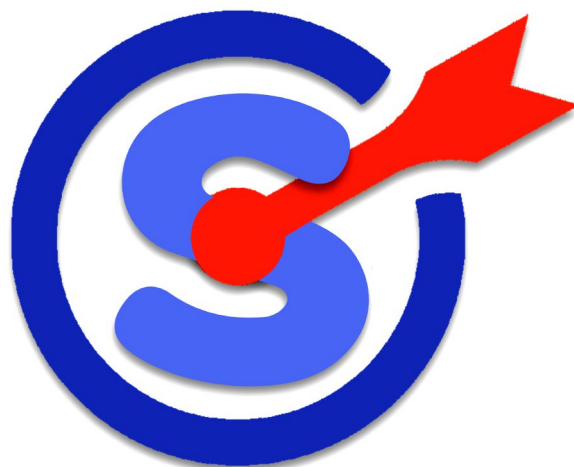


OPTIMAL
SCHOOL GOVERNANCE

SMART

**THE SCHOOLS MISSION
APPRAISAL REPORTING TOOL**



LET'S MEASURE WHAT WE TREASURE

THE UNMET NEED IN SCHOOLS

Every independent school exists to fulfil its unique enduring purpose, usually expressed through its Mission and Vision Statements.

So, how can the leadership of a school know the extent to which its mission, vision and values are being achieved in practice? Ideally, the answer should be to **conduct an assessment that focuses specifically on measuring mission and values performance.**

This is a task that is neither easy nor frequently undertaken. As the American Sociology Professor, William Bruce Cameron, wrote in 1963: “**Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts.**”

Cameron’s statement encapsulates one of the great paradoxes faced by educators, school leaders and school boards, which is that **the most highly valued educational outcomes are those which are the most difficult to measure.**

In contrast to Cameron’s assertion, an all-too-common saying is “**if you can’t measure it, you can’t manage it.**” For many organisations, this approach has led to ‘measurement’ becoming a goal in itself, often encouraging managers to take the easy road of focussing only upon those outcomes which are easiest to measure and quantify. Such outcomes seldom focus upon, or even include, a school’s founding mission, vision and values.

Most independent schools were founded on the basis of a **strong, coherent values position** that is expressed through its mission and/or vision. Such schools aim to share and develop those values explicitly with their students– it is the school’s primary *raison d’être*. It follows from this that **an effective school evaluation, or performance review, ought to focus primarily on the extent to which its values objectives are being achieved.**

Every educator understands the tyranny of measurement. Most school performance reviews are not designed to measure the extent to which its mission, vision and values are being achieved and implemented. Most school performance reviews largely comprise fairly generic, easily measured indicators, even though such variables are at best trivial shadows of the school’s fundamental values – mere footnotes to the real purpose and mission.

THE SMART SOLUTION

Optimal School Governance has crafted **an original ground-breaking tool** that authentically evaluates a **school’s performance in achieving its real purposes** – its mission, vision and values.

This tool is known as the **Schools Mission Appraisal Reporting Tool (SMART).**

Following Research-by-Design methodology espoused by researchers such as Brockwell (2019), the **SMART** approach is based upon **two key principles:**

- a. Engaging key stakeholder groups in defining which outcomes are the most valuable, meaningful and worthwhile within the context of the school’s mission, rather than uncritically adopting the values and priorities of the commonly used generic measuring tools; and



- b. Developing multi-level evaluation frameworks that take these diverse views into account through a curated process of choosing and prioritising the significant indicators to be investigated and the most effective ways to assess these indicators.

SMART shifts the key question away from “**what can be measured** using current methods and datasets?” to “**what should be measured** to ensure progress towards the kind of education that will enhance achievement of the school’s mission, vision and values?”.

WHAT ARE VALUES-BASED INDICATORS?

“**Values**” is a helpful shorthand term that embraces the beliefs, attitudes and consequent behaviours that are individually or collectively viewed as valuable, worthwhile, important and meaningful within a community that has a shared outlook, such as a school.

The values used in **SMART** are those which define a school’s identity, and these in turn provide the foundation of the indicators and assessment tools used to evaluate performance. Specifically, we can think of values as “the principles and standards that guide behaviour”, or “the ethics that contain an imperative for action”, rather than mere “judgements about what is important in life” (a common dictionary definition).

It is widely recognised that attempts to measure values by using generic, predetermined constructs are problematic, especially in situations where there are people from several cultural backgrounds (Braithwaite & Law, 1985; Brown & Crace, 1996; Peng, Nisbett & Wong, 1997). **SMART** avoids these shortcomings by establishing viable alternative criteria to the traditional inflexible benchmarks.

