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## **THE ROLE OF STRATEGIC PLANNING IN ENSURING THE SUCCESS OF EDUCATION**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The research paper elaborates on the main concepts and terminology of strategic planning in education, including all the steps of building a strategic plan with mission and vision statements. Furthermore, it analyses and compares some successful strategic planning case studies in education by identifying the strengths and some weaknesses. The final results of this inquiry serve as recommendations for positive changes and reforms in North Macedonian education.

Furthermore, this research paper emphasizes the importance of the SMART strategic goals for improving education, articulated via the mission and vision statements. It is quite interesting that internationally accredited educational organizations like NOVA IS of Skopje have more successful improvement plans based on shared values and goals via their mission and vision. The implementation of their strategic plans is closely monitored and evaluated. Moreover, some successful educational reforms happened in Finland, Singapore, and Victoria, Australia, and their ministries of education are dedicated and accountable to aligning their mission and vision with all public schools in these countries. On the contrary, although the Ministry of Education of North

Macedonia has clearly published the mission and vision statements, there is still a huge gap in the reality of implementation of those in all public schools, and rarely any school has a shared mission and vision on their web page. Browsing around, one primary school in North Macedonia, “Jan Amos Komenski” has recently started sharing their school’s mission and vision, values, and goals with the community which is a positive change toward SMART reforms. Strategic planning affects the improvement of learning and teaching; therefore it needs to be built inclusively and wisely.

**Keywords:** Strategic Plan, SWOT, SMART, Mission, Vision, community, values, objectives

## **INTRODUCTION**

This research paper analyses and compares the strategic plans through shared mission and vision of some schools and countries, analysing the case studies of NOVA Secondary School of Skopje and one local primary school “Jan Amos Komenski”, Skopje. The information here comes from credible sources, the most recent data from governmental sources, and educational organizations, primary data, two qualitative open-ended interviews with educational leaders and managers of educational organizations, a survey with a focus group of 7 families whose children attend public schools in North Macedonia, and most recent charts. The primary purpose of this research is to find role model examples of the schools’ strategic plans for improvements through their mission and vision. The results of this kind of inquiry could serve as a guide to the Ministry of Education of North Macedonia and all the principals and educational leaders to identify the best and most effective practices regarding strategic planning, SWOT analysis, setting SMART goals for improvements, creating schools’ mission and vision inclusively, and closely monitoring the whole process. This could be implemented when shaping and transforming the education system of North Macedonia toward the 21st-century model.

## **WHAT IS STRATEGIC PLANNING AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT FOR SCHOOLS?**

A strategic plan is an official document that provides a shared vision and priorities that direct educational development in one school or in the whole education system of a country.

The organization and its leadership “should focus first on the evidence or research-based blueprints that can help guide their school improvement efforts. Using these blueprints as a foundation for all

school-based initiatives, strategies, and activities, schools should be able to individualize their school improvement efforts while utilizing defensible, accountable school and schooling practices" (Knoff, 2023). Planning for education involves a wide range of actors in defining its future and mobilizing human and material resources to achieve its objectives. It is both visionary and practical since it communicates the school's mission and vision, including the school community's goals, objectives, and shared core values (IIEP-UNESCO, 2023). Additionally, it gives directions to the policymakers on how to restructure and transform the educational system and offer everyone a high-quality education and inclusion. The strategic plan is a live document that engages all the internal and external stakeholders and should be consistently evaluated, revised, monitored, and updated in order to be relevant for further improvements. The strategic planning process in education encompasses three concrete phases that puts the organizational model into action and empowers leaders with critical information and strategies to bring decisions into focus" (ECRA, 2015):

1. Conducting Research to gather data on the current school reality (interviews, focus groups/stakeholder surveys, student achievement analysis, and other archival data)
2. Developing the Strategic Plan (creating/revising the mission and vision statements, setting strategic SMART goals based on the research results and each goal is further "unpacked" through comprehensive tangible objectives)
3. Developing the Implementation Plan (planning meetings, execution of the strategic plan with the action steps per objective, monitoring via Dashboard)

The Strategic Planning process includes analysing and interpreting data collected during the Research phase, triangulating this new data with the archival data of the school, then synthesizing all the results and setting SMART goals for further improvements. It also involves creating an annual action plan and managing and mobilizing the human and material resources needed to achieve those goals and objectives. Educational strategic planning goals relate to the shared mission and vision of the school and the values and core beliefs of the whole school community. "Understanding the difference between process and results goals is important to setting learner centred, effective SMART goals. Our field observations confirm what many educational researchers have found: Most school goals are process oriented geared toward activities, programs,

and instructional methods” (O'Neill, 2000).

