POLICY PERSPECTIVE ON SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS AND IMPROVEMENT AT THE STATE LEVEL: THE CASE OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

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Introduction

The South Australian education system has rightly been held in high esteem nationally and internationally for many years. It has been at the forefront of the social and cultural development of the state and its work in areas such as early childhood, literacy and middle schooling has been recognised as leading edge. Like all organisations, however, it has progressed through a cycle of growth that at the beginning of the millennium was showing a downward trend, particularly in terms of vital indicators such as student retention in the secondary years, literacy and numeracy results in the primary years and workforce morale in general.

My appointment as Chief Executive enabled me to pursue a reform agenda aimed not only at lifting standards of student achievement and wellbeing, but providing a trajectory for system development that would better match the pace of change in the social, economic, technological and cultural spheres of the state and more globally.

In this chapter, I will outline the key factors of system reform that enabled improvement in culture, student performance and organisational health. In doing so I will focus my attention on factors outside the school and classroom that contributed to improvements. While the quality of teaching is the major factor in student performance, my role as Chief Executive was to align the factors outside of the classroom to best support school leaders and teachers in their work.

While space does not allow me to discuss all the important reform factors such as policy and planning reform, professional development, industrial relations, budget reform and the like I have discussed the factors that had a significant impact on the organization as a whole.

First, I will outline the context of the Department before making brief comments about how I viewed the role of Chief Executive and the manner in which I carried out that role. Second, I will illustrate how the task of aligning the Department was undertaken in a way that positioned student learning and wellbeing at the centre of action.
In doing so I will make comments about the importance of systems theory and how inquiry in the Department of Education and Children’s Services (DECS) complimented organisational values. Third, I will emphasis the importance of support structures to schools. Finally I will outline a key organization development strategy.

The Context of DECS

The Department of Education and Children’s Services has undergone a number of organisational changes in recent decades. In 1997, for example, Education and Children’s Services was amalgamated by the Liberal government of the day with Employment and Training to form the Department of Education, Training and Employment (DETE). In mid-2002, the newly elected Labour government re-established the DECS by moving the employment and training components to another government agency.

After 8 years of a Liberal government, 2002 was a year of major reorientation for the South Australian public sector. DECS had had a number of Chief Executives during that time and the whole of the executive structure of the department had undergone a period of uncertainty. In light of the policy platform of the new government, school and Children’s Services leaders were looking to the department for direction, particularly as major changes to the state’s system of local site management were being foreshadowed.

The Role of the CE

In October 2002, I was appointed as the Chief Executive of DECS, with responsibility for educational reform in South Australia. My aim in leading DECS was to position the department as an innovative, high performing and service oriented organization that was connected or joined up both within and across the public sector. As a strong believer in complex adaptive systems, I focussed my role on building alignment, designing and building culture, deepening the organizations strategic leadership and capacity to learn. Two key priorities were to build a single model of local management and to place the learner at the centre of the reform.

Upon arrival, I initiated a functional realignment, the key deliverable of which was to improve learning outcomes for all children and students. The realignment was designed to ensure that as an organisation, DECS would become:

- Highly connected, networked and interdependent
- Driven by explicit values
- Learning-centred at all levels

It was my vision that the culture of DECS support collaboration, problem solving and value adding. As a public enterprise at the heart of the state’s social and economic development, it was essential that Education and Children’s Services model and deliver responsiveness, ethical standards and a clear valuing of people and their contribution to the goals of the organisation.