WHY ARE VALUES-BASED INDICATORS IMPORTANT?

We know from experience in many schools that **what gets measured gets done, and by implication, anything that is left unmeasured is likely to be neglected.**

Therefore, if a consensus were to emerge that ‘values’ are not ‘measurable’, they are likely to be overlooked and therefore diluted, even though they are central to a school’s identity and purpose. In turn, **this is likely to contribute to the marginalisation of a school’s founding values, creating an ethical vacuum that is likely to be filled by more easily measurable dominant economic and political narratives.**

The **indicators used in SMART**:

- help school leaders **assess** the values-based intangibles that define the individual school’s identity, including identifying culturally defined legacies that are often missed in ‘normal’ evaluations;
- help school leaders **crystallise** the authentic values of the school (which often happens during “eureka” moments when the importance of previously overlooked factors is recognised);
- help school leaders **communicate** what the school offers beyond the usual ‘deliverables’ to students, parents, staff and the wider community;



- help school leaders **capture** important skills and capabilities that are seldom seen in conventional assessment approaches (such as how effectively students work in groups, how students relate emotionally to the school's values and thus put these values into action, and the extent to which students and teachers feel empowered to effect positive change);
- help school leaders **monitor** the extent to which the values of the school overlap with the values of staff and students, and use this information to **improve** the translation into action of the school's mission, vision and values; and
- following from these points, help school leaders **create transformational learning situations** in which students and teachers embrace, internalise and act upon the school's values with head, heart and spirit.

THE VALUES-ACTION GAP

Knowledge in itself is usually insufficient to change people's behaviour. Even though people know what they should be doing, they still do not do it. This "**knowledge-action gap**" is common, not only in everyday society, but in educational settings. The inaction or inertia resulting from knowledge-action gaps usually requires a values-action gap to be identified, addressed and overcome, as values tend to be deeper influences on people's behaviour than knowledge.

In numerous situations where strong statements about values are espoused, the sad reality is that many individuals within that community or environment fall short of performing the actions or behaviours implicit in those values. This can be regarded as a "**values-action gap**".

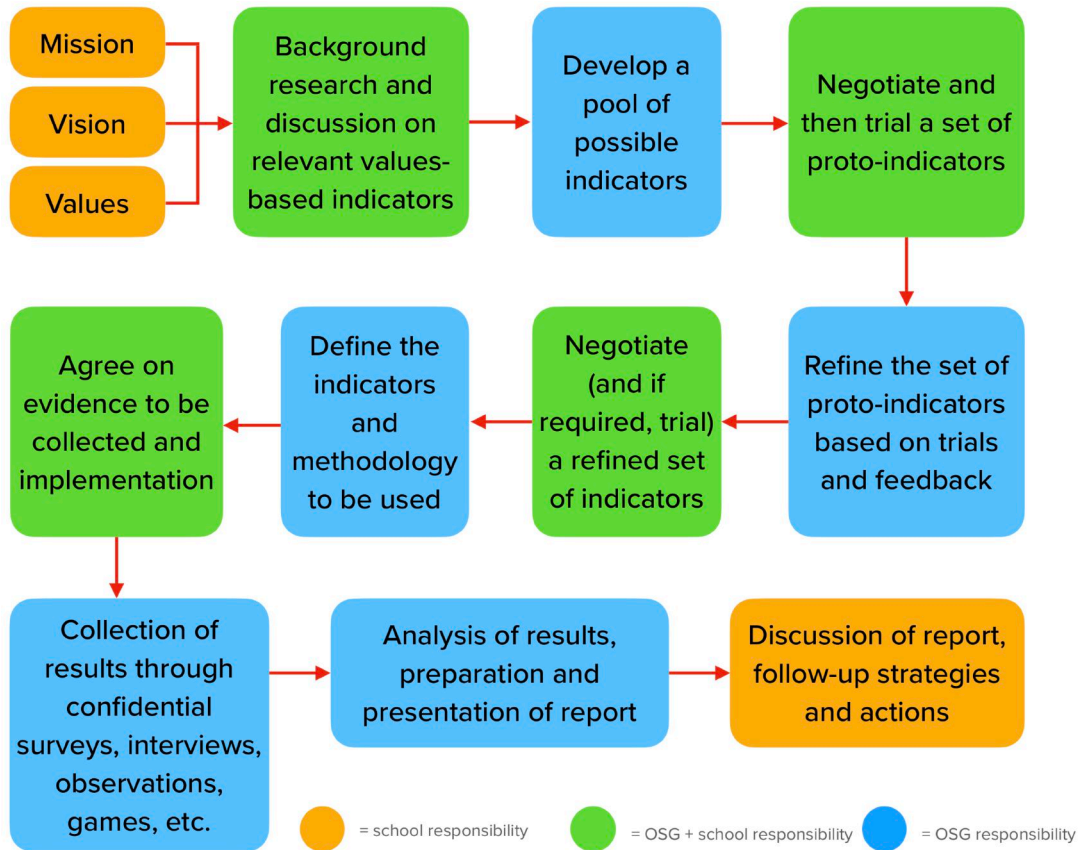
If the values-action gap is to be addressed in schools, the actionable implications and consequences of the mission, vision and values need to be promoted and amplified through a regular process that uses a different type of performance review than those commonly conducted (which simply focus on easily measured, less significant factors).