Moreover, a strategic plan of a school is like a GPS that should provide the exact position “Where are we now?” and the desired direction for the school toward the final destination i.e., the SMART goals and objectives “Where do we want to go, when, and how?”. The school leader is like the captain of the ship wisely navigating their crew through sunny and stormy days, utilizing this powerful strategic tool.

“Despite the fact that to date there is a great lack of genuine evidence for the effects of education programs through the provision of service, there is a possibility or the likelihood that they will continue to present key education innovation in the future” (Shabani, Bajrami 2019).

Whenever the Ministry of Education decides on some reforms in education, they should consider creating an organized visionary plan based on the SMART goals. Additionally, this strategic planning should involve other ministries and national and sub-national departments to get involved collaboratively in this common national goal. Consistency, patience, and continuity are a must since educational reforms last for years or even decades. Ministries must establish a strategic vision and priorities, coordinate their programs and budgets annually and within a medium-term expenditure framework, bargain with national and international financing agencies, and conduct implementation reviews on a regular basis to ensure that they are on track to meet policy objectives.

#### Why is it important to use SWOT analysis in order to initiate meaningful change in education?

The acronym SWOT stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. A SWOT analysis is an important method that is used to evaluate, reflect and diagnose the school's current standpoint and can be performed with a number of school stakeholders (parents, board members, staff and students, etc.). Strategic planning starts with the self-study phase and research as a metacognitive approach to set further SMART goals. The SWOT analysis method considers both internal and external environmental factors and the results are further interpreted for obtaining a detailed picture of the school's reality.

#### What are SMART goals?

SMART goals were developed by George Doran, Arthur Miller, and James Cunningham in their 1981 article “There's a SMART way to write management goals and objectives”. Every educational organization should develop a SMART plan for improvement based on the self-study

feedback. The SMART acronym refers to goals that are Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Timely and it is crucial that all goals for educational development are set in this manner in order to be accountable and measurable (“A Simple 6 Step Process for Setting Smart Goals (With Examples!)”, 2022, January 14).

### **WHY ARE MISSION AND VISION STATEMENTS VITAL FOR EFFECTIVE STRATEGIC PLANNING?**

Mission and Vision are strategic documents of the school to emphasize the school philosophy, core values, school purpose, and top priorities. A school's goals and objectives are outlined in its vision statement, and its mission statement summarizes how it plans to get there. School vision and mission statements make the values of the school clear to the public. They are like agreements between the school and all the stakeholders. School mission and vision should be the first thing you see on all schools' websites visible in the school's hallways, offices, and classrooms since they represent what that school stands for and believes in, the core and heart of the school (Allen, Kelly., Kern, Peggy., 2018). On the other hand, despite their benefits, mission and vision statements are also frequently criticized by many. They might be there “on paper” for marketing purposes which may seem catchy and competitive on the market but have little bearing on how the school functions in reality. It is possible that employees are even unaware of or unconcerned with the statement's contents. This could indicate a gap between what is actually happening in the school and the defined values. Therefore, this kind of school with a dated and “irrelevant” mission and vision will not achieve its goals and objectives for improvement and will never become a high-quality educational environment for students. Mission and vision statements should articulate transparently the direction of the school and its core values and beliefs, mirroring the strategic plan.

#### Case Study 1: How are the mission and vision of NOVA IS of Skopje in alignment with the current strategic plan?

The participant in Interview 1, D-r. Bela Gligorova, is the secondary school division principal of Nova International School of Skopje. This school has recently been accredited by the International Baccalaureate authorization team and is currently preparing for the upcoming MSA re-accreditation in 2024.

