



I need to develop a strategy

So you're involved in visiting a school, perhaps as the church youth worker or the staff member for a local schools project, and you're trying to work out what you should be doing. Perhaps the school has already suggested some things you could do, like help with a mentoring programme, or maybe you're wondering what you should ask if you can do. This guide sets out how a schools worker can develop a clear strategy for their work with the right aims and objectives.

▶ Starting points

For Christian work in schools, strategy is always going to be closely connected to a clear sense of guidance from God. There is no point in having detailed aims and objectives if they are not rooted in a belief that you are doing what God is asking you to do. So, although much of this guide will be concerned with the specifics of drawing up a strategy, being clear about aims and figuring out how to achieve them, all that activity rests on the vital foundation of our belief that we are, as Christians, seeking to do God's will.

▶ Developing an aim

In its simplest form, a strategy is figuring out where you want to end up and then working out how to get there. It's the equivalent of planning a journey. To start with, you need to know your destination: where are you trying to get to? Edinburgh? Cornwall? Then, once you have decided your destination, you have to work out what route you'll take to get there? Notice that there is probably more than one possibility. Some roads may be faster, some may be easier, some may be cheaper... and some will head you in completely the wrong direction. There's no point in taking a road from London to Brighton if you're planning to get to Edinburgh!

Strategy in schoolswork is just the same. It starts with the question: where are you going? What do you want to happen? And then it asks: how do you want to get there? But instead of asking what road you want to take, you might ask:

- ✧ what kinds of activities do I want to do in school to achieve my aim?
- ✧ who should I be working with in school?
- ✧ how much time should I be planning to spend in school?
- ✧ what kind of other costs are involved for me (or my church or organisation)?

There's also one other key question: how will you know you've arrived. Hopefully, if you're travelling to Edinburgh, knowing whether you've arrived is pretty easy... there are large signs and people speak with a Scottish accent! But often our aims in school are slightly harder to measure, so another key question might be:

➤ how will I know I've achieved my aims?

We will explore all these issues in more details later in this guide.

▶ Terminology

Commerce is full of talk about strategy, aims and objectives. Delve into the business section of any bookshop and you'll see literally hundreds of books on the subject. The web is also awash with articles and information. Many of these guides use specific terminology about strategy: words like aim and target have particular meanings... and you may like to note that not all the books agree on what they are!

For the purpose of this guide, it's worth being clear about what we mean when we talk about 'aims', 'objectives', 'outputs' and other terms. Here's how we'll be using them:

⊗ Aims

An aim is the **change** you want to see in the group with whom you're working. That could be, for example, a Christian young person being more confident about their faith in school, or a young person finding faith.

It's often easy to confuse an aim with things that you do to achieve an aim. For example, an aim will never be 'to set up a lunchtime group' because that's not describing a change. An aim, in that context, might be 'to enable Christian students to be more confident about their faith' or 'to help students become aware of what Christians believe'... *these are both aims that you might then use a lunchtime group to achieve*. But running the group isn't an aim in itself. Aims are always about the impact you want to have in your target group.

And, although young people will often be your 'target group', it does not always have to be so. You might want to see change in a school as a whole: for example, to see the school take the challenge of spiritual development seriously. Or to see Christian teaching staff grow in confidence about the role of their faith. The key is that your aim involves **change**. Consequently, people tend to use verbs that describe change when setting their aims, such as to increase, to promote, to improve, to reduce, to enable or to develop.

You can have more than one aim. In fact you can have as many as you like. However, most people agree that three main aims are about as much as most people or organisations can manage.

⊗ Objectives

Objectives are the practical areas of work you're involved with to achieve your aims.

So, for example, if your aim is to enable the Christian students in a school to be more confident about their faith and apply it to their school life, you might decide there are three objectives to achieve your aim:

- to provide mentoring and support to Christian students.
- to provide Biblical input for Christian students.
- to provide opportunities for Christian students to share their faith with their friends.

These are all objectives: they are things that you will do to get to the destination you're aiming for.

⊗ Outputs

Outputs are the specific actions you plan to achieve your objectives. So, looking at the three objectives above, you might come up with a series of actions to achieve them:

- spend Tuesday lunchtimes walking around school and informally meeting Christian students.
- start a Christian prayer and Bible study group on Wednesday lunchtimes.
- run two special events through the term that are suitable for Christian students to invite their friends to.
- set up a scheme to encourage the Christian students to have 'prayer partners'.

➤ invite Christian staff to speak about their own faith at the prayer and Bible study group.

➤ **Outcomes**

Outcomes are the specific actions or changes you will see in the group with whom you're working, that show you are achieving your aims. So, to continue with our example, if your aim is to enable the Christian students in a school to be more confident about their faith, what are the different things you might expect to see happen that will show you that your aim is being achieved?

- Christian students don't feel ashamed or embarrassed about being identified as a Christian in the school.
- Christian students are comfortable inviting their friends along to Christian events.
- Christian students are more knowledgeable about the Bible especially in RE.
- Christian students are concerned for each other and regularly pray for each other.