SMART offers a solution to this challenge.

IMPLEMENTATION OF SMART

Every school has its unique mission, vision and values. Therefore, the process of implementing **SMART** varies from school to school. Nonetheless, as a generalisation, implementation usually follows an iterative process such as the one shown in the diagram on the next page:





In addition to mission-specific variables, it is expected that many schools would expect also to include more general indicators of ethical practice such as trust, integrity, justice, empowerment, unity in diversity, and care and respect for the community of life.

Value clusters that have emerged in earlier discussions with schools in several countries when exploring Mission-based indicators include (in alphabetical order):

- Academic excellence / examinations performance
- Challenge / risk-taking
- Community action / connection / 'real world' action
- Compassion / caring
- Creativity
- Dialogue / collaboration
- Discipline / behaviour
- Enabling / empowering
- Engagement / initiative / responsibility
- Extra-curricular activities / co-curricular activities
- Financial benefits
- Flexibility / inclusivity
- Fun / humour / silliness
- Integration / holism



- Leadership / facilitation
- Learning environment
- Love / friendship / closeness
- Parenting / guardian role
- Personal goals / employment / progress
- Peer support
- Positivity / happiness
- Preparation / resources
- Professional development
- Reflection / criticality
- Relationships with parents
- Respect
- Rights
- Sacredness
- Safety / security
- Self-knowledge / self-awareness
- Sense of place / roots / heritage
- Service / giving
- Student-centredness
- Transformation
- Understanding

(after PERL, 2014, *passim*; and Brockwell, 2019; pp.179-180).

Using values clusters such as these, school-specific indicators can be developed using **four criteria**:

1. The indicator draws explicitly or implicitly from the school's enduring purpose (mission), vision (priorities) and values (ethical position).
2. The indicator represents a statement of an ideal or valued reality.
3. The indicator includes a subject (even a vague one such as 'people') and a verb.
4. The indicator is seen by the researcher as potentially 'measurable' or at least pointing towards something that can be evaluated (such as through observation, surveys, and/or qualitative methods such as interviews and focus groups).

Even when using these four criteria, **discernment** is required. For example, a statement such as "students acquire values and competencies different from those of materialistic, technocratic societies" does not provide sufficient detail to identify what the desired competencies might be – it needs to be expressed positively rather than as a deficit.



Brockwell (2019), Sabo Flores (2008) and Burford, Valasco et.al. (2013) offer several **strategies** to help students identify values-based performance effectiveness:

1. “The First Thing You Think Of”: asking students to write down the first thing that came into their minds when the facilitator mentions certain words, e.g. ‘participation’, ‘community’, ‘sustainability’, and the name of the school itself (c.f. Sabo Flores, 2008, p. 52)
2. “The ‘Yes, And...’ Game”: encouraging students to create a ‘collective story’ about the type of future they would like to see for their school, in which each new participant has to acknowledge the preceding contribution by saying “Yes, and...” (c.f. Sabo Flores, 2008, p. 56).
3. ‘Human survey’ to assess the extent to which the students feel that key skills are already being put into practice in the school, by asking them to arrange themselves along an imaginary line across the room that represents a scale from 0% to 100% (c.f. Sabo Flores, 2008, p. 50). This has parallels with the ‘spatial survey’ method that was tested during the ESDinds Project in which participants were required to move into one of three different physical spaces to represent their choice from three possible answers to a question (Burford, Velasco, et al., 2013).