According to Dr. Bela Gligorova, the international accreditation aspects of both IB and

MSA are taken into account when creating a strategic plan. To that end, there are two current plans, one school-wide, 5–7-year strategic plan that involves all Nova school divisions (PYP, MYP, and DP) set by the senior leadership and the advisory board, and then reviewed by an external consultant. The second strategic plan involves the secondary school division which looks closely at the 5-7 school-wide strategic plan, especially the action plans embedded in the re-accreditation goals for the programs the division supports (MYP and DP). For this strategic plan to be shared with the wider NOVA community, it needs to be inclusive. The Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) regular meetings include the external stakeholders of parents/guardians where the school's objectives and goals are communicated. Prior to the recent IB MYP accreditation in May 2022, the school's priorities were horizontal and vertical alignment for K-12 curricula across all subject areas since there were some existing gaps in students' learning. As every SMART goal for school improvement starts with self-evaluation, this was confirmed by Ms. Gligorova's statement "The MSA (re)accreditation process provided us with a key opportunity to take a closer look at our action plans and reassesses what our ultimate goals were in regard to the standards we built our units of study around, how they trickled throughout the PK-12 continuum, and ultimately, what meaningful assessment should entail." Furthermore, after the IB accreditation success in May 2022, the school plans to develop the standardization and moderation to the proficiency level for all NOVA educators and the IB MYP approaches to learning (ATL skills) for all NOVA students since these are vital tools for inquiry-based learning. On the DP side, the goal is to retain the number of students within this program and to prepare these students to meet the university requirements.

At the present, Nova IS is in the process of preparing for the MSA re-accreditation in 2024. The previous report by MSA helped this school with its SWOT analysis and setting SMART goals for further school development. Currently, NOVA IS is considering the Organizational Committee with stakeholder representation from the entire PK-12 continuum for revisiting the key outcomes of the existing action plans and providing suggestions for the next 7-year cycle (new action plans). The school will work closely with the SAGE consulting team to create a next five-year strategic plan and revise the current mission and vision statements accordingly.

Furthermore, a recently shared community message (December 2, 2022) by the Director of NOVA IS, Mr. Ivan Novakovski, mirrors what the principal Ms. Gligorova explained in her answers to the interview question regarding the current strategic planning of this school. Mr.

Novakovski emphasizes the importance for the school to maintain the quality of education for the benefit of all students and to build a new strategic plan for improvement based on the school's self-study aka self-evaluation in regard to the upcoming Middle States Commission on Elementary and Secondary Schools (MSA-CESS) re-accreditation, which is to be finalized in 2024. The following communication (December 16, 2022) by the NOVA IS school director with the community, announces the development of the next 5-year strategic plan and the inclusion of representatives from internal and external stakeholders i.e., students, parents, and staff members in this important strategic planning process. Nova IS has been working consistently (February 2023-) on gathering important data via surveys sent to all stakeholders so that the results will be analysed and utilized for the self-study phase. The MSA re-accreditation committee at NOVA IS consists of representatives from all stakeholders like the school director, principals, educational leaders, curriculum coordinators, teachers, counsellors, students, and parents. The committee members are meeting monthly to discuss, plan, and collaborate as a team in order to make further decisions for the next steps and revision of the mission and vision statements based on the stakeholder feedback.

In conclusion, NOVA IS strategic planning process follows all three main phases taking into consideration the self-study through SWOT analysis, setting SMART goals for school improvement, and the recommendations for school development provided by the IB accreditation and MSA reports. The mission and vision of this school reflect the objectives of the SMART goals for school improvement from the current strategic plan, articulating the desired direction and core values and beliefs of NOVA International School of Skopje. The designing of the next 5-year strategic plan with the new SMART goals for improvement might result in the further revision of this school's mission and vision, thus emphasizing the importance of competent and dedicated strategic educational leaders like the principal Ms. Bela Gligorova and NOVA IS director, Mr. Ivan Novakovski, with their effective teams.

Case Study 2: What are the mission and vision statements of the Macedonian primary public school “Jan Amos Komenski”, Skopje? To what extent are they shared with the community and are they in alignment with the strategic plan?

