Braun and Clarke (2013) assert that qualitative research involves an interpretative, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, endeavoring to make sense or to deduce phenomena in terms of the meanings people attach to them. This study employs the qualitative design to determine the opinions of participants in their natural setting.

The population in this study consists of all principals of schools in the Motheo District of the Free State province in South Africa. A sample is a subset of the population or a small group that is observed (Ary et al. 2009). This study employs the purposive sampling method. In purposive sampling, the researcher specifies the characteristics of a population of interest and then tries to locate individuals who have those characteristics. The sample for this study consisted of 10 school principals of these schools.

Nieuwenhuis (2014) states that qualitative data analysis tries to establish how participants make meaning of a specific phenomenon by analyzing their perceptions, attitudes and experiences. Qualitative data analysis is primarily an inductive process of organizing the data into certain categories and identifying patterns (relationships) among the categories. In this study, the data was organized into categories relating to questions and reported in the narrative (as is characteristic of qualitative reporting of data).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the analyzed data are provided by sequence of interview questions. Verbatim responses of principals are provided.

Question 1: Does your school have a strategic plan in place? Please elaborate

Most of the participants responded that they have a strategic plan in place. Some of the principals elaborated that they do not always get to implement the plans made as some factors hamper them from doing so. One of these principals stated that it is the task of the SGB to ensure that strategic planning is done. They agreed on the issue that planning is one of the most important tasks of the principal as it forms the basis of all other management tasks. The following are types of responses received from participants.

"Strategic plans are in place. It is important to have such plans as it gives direction to what must happen at the school."

"Strategic plans cannot always be implemented as other important day-to-day issues take up our time and that of the teachers."

"The SGB must do strategic planning for the school. We, as principals, should assist with that."

Most schools do have a strategic plan in place. Principals also realize the importance of such plans to provide their schools with direction. This is in agreement to what is found in literature, where Education Impact (2010: 4) states that a school strategic plan normally sets out the school's strategic direction for the coming years. Included will be the school's purpose, its values and environmental context, as well as its goals, targets and key development strategies. Strategic planning contributes to the progress of the school as an organization and the formation of operative strategies. Therefore, strategic planning is critically important for any organization to develop.

It also seems as if not all principals ensure that strategic plans are implemented. Other work-related operational tasks take preference and the strategic plans shift to the side. The principal that indicated that strategic planning is the task of the SGB may not realize that he/she forms part of the SGB and has a responsibility to ensure that such planning is done in conjunction with the SGB.

Question 2: Do you involve stakeholders in the strategic planning and if so, which stakeholders are involved during the drafting and formulation of the strategic plan?

Most of the participants stated that they involve other stakeholders, such as the full SGB and the School Management Team (SMT) during the drafting and formulation of the strategic plan. Some of these principals mentioned that some members of the SGB do not turn up for these sessions due to other commitments. The SMT members are teachers of the school and are involved.

A few of the principals mentioned that they do not involve all members of the SGB as these members resist the changes that come along with strategic planning. In some cases these principals also do not involve the full SMT as they feel that too many people involved prolong the process (too many ideas thrown around). These principals have therefore decided only to involve those who are interested. Reasons provided by these principals are include the following.

"SGB parents do not avail themselves for these sessions and in many cases do not even send an apology."

"Some SMT members complain about all the administrative work they are doing and do not want to be involved in more work."

"Support staff are also not included as they very seldom provide any inputs."

Principals do not always involve other stakeholders during the drafting and formulation of the strategic plan. Directing organizational activities towards the overall attainment of strategic objectives needs some form of institutional planning. At the onset of this process working groups need to be engaged with current and potential stakeholders, such as the SGB, SMT, other staff members and representatives of the wider community in order to identify or anticipate external expectations and match these to the internal expectations of the school. This is in line with what Lingam et al. (2014) advocate when stating that consultation and participation with key stakeholders are important aspects of the strategic planning process. At the school level, stakeholders such as parents, principals, teachers, students, as well as those who have an interest in children's education should be consulted.

