3: Developing policies that support improvements in teaching and learning

This chapter explains the importance of having clear policy documents that define values, principles and practices to guide school evaluation and development. We identify key policy documents and consider processes that you can use to create and revise them. This chapter also has a brief section considering how parents should be engaged to support school policies and practices aimed at enhancing learning.

3.1 Policy documents

A policy is a guide for action based on clear principles. A policy is only worthwhile if it is used and influences practice and decision-making in the school. If it just remains in a file on a shelf it serves no purpose and has no value. School policies will inform the development and revision of other documents, for example student, staff and parent handbooks.

As we require a number of supporting documents for the Cambridge registration process, schools that have completed the process will already have some policy documents. These will need regular review and updating in parallel with the school evaluation cycle. In this chapter, we provide guidance on writing policies and the structure and content of effective policies. Statements that clearly define standards are also important policy documents, in particular those defining the school's expectations for teaching and learning, assessment and teacher evaluation. We cover these in Chapters 4, 5 and 6.

Key policy documents include:

1. **Mission statement and educational values:**
   The mission statement is a written declaration defining the school's educational purpose. The school's educational aims and values might be included in the statement or listed separately. Some schools also publish a vision statement. This gives an indication of the future direction of the school, and should be widely shared and inspire commitment. These three elements should focus the development planning process and guide the educational priorities of the school. They are therefore very important, informing on all other policy documents.

2. **School curriculum policy:**
   This policy sets out the principles upon which the school's curriculum has been constructed. It explains how the curriculum should progress vertically (from one age level to the next) and horizontally (the requirements and choices for a particular year). The document might also exemplify the principles and approaches to teaching, learning and assessment. Or, these might be covered as separate policies that are cross-referenced with each other (see Chapter 5.2 on assessment policy). The curriculum policy will also identify the outcomes expected for learners. It will be based upon the school's vision and mission statements, and should clearly relate the curriculum that is offered to the school's educational values and the Cambridge learner attributes (see Chapter 4, Table 4).

3. **School language policy:**
   This requirement is included in the registration process, specifically for bilingual and multilingual schools. These schools need to make clear how they will structure the curriculum, and organise programmes and support to meet the needs of learners for whom English is a second or third language. It is also important in schools with a majority of students who are proficient in English but do not have English as their first language or mother tongue. The language policy should indicate how the school will encourage and support the maintenance of students' first languages.

4. **Performance management – Teacher and leaders' evaluation:**
   This will include an account of how the work of teachers and leaders is evaluated. It should include explanations of accountability for each individual's responsibilities. Standards for teachers and leaders will be identified and evaluation practices explained based on the principles that underpin them. In Chapter 6 we give

guidance on developing standards for teaching planning and putting into place a teacher evaluation system. We consider that school boards and/or the school owner are responsible for the performance review of the school director, chief executive or principal.

5. **School professional development policy:**
   The professional development policy sets out the purposes and objectives of the school professional development programme. It describes the kinds of professional development that are available to staff and their responsibilities and entitlements in this area. Plans for professional development need to be very closely linked to the evaluation process. Therefore, this policy needs to be cross referenced with the performance management policy and school curriculum policy, which will identify priority areas that need to be supported.

6. **Code of conduct for students and teachers:**
   We do not cover student conduct and behaviour in this guide. However, it is self-evident that students must have a clear understanding of expected behaviours and schools must consistently apply appropriate rules of conduct to achieve excellent learning outcomes. Cambridge schools will want to include in the code some account of the Cambridge learner attributes and how they relate to the expectations and social and academic behaviours of learners in the school.

7. **Complaints policy:**
   The way in which the school deals with complaints, particularly those from students and parents or carers, needs to be clear.

   Other important supporting documents include:

8. **Organogram and job descriptions for the senior management team:**
   The organogram is a graphic representation of the organisational structure of the school. It shows the individual members of the senior leadership team, from the principal down, their titles and areas of responsibility, and other key leaders and groups of staff they are responsible for. The job descriptions should clearly state the overall purpose and accountabilities of each management position, and identify specific roles and responsibilities. There should be a clear line of accountability, in terms of who the post-holder reports to, and which key positions report to the post-holder. Finally, it should show any conditions that affect post-holders' work,

and the constraints within which they work. The job descriptions will have been discussed with and accepted by the individual post-holders. The organogram should demonstrate a clear, analytical account of the major areas of responsibility for achieving school objectives.

9. **Roles and responsibilities with respect to Cambridge programmes and**
   qualifications for senior management team:
   In many schools a Cambridge curriculum is followed by all students, but in other instances it is part of a wider curriculum. Therefore leadership responsibilities for the Cambridge programme may make up the whole of an individual's responsibilities, or only a part. It is equally important that the school identifies and records how leadership responsibilities associated with the effective provision of a Cambridge programme have been allocated. The detail of these responsibilities will be included in job descriptions.

10. **Key staff CVs (principal and teachers involved in teaching Cambridge syllabuses):**
    Cambridge International needs to see these CVs as assurance that all involved have, or intend to achieve, a level of skill and experience appropriate to their specific responsibilities in the Cambridge programme. These documents are also important for teacher evaluation and professional development planning. Therefore all school leaders and teachers will want to maintain up-to-date versions.