The participant in Interview 2, Ms. Maja Starova, is the principal of the local public primary school “J.A. Komenski” in the municipality of Karpos. This school has recently shared its mission and vision statements with the school community and all of its stakeholders during the parent-

teacher conferences. According to Ms. Starova, the strategic planning goals emerge directly from the internal self-study process and results. Every second year, the planning committee of this school considers and evaluates the seven fields of the educational process in alignment with the success indicators of the Ministry of Education of the Republic of North Macedonia. This planning committee includes representatives of the internal and external stakeholders of this school (teachers, administrators, parents, and students) who focus on the strengths and weaknesses of the school's current standpoint, then the detailed report is prepared. This report should be approved by the Board of Education and Municipality of Karpos, and additional suggestions for further improvement are considered when creating the SMART goals for the strategic plan (the time frame of the current strategic plan is August 2023). Additionally, Ms. Starova claims that the Mission and Vision statements are in alignment with the goals of the strategic plan, publicly shared with the community on the webpage, brochures, and school hallways, and the school revises them every four years accordingly. Every three years, this school's progress is externally evaluated by The State Educational Inspectorate. The school leadership plans several professional development sessions for all teachers in order to successfully accomplish the school's strategic goals and objectives, for example, training all faculty members for developing skills and competencies needed for 21st-century education, Social-Emotional learning, and prevention of any type of bullying in schools. Ms. Starova adds that the faculty members are highly educated and trained to stimulate students to think critically and creatively during classes and work on different projects. Many of their students with subject mentor teachers have participated and been rewarded in academic competitions on the municipality and state levels, including two projects by the Innovation and Development Fund of the RNM. In addition to academics, the students are encouraged and guided to participate in many extracurricular activities and community service projects to make positive changes in society (social activism). Ms. Starova further explains that a group of students from this school was the winner of the prestigious award for organizing An Open Day for Civic Education from the Bureau of Educational Development of the RNM. Even though it was still a COVID-19 pandemic setting, the school organized an online event where students promoted a manual for distance learning mode, designed by students in collaboration with their mentor teachers and professional associates. This school is one good example of how to set strategic goals based on self-reflection and work hard to achieve those. In fact, there is still a long journey to be taken, since the whole Macedonian education system needs a complete



transformation, a shift of the pedagogy and learning methods towards the 21st-century model.

To conclude, all educational organizations should regularly review their mission and vision statements to make sure they still meet the needs of the students as their priority. Furthermore, the mission and vision must be developed together with the school administration, parents, teachers, and in fact, all the stakeholders. Something that people participated in creating will have their support and commitment increased and the school will truly benefit from the mission and vision statements. Furthermore, schools should be accountable for their public statements because many families choose schools for their children based on their own beliefs and values in alignment with the school's mission and vision. Mission and Vision are the heart and mind of the school.

### **TO WHAT EXTENT SHOULD MINISTRIES OF EDUCATION BE ACCOUNTABLE FOR WHAT THEY ARE SHARING VIA MISSION AND VISION STATEMENTS?**

How do the mission and vision of Singapore's Ministry of Education communicate the national educational goals?

Singapore has been the country with the leading education system for years and has always been among the top ones on the PISA scores ranking. They plan wisely and accordingly to set SMART goals in order to improve their education in all schools through a thorough strategic plan. The mission and vision statements embed the goals and objectives of the strategic plan and are publicly shared with the nation on the main web page. The main theme of their mission and vision is Thinking. This is a crucial 21st-century learning skill and essential for the youth to develop into critical, creative, and reflective thinkers. TSLN (Thinking Schools, Learning Nation) was announced as Singapore's vision and the main objective for education in 1997, by then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong. These Thinking schools will foster thinking skills in both young and adults shaping them into lifelong learners who will make positive changes to the nation and Singaporean society. All of these objectives in the vision, align with the "how" they will do it, the mission statement: "To mould the future of our nation, by moulding the people who will determine our future." ("About us." (n.d.) *MOE*). The people are the focus, to invest, to mould and shape their citizens into lifelong thinkers, conscious of their responsibilities to family, community, and country. It is vital to boost the higher-order thinking skills in one's nation, to empower the youth for the future.

What is the current strategic plan of the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture?