Question 3: How often do you discuss and draft changes or new aspects of your strategic plan?

Most of the participants mentioned that although strategic plans are seen to be at the heart of the management process, they do not have a specific cycle in which strategic plans are drafted or amended. Strategic issues that may arise are discussed and a plan is drafted to implement such a decision. One of these principals said that if strategic planning cycle (say every three years) sessions are not noted and executed, it normally is not done in a formal way. He mentioned that the planning of such sessions must be driven by either the principal or the SGB chairperson. A few of these principals mentioned that they do most of the planning on their own and merely inform the SGB and staff. The main reason provided is that their SGBs do not have the capacity to engage in strategic planning.

A small number of participants stated that they have not drafted or updated strategic planning at their schools for a number of years. They mention that they do not get any support from their SGB in this regard and that they do not have the time to do it on their own.

"We do not have a specific cycle in years that we follow. When something very important must be done, then we plan for it and try to do it."

"If we do not plan to have strategic sessions and minute such decisions, then no formal strategic planning is done, we just make decisions as they arise."

"I do strategic planning on my own, because my SGB cannot help me. They do not know how to do strategic planning."

"We have not done strategic planning for long. My SGB says that anyone can come up with plans and must inform me, but no one brings plans. I cannot do all of that on my own."

The responses indicate that schools do not have specific cycles in which they do strategic planning. No formal time frames are set, in which strategic planning sessions are to be done. It seems as if strategic planning is done on an ad hoc basis. In some instances, no strategic planning is done due to lack of knowledge capacity from the side of the SGB and time constraints from the side of the principals. Dibrell et al. (2014) indicate the necessity of incorporating systemic planning flexibility that will allow the formal strategic planning process to maintain relevance in changing circumstances. In other words, strategic plans can be changed and adapted to reflect the changing circumstances of the school.

Question 4: Which factors influence the drafting and the implementation of strategic planning at your school?

Many factors were mentioned by participants. These factors include the following.

- Poor consultation between the principal and the SGB: Strategic planning is not seen as important by many SGBs. They consider normal planning for the year (operational planning), as the only planning that is needed for the school.
- Lack of monitoring/evaluating: Where strategic plans are in place, they are not really monitored or evaluated in terms of progress made. The effect of this lack of monitoring is that such plans are in the end not implemented.
- Policy overflow: New and amended policies in terms of curricula take up a lot of the time of the principal and teachers. They are so involved in these that strategic planning is not seen as a consideration. The principal has other important aspects to attend to such as finances, teacher to learner ratios, lack of commitment from teachers, and hence, strategic planning sessions are not at the forefront of his day-to-day management.
- Lack of skills among the SGB: Members of the SGB lack skills in the drafting and implementation of strategic plans. Many of these members are not highly schooled and feel that they have no input to make in this regard.
- Lack of resources for proper implementation: Whenever plans are made, the funding of projects and plans is always an important factor. In many cases, the school just does not have the funding to execute plans. Funding from the department is not always received in good time and this has an influence on payments that need to be made to implement possible plans.
- Lack of strategic planning skills: In some instances only the principal has the skill to engage with strategic planning (and this is also not always the case). If stakeholders do not have the ability to engage in strategic planning, the effect on the success of the school is jeopardized.