Although it can be surprisingly hard work to get your head around these terms, understanding them is a great help towards planning an effective strategy. And, in summary, you'll also notice a connection between aims and outcomes, and objectives and outputs.

Aims are things you want to be different in **others** with whom you're working.

Outcomes are the specific changes that will take place in **others** as a result of being different.

Objectives are the things **you'll** do to make that difference take place in others.

Outputs are the specific actions **you'll** do to fulfill your objectives.

We'll be using this terminology in the remainder of this guide.

It's also worth mentioning that grant making trusts often use these terms in their application forms and in their evaluation and monitoring of grants. So, if you're hoping to get funding for your schoolwork, having clarity about your aims, objectives, outputs and outcomes will be a huge advantage.

▶ **More about aims: what am I trying to do in school?**

There are many Christians involved in visiting and working in their local school: most church youth leaders visit a school regularly, as do many ministers and vicars. There are also a large number of schoolwork projects set up around the UK with the aims of working in local schools.

So what are we all trying to achieve? What are our aims?

➤ **Busyness doesn't equal effectiveness**

Perhaps, surprisingly, when you ask this question, many of us are uncertain about the answer and will find it hard to articulate specific aims. Our work is perhaps motivated by a more general desire to share faith, meet not-yet-Christian young people or perhaps to offer support to a struggling group of Christian students. For others, it may simply be because there was an opportunity to do so. If you're a youth worker in a local church, for example, why not get involved in a local school?

None of this is necessarily a bad thing. But having such general aims, or no aims at all, does lay us open to the danger of getting distracted and caught up with doing things in a school that ultimately don't make as big a difference as we hope for.

For example, imagine I'm a schoolworker allocated to a large local secondary school by the schoolwork project I work for in the town. Without thinking much about my aims, I head off to meet the staff contacts I've been given. I find them very welcoming and positive and, before I know it, I've agreed to help in all kinds of activities. "We need an extra coach for the Year 8 football team... would you help?" "There's a young lad in

Year 7 who needs Lesson Support... can you work with him on Thursday afternoons?" "Would you like to take an assembly?" "There's a PHSE lesson on bullying for Year 9's coming up... would you be willing to take it?"

All these activities could keep me very, very busy! In fact, I would probably go back to my management committee or church and report that I have had all kinds of great opportunities given to me.

But in fact, their usefulness depends entirely upon what my aims are.

‣ If my aim, as in the example earlier, is to support Christian students in the school be more confident about their faith, then none of my activities will be especially helpful because they're not focused on Christian students.

‣ If my aim is to help students understand more about the Christian faith, then perhaps a few of the activities could help, like taking an assembly. And, of course, building relationships with young people on the football team will be valuable. But even so, if this really was my aim, I might have preferred to use the limited time I have to concentrate on RE lessons rather than PHSE lessons on bullying.

‣ If my aim is to be a support to the school and, as a local Christian, help them in any way possible, then everything I'm doing will be useful in achieving this aim, since I've simply agreed to fill in the gaps.

So lots of activity in a school doesn't necessarily an equal effective strategy. My activity has to be linked to achieving my aims. And if I'm not clear what my aims are, it's likely I will spend at least some of my time doing things that are irrelevant. A useful exercise for anyone already involved in schoolwork, is to write down all the activities you do in school. Taking lessons, running lunchtime groups, helping with mentoring. Then write down your aims... **Do all of them contribute towards these aims?**

❖ Different approaches to schoolwork

Developing your aims for schoolwork has theological implications as well as practical ones. Some schools workers will have very clear evangelistic aims, whilst others will debate the appropriateness (and legality) of such an approach in a school setting. Other schools workers will have a focus on caring for young people who are struggling with something in their lives. Still others will be concerned about ensuring that the school teaches Christianity in as relevant and lively a way as possible. In truth, there are many, many different approaches to schoolwork - and, whilst the debate about whether one is better than the others is important - it is not the main topic of this guide.

The key point being made here is that, whatever your view what schoolwork is about, it's vital to have clarity about your aims. Doing so will help you make decisions about how to use your time, enable you to see more clearly if your making a difference and, hopefully, encourage you when you do!

Remember that aims are not the things you will do, they're the changes you want to see. here are some examples of possible aims in schoolwork:

- supporting Christian students to be more confident about their faith.
- supporting Christian staff to apply their faith to their work.
- helping students understand the basic beliefs of the Christian faith.
- changing students presumptions and stereotypes about Christianity.
- enabling students to have the ability to express their own beliefs and explore others.
- helping young people make a decision to become Christians.
- supporting students to overcome difficult situations in their lives.

❖ Pressures and dangers in developing your aims

Whilst some schools workers may have the opportunity to develop their own aims, it's worth noting that

others may not. You may be part of a schools organisation that have already have articulated their aims, or you may have been set an aim by your church or management committee.

You may also face the question of how much you articulate your aim to a school. Will they want you to work with them if they see your aims? Hopefully the answer is 'yes'. Certainly being subversive or deceitful is not appropriate. If you feel a school would not approve of your aims, are they the right aims for schoolswork?