Finland's education system is one of the most successful models that was reformed over a five-decade time period. The core of Finnish education is students' well-being and academic progress. Behind each successful educational reform, there is a process of SWOT analysis, setting SMART goals, consistent effort over time, reflection for next action steps, etc. Finland's Ministry of Education and Culture oversees the K–12 curriculum reform cycle. Over 100 classroom teachers in addition to governmental and university education professionals participated in the 2015 reform of the national Finnish curriculum to build a SMART strategic plan for improvement. The "growth of the student as a human being and as a citizen" is at the heart of Finland's new vision for student learning. The transfer thinking skills for all subject areas and the interdisciplinary approach to teaching and learning are fundamental to this central focus (Burg, 2018).

Moreover, The Ministry of Education and Culture's authorities have reviewed their perspective for the strategic plan through 2030. It outlines the topics that the Ministry, its agencies, and each department of the government should focus on. The strategy's main takeaway is that the Ministry of Culture and Education and its agencies would be in charge of ensuring that society's cultural and educational foundations are solid. Early childhood education and care, education, science, art, culture, sports, and youth work all have a fundamental impact on the development and promotion of education and culture, which in turn helps to revitalize society. The strategy outlines three impact objectives as well as their relative importance. The Ministry's objectives are to empower everyone to have better skills, knowledge, and competence and to take creative, inquiry-based, responsible action that can transform society for better equality and equity. To reach these strategic SMART goals, the Ministry of Education seeks to act transparently and responsibly and strives to build trust (*The Ministry of Education and Culture, Finland - OKM*, n.d.). The reality is that all schools in Finland are equally good, all students have equal access to high-quality education, and better equity. The Ministry's vision for educational development is shared and in alignment with the mission and vision statements of all public schools in Finland that have the students' life skills, academic learning, and well-being as the core.

What are the mission and vision themes of the secondary schools in Victoria, Australia?

Research shows that 88% of the secondary schools (308 schools were involved) in Victoria, Australia have academics (learning outcomes) as the priority in their mission and vision statements. Other themes also appeared in these schools' statements to prove that academic success

was not the only priority for high-quality education. Additionally, promoting good mental health/well-being was referenced by 66.2% of schools, and school belonging was mentioned by 57.5%. Study shows that the inclusion of non-academic themes like well-being and belonging to the school community together with the academic ones demonstrated better academic achievements in those schools. Nevertheless, 34% of schools made no mention of promoting mental health. According to the OECD and top academics in the field, schools currently place too much emphasis on academic achievement, which is detrimental to students' mental health and overall development.

The mission and vision are posted on the main governmental webpage of the Department of Education and Training. They communicate the priorities and goals for educational reforms in this Australian state, like Victorians to reach their potential, regardless of their background, and to develop the knowledge, skills, and competencies they need to participate and thrive in a complex economy and society. (“Our work, vision, and values: Department of Education and Training.” (2022, March 16) *Victorian Government*).

It is evident that this shift in education toward equality and equity for all participants in the learning process in Victoria, Australia also includes life skills and well-being besides the academic outcomes as goals, ensures high-quality education for all citizens, and is very similar to the Finnish model which is globally acknowledged as one of the best.

What are the mission and vision of the Ministry of Education of North Macedonia? Is the national strategic plan in alignment with the reality in approaches to teaching and learning in the public schools in North Macedonia?

The mission and vision statements of the Ministry of Education of North Macedonia are publicly communicated to the nation through the main web page. The themes used here are in alignment with the desired 21st-century education and reflect the skill set needed for the youth to be prepared for future careers and the complexities of the modern world. One would think these are almost perfect since they match the modern trends of education and include lifelong learning, research, critical and creative thinking, skills-based education, and student-centred learning with real-world connections in all subjects. In comparison to the Finnish and Victorian statements, North Macedonian objectives embedded in the mission and vision don't include the themes of well-being and global citizenship.

The question is, do these mission and vision statements reflect the reality in Macedonian public schools? No, not yet. Unfortunately, Macedonian education needs an urgent shift toward what is “promised” by the mission statement: student-centred education, lifelong learning with real-world connections and skills application, and critical and creative thinking. The approaches to teaching and learning in all public schools are content memorization-based, factual knowledge with some skills application but the only source used is the subject textbook hence the content-based assessment, a summative grade per subject reflecting the factual knowledge. There is an obvious gap, a discrepancy between the mission and vision statements of the Ministry of Education of Macedonia and the cruel reality of the “old way” of teaching and learning still happening in public schools, with some rare attempts by some teachers to change their pedagogy.