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQs)

1. WILL THE RESULTS BE VALID?

Yes, the results will be as valid as you want them to be. The reality is that no measurement is considered rigorous if it is the only one that is made, so it can be helpful to validate the result by measuring the indicators using more than one method (such as **surveys, interviews, observations, focus groups, document analysis, diaries/logs, scenario analyses, guided visualisations, drama and theatre-based methods, word elicitation, diagram analysis, collective memory work, etc**). Using (say) three different methods to measure and triangulate an indicator would yield a result that is considered rigorous. On the other hand, not everyone requires such rigorous results – a school may simply want a more approximate result or even just ‘a rough idea’. The choice is up to each school, depending upon the school’s requirements, the time available, how many helpers are available, the budget available, and so on.

2. DOES IT MATTER IF WE DON’T USE QUESTIONNAIRES?

No, you can use any measurement method that suits the values and demographics of the school. Different measurement methods are listed in bold in FAQ-1 above. Whichever approach is used, we need to make sure:

- a. that everyone *really* understands the questions in the same way. Could a slightly different emphasis change the meaning of a question? Do we need to pre-test the questions with a small group first?
- b. that students and teachers are not just giving the answers that they think you (or their managers) want to hear. Do they feel comfortable enough to tell the truth? Are there any indicators that are so sensitive that we need to keep answers confidential?



- c. that students and teachers do not just ‘follow the crowd’ because they are afraid to show their real feelings in front of the group.
 - d. that those people with the greatest difficulty making their voices heard, especially from marginalised groups, participate equally. Is anyone reluctant to speak in public, within a diverse group? Are there cultural barriers?
3. *HOW CAN WE BE CONFIDENT WE ARE USING A LEGITIMATE SYSTEM OF INDICATORS?*

The values-based indicators used for each school are individually crafted to harmonise with the school’s specific mission, vision and values, and then curated to ensure seamless and effective implementation. The underlying framework of developing values-based indicators arises from a formal research project called ESDinds, which was funded by the European Union’s Seventh Framework Programme (www.esdinds.eu). It involved academics in social sciences, environmental sciences, indicators and sustainable development, in partnership with four Civil Society Organisations (CSOs).

The method used to develop the indicators was rigorous, and can be found formally written up for academic journals, several of which are listed on pages 9 and 10 of this document. As described by PERL (2014), an initial set of relevant values and indicators was collected from several CSOs, and analysed using discourse analysis and coding (social science methods) (Podger et al., 2010). The indicators were tested in the field using action research methods (Podger et al., 2013). After several stages of analysis and consultations between CSOs and university researchers, 177 indicators were trialled in real CSO projects in the field. Following further modifications, the refined set of values-based indicators was developed.

THE ‘FINE PRINT’ OF DEVELOPING VALUES-BASED INDICATORS TO ASSESS A SCHOOL’S PERFORMANCE ON ACHIEVING ITS MISSION

SMART is inspired by the approach used by PERL (The Partnership for Education and Research about Responsible Living) to develop values-based indicators to assess Environmental Sustainability, which is (like values in education) often difficult to quantify.

SMART is a radical adaptation of the methodology of assessing value-based indicators of environmental sustainability to meet the needs of school boards seeking to evaluate their schools’ success in achieving their values-based mission and vision statements.

The approach adopted in **SMART** for the design of the assessment and evaluation is **inductive** insofar as the indicators flow from board members’ and school leaders’ understanding of the mission, vision and values, in contrast to being derived from a generic evaluation instrument or theoretical framework (which would be a deductive approach). The **SMART** approach is also **intersubjective** in that it is based upon explicit agreement on the meaning and definition of terminology and the values underpinning them.



Unfortunately, the sad reality is that most schools still use appraisal measures that are neither inductive nor intersubjective. Rather than explicitly basing school performance reviews on the fundamentally important values that underpin the mission and vision statements, and then using assessment and evaluation to track and advance progress towards their achievement, they tend to base appraisals on tradition (what has been historically measured) or convenience (what is easily measured, or what is easily obtainable through consultancies that do not appreciate the importance of assessing mission, vision and values).

IN CONCLUSION

Many educators, school leaders and board members embrace the well-known adage “*The heart of education is the education of the heart*”. Similarly, most would agree with Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s Little Prince when he says “*It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye*”.

SMART overcomes the shortcomings of traditional school appraisal and performance review processes. Rather than relying on simple, generic, easily quantified factors, **SMART** focusses on the distinctive characteristics that authentically target a school’s unique identity – its mission, vision and values.

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The format of every **SMART** report is individually crafted to target each school's unique combination of mission, vision and values.

To discuss the benefits **SMART** can bring to your school, please initiate a conversation through stephen@optimalschool.com.

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