3.2 Creating, developing and implementing school policies for teaching and learning

Schools will have some written guidance and information for teachers, learners and parents about how the school operates, even if formal policies do not exist. Examples might include a staff handbook that gives guidance on what teachers should do if a child misbehaves in school, or how they should assess learners' work. A handbook for learners and parents will include a range of information such as school procedures, homework and reporting guidance. These handbooks should be based on clear policies rather than policy emerging from the handbook.

Writing clear policies is a very valuable process that can help the school run better. Clear policies will make sure that the approaches used by everyone in the school are consistent and efficient. These will then determine what is written in secondary documents including handbooks and procedures.

Suggestions for developing or reviewing school policies:

- Establish a School Policy Steering Group. This group will prioritise work, consider draft policies, make any final revisions and make sure all school policies are consistent and reflect the school ethos and values. Consider including parent, governing board and different staff group representatives, as well as senior management. Too many representatives, however, will make the group less effective. As quality is more important than quantity, focus on writing and reviewing a few policies each year.

- Set up working groups, reporting to the steering group, to draft each policy. Consider including parents and older learners in these groups where appropriate. These groups will discuss, develop and then write the draft policies, so each one will need to include at least one senior member of staff.

- Use the expertise and experience available in the school. For example, if a teacher or administrator is responsible for assessment, it makes sense to involve them in writing the draft assessment policy or to lead the working group tasked with writing it.

- Use example policies or policies developed by other schools as a starting point, but do not implement them in full. For the policy to succeed you must own it and make it specific to your school's context.

- Clarity and brevity are important. Attach appendices and refer to other policies and guidance documents where necessary.

- Policies need to be accessible to the whole community and need to be written in language(s) that make this possible.

- Consult with representatives of all those affected by the policy before publishing the final version. Where policies are new, think about how and when they will be introduced.

Policies can be short and to the point – the procedures and the instructions that follow will give more detail of how the policy is implemented. This elaboration is suitable in documents like handbooks for teachers, learners and parents, which is why these should be produced (or revised) after policies are established.

Each policy will usually be formed through consultation and be written by people with the most knowledge and understanding of the subject area. Therefore it is a good idea to agree on a template that you can use for all policies. This will make sure that the approach and style are consistent and will act as guidance for those writing the policy.

Table 3: What makes a good policy

What makes a good policy?
• informative • clear • as concise as possible • easy to understand • up to date • reviewed regularly • approved by a group that includes the principal and/or senior leaders • consulted upon with stakeholders (staff, parents, learners …) and, where necessary, with legal counsel • approved by the governing board • its application in school practice is evident
Policies should include:
• the name of the school • the title of the policy • the purpose of the policy • the scope of the policy and to whom it applies • the date and issue number of the policy • the date by which the policy should be reviewed • the name and title of who is authorising the policy • references to any other appropriate policies.

3.3 Engaging parents and carers in improving learning

"*Education is a triangle with three legs: parents, child, school and if any of the legs fall, the triangle falls as wel*l" (Harris and Goodall 2007, p. 2).

Parents are key partners in the drive to improve student learning. Their active participation in this partnership makes a difference, and so engaging with parents is a key priority for any school. According to evidence gathered in the United States (Henderson and Mapp 2002, p. 7) learners whose parents were involved with their school and their learning were more likely to:

• achieve more highly (gain higher grades and test scores)

• enrol in higher-level programmes

• attend school regularly

• have better social skills, be well behaved and have good attitudes to school and to learning

• graduate from school with the qualifications to go on to higher education.

Parents can make a very significant contribution to the self-evaluation and goal-setting processes described in Chapter 2. In some cases it might make sense for parents to be involved in policy developments described above. It is absolutely essential that parents understand the mission and values of the school.

Learning does not begin or end at the school gate. If parents understand and support the learning that happens in school, this will have a very significant impact on learner achievement. Parental engagement is more about parents engaging with the learning of their children, rather than engaging with the school. When parents and teachers work together to improve learning, learners achieve more highly. When parents support their child's learning in the home, it makes a bigger difference than when they support activities in the school. Parental involvement in school-based or school-related activities can have an impact on a child's social development and can help to embed the partnership with the school. However, where these activities are not directly connected to learning they have little impact on learner achievement.

Schools should consider the following:

- Make parental engagement a priority. Have a clear communications plan with parents.

- Prioritise parents engaging with their child's learning rather than just involving parents in the school. Support the engagement of parents who are already involved in their children's learning, as well as trying to improve the partnership with those who are less engaged.

- Be as flexible as possible in provision for meeting parents face to face and talking to parents remotely. Where it is difficult for parents to come to your school regularly use alternative means of communication, for example video-conferencing or video phone calls.

- Think carefully about the nature of communication with parents. Is it two-way or usually just communication that informs or reports to parents? Are parents encouraged to communicate openly about their child's learning and progress? How can this process be improved?

- Use new technologies to support parental engagement, but think carefully about the best way to do this. For example, share course outlines online and, where appropriate for certain age groups, homework assignments.

- Include policies and practices for engaging parents in appropriate school policy documents.