In this survey (B. K. Anita, 2022), the focus group was seven participants, parents, whose children attend public schools in North Macedonia. According to all of them, the purpose of education is to prepare children for real life, applying critical and creative thinking skills, collaboration, and communication skills within larger groups, developing children into lifelong learners.

According to the participants in the survey, the positive side of Macedonian education is that it is free of charge till finishing the compulsory high school education, the school is like a reflection of “real life and society” where students can naturally develop life skills and conflict-resolution skills on their own, rather than bubble created for the students in the private schools in Macedonia. Additionally, some positive examples of dedicated and caring teachers and educational leaders have a great impact on children development. On the contrary, the biggest issues in Macedonian education according to these 7 families, that in discrepancy with the Ministry’s Mission and Vision, are: learning focused on content, not on skills, inflation of grades, dated programs/textbooks, a poor system for teachers’ evaluation, multiple problems on all levels, top-down like lack of responsibility on the principal level, and finally, an unfair selection of teachers and principals, mostly based on their political orientation. Furthermore, according to these 7 participants, the most urgent changes needed in North Macedonian education are: to exclude political corruption in education, employ high-quality teachers and elect experienced and skilful educators for principals, longer school days and better organization, provide better resources besides the textbooks, focus on skills application, critical and creative thinking (innovation) through inquiry, raise teachers’ salaries, improve hygiene in all schools, improve collaboration and communication among teachers, and between the school with parents (not only during the parent-

teacher conferences general discussion about the whole class, rather than focusing on each student's progress), develop a better skills/criteria-based grading for students and adequate evaluation for the teachers and their approaches to teaching and learning.

Evidently, it is crucial that the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Macedonia work harder for the common national goal of improving the education system, following all the objectives shared through the mission and vision statements, since without true application, they just read and sound wonderful and trendy.

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

The importance of SMART strategic planning in education is crucial to guide schools toward improvements in both teaching and learning, preparing students for their future careers to be competitive in the global labour market. Research shows that 56% of current students in North Macedonia are not prepared for 21st-century careers in the competitive global labour market. It is vital that every Ministry of Education plans SMART reforms based on the honest SWOT analysis reflection, then creates a strategic plan with shared values and objectives through mission and vision. The ultimate common goal of all educational operating systems should be improving academic learning outcomes and well-being as these research results confirm. The most successful systems include the themes of improving academics, well-being, life skills, ICT integration, international mindedness, global citizenship, inclusion, equality, equity, etc. Not all high-quality education institutions have well-being in their mission and vision statements, but Finland, the IB schools, and Victoria, Australia do. Furthermore, internationally accredited schools like NOVA IS (IB and MSA accredited) have built strategic plans communicated via their mission and vision statements and are aligned with the reality of their education. They are evaluated by the external international authorization teams, not just national, and are not prone to political corruption. Moreover, their shared mission and vision must reflect reality and achieve the objectives needed for international glory.

One spark of hope for North Macedonian smart educational reforms is some of the local schools, like for example the primary school "J.A. Komenski", Skopje. Hopefully, this positive example and enthusiasm of the principal and faculty members for reforming and transforming the approaches to teaching and learning will continue in this public school and will shift completely the education and learning style to research and inquiry in alignment with the strategic plan and

the Ministry of Education goals, rather than content memorization from the textbooks.

It is vital that all the educational organizations in North Macedonia be in alignment with the national mission and vision for education published on the main governmental webpage. All schools should build and publish their own inclusive strategic plans with transparently articulated mission and vision statements with the community and all stakeholders. Strategic planning for reforming and improving the quality of education in one country is vital for prosperity, welfare, and a better future for all citizens. Therefore, all the ministers of education and all the educational leaders in the Republic of North Macedonia should research the best examples in the world and can use the results of this inquiry to make good reforms based on SMART strategic planning and consistently work hard and wisely toward this important national goal of improving education.

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