► **More about objectives: what am I offering schools?**

Objectives are the areas of work you do in a school to achieve your aims. They're the 'services' you offer and might form the basis of any brochure you might give to a school. Listing your objectives is helpful because it helps keep you focused on doing the right things.

For example, imagine 'Dare2Care' a schoolswork project working in a secondary school in a town. Their work has been set up by a group of local churches to show that local Christians are concerned about young people who are struggling with big issues in their lives. As a result, their aim is described as

to enable young people with social and emotional problems to achieve their potential at school

So the next stage is for them to think about the key areas of work they'll be concentrating on to achieve this aim. The small team of workers meet to think this through. None of them is a trained teacher and, as it turns out, not many of them feel confident to take assemblies either. They decide to concentrate their work on the pastoral aspects of school life. They also realise they don't have the experience to deal with some of the more serious issues like suicidal tendencies or mental illness. But they can work with young people with low self esteem and those whose anger seems out of control. Here, they believe, they can make a real difference. So they come up with three objectives:

- supporting young people with low self esteem to grow in self confidence.
- supporting young people with anger problems to cope with conflict at school (with peers and the school).
- run a drop in centre as a safe place for these young people to go during school.

Like aims, you can have as many objectives as you like. However, more than five or six will probably be hard to manage.

This clarity about their aims and objectives, helps them draft a much more focused proposal to the senior management of the school. It also helps them deal with other requests that they realise they can't meet. For example, soon after starting work in the school, they are approached by one of the special needs staff who asks them if they would supplement her classroom assistants. She's short staffed and would like the team to each do two days a week helping out by sitting in lessons with particular students. Although the request sounds appealing - and there clearly is a need: the school are genuinely short staffed - the team decide that this huge extra commitment would actually detract from achieving their aims. They come to the conclusion that they can spend the time being more useful working directly on the their objectives. So, they politely and sympathetically decline.

This example shows the importance of having clear aims and objectives. Without these, it's easy to get distracted, even flattered, by requests from a school to help in a particular area. Some schools workers find themselves incredibly busy simply because they respond to all these requests. And, of course, sometimes it may be perfectly appropriate to do so. As Christians, we want to be as helpful and supportive as possible, especially if we're meeting an urgent need: please help us with the school play, someone has dropped out at the last minute! However, it's also possible to find yourself doing lots, but achieving little towards any of your aims. The group in this example would probably have had little time (and energy: classroom work is exhausting) to achieve their stated aim.

Think about the work you're doing in school. Have you stuck to your aims or have you been distracted from them by other opportunities or requests?

▶ **More about outputs and outcomes**

Outputs are the specific actions you take to achieve your objectives. This is the point in a strategy when you get down to the details and figure out what you're going to be doing, perhaps on a weekly basis or termly basis.

So, to continue the example of 'Dare2Care', the team might decide on a set of outputs for the first term. they decide that they want to:

- spend three lunchtime a week walking around the school informally to meet the young people they want to support.
- start a drop in before school and on two lunchtimes, to give young people with low self esteem a safe place to hang out.
- run a trial anger management group for Year 8 students.

The team also have to think about the outcomes they are hoping to see. There are lots of things they could focus on but, in the end, they decide there are a few key ones:

- students are more confident about themselves and their abilities (relates to those with low self esteem).
- students are able to build healthy friendships (relates to all students they work with).
- students deal with conflict without getting angry (relates to students with anger problems).

Being this specific in their strategy will help the team make the most of their limited time and hopefully will benefit a lot of students. It will also be easier for them to approach the next stage in developing a strategy: monitoring and evaluation.

▶ **Monitoring and Evaluation**

Once you are clear about your aims and objectives, you can check systematically on progress. This checking process is known as **monitoring**.

Evaluation is about making sense of the information you have collected and making a judgement about your project.

Both are important. Monitoring on it's own has only limited value and evaluation is impossible without some data to evaluate. Together they can tell you a great deal about the schoolwork you've been doing.

Monitoring and evaluation are terms that are used extensively with grant-making trusts. If you want to seek funding from these sources, you will need to think about how you evaluate your strategy: in short, did you achieve your aims?

Of course, evaluation is important aside from the benefits in fund-raising:

- it helps you plan for the future. If you achieved your aim, then what next? if not, do you try again or change your aims.
- evaluation gives you the chance to improve your work. Can you be better at presenting or teaching? Can you improve your skills in another area?

➤ it also gives a sense of accomplishment. One of the frustrations of working with people is that your impact is often hard to see. Changes in young people's lives may not always be readily apparent. It can be discouraging to keep going without stopping to realise what's already been accomplished. Evaluation gives you that chance.

▶ Finding more help

You can download a great set of guides (for free) on strategy and monitoring and evaluation, from the Charities Evaluation Service at www.ces-vol.org.uk. This organisation also has other useful books and publications for sale.

Nick Sheppherd's extensive essay 'Praxis of schools ministry' explores some of the theological questions and different approaches to schoolwork mentioned in the guide. You can download a copy from the 'Thinking' section at www.schoolwork.co.uk.

A strategy development grid is available to download from the 'Thinking' section at www.schoolwork.co.uk.

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