- The 'buying in' of all stakeholders: The drafting and implementation of a strategic plan should be a team effort. If the SMT, or teachers or parents do not assist and support such planning, then no success will be forthcoming.
- Support from the department: This aspect has been discussed in a prior question.
- A general unwillingness of the staff from the school to be part of the process, both at the drafting and implementation stages: Many staff members see strategic plans as an extra burden over and above their normal workload.
- A fear of failure: Stakeholders seem to rather not be involved because then they have to achieve something planned and measurable. They fear that they will not achieve what was planned and will seem like a failure.
- A general resistance to change: Many strategic plans put forward new ideas and plans. Many principals and teachers are so entrenched in their normal day-to-day activities that they do not want to engage in new endeavors. They want to stay with what is known to them and therefore do not support strategic planning.
- Economic factors: Schools struggle with funding and therefore stakeholders feel that they will not be able to implement plans that require funding. Where schools are dependent on the department to provide them with resources, problems arise with receiving resources very late or not at all. Parents are mostly poor and cannot contribute to the school finances. This hampers the drafting of strategic ideas linked to funding.
- Lack of learning materials: Any strategic plan that includes the use of learning materials to improve the academic aspects in the school is not supported. Principals and teachers have a constant battle to ensure that teaching and learning materials are provided to the school. Principals mentioned a lack of trust that crept in with regards to proper delivery of teaching and learning material by the department.

The abovementioned factors cover both internal and external aspects that influence strategic planning. A number of factors were mentioned that could be internally controlled and changed. The perceptions of internal staff can be changed positively if small successes with implementation of aspects of a plan can occur. Some external factors may not be so easy to control by principals. Departmental influences and the economic situation prevailing at the school are out of their hands. A study by Njeru et al. (2013) confirms the above factors when indicating that in order for a school to formulate a strategic plan the leaders of the school should put in place measures to solicit for the required funds, understand the various government policies with regard to strategic plan formulation and train employees to provide them with required skills to effectively be involved in the planning and implementation.

Question 5: How do you determine whether the implementation of aspects of the strategic plan is successful?

Most of the participants mentioned that they make use of reports and feedback from meetings, workshops and activities performed. They expect people who are in charge of these activities to provide such reports to monitor whether these were implemented successfully. Some of these principals stated that they should also report to the SGB quarterly on aspects of the strategic plan.

Some participants stated that different committees should report their activities to them verbally or in writing, but that not all of them do that. In most of these cases they report problem areas and give up trying after a while. Parents committees are not really functional and the same parents are always involved. Such parents also become despondent and loose initiative.

"I expect my people to get back to me. If I do not hear from them for a while I will call them into my office to get feedback. Then I can again provide feedback to the SGB."

"The different committees must bring feedback, but they do not always do. It becomes difficult for me to follow-up on everything."

"The parents are not always willing to work for the school anymore. They get too busy with their own lives."

The responses indicate that some form of monitoring exists. It seems as if the general trend is that when problems are encountered that are difficult to solve, the implementation of strategic plans are negated. The abandonment of sections of the strategic plan may become easier to do if motivation and support are not provided,

or when stakeholders see that nobody really cares whether they continue with the implementation or not.

CONCLUSION

Strategic planning is a powerful instrument for school improvement and ensures that a coherent action-planning process for school renewal, innovation and change exists. Therefore, strategic planning in schools should aspire to introduce change and/or affect innovation and should thus, be an exercise initiated by the school community (possibly through the SGB) in a quest for continuous improvement. Schools cannot function properly if strategic planning is neglected. This is more so in the case where schools are poorly resourced and parents do not have the means to financially support the school. Attainable strategic targets should be set with the result that success will drive success.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Both the principal and the SGB chairperson are the main drivers to initiate strategic planning processes. They need to engage with the SGB and SMT to conceptualize strategic planning as a starting point for further discussion in this regard. Principals need to involve other stakeholders with the drafting of a strategic plan at the school (even if experts need to serve on such a committee on an ad hoc basis). At the onset of this process, working groups need to be engaged with current and potential stakeholders, such as the SGB, SMT, other staff members and representatives of the wider community in order to identify or anticipate external expectations and match these to the internal expectations of the school. Strategic plans need to be formally drafted and should be planned in cycles. A three-year or five-year cycle should be used with monitoring and amendments to be made on a yearly basis. Drafting strategic plans should take into account the resources available at the school. Strategic plans must be attainable with available resources. All stakeholders need to feel like a part of the process, as they will be more willing to participate if they feel that they own the strategic plan.

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