

GREAT SCHOOLS

CHECKLIST

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Including:

Leadership and vision

School governance

Management and values

Teaching and learning

Curriculum

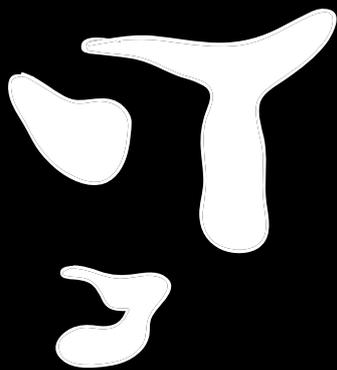
Technology and communication

Partnerships and community

Joined-up change

Performance

Resources and facilities



1. Leadership and vision

- Is there a clear vision and direction which the school needs to move toward?
- Do the school's leaders openly and objectively discuss not only the school's achievements but also the challenges in developing a truly 21st century education for all students?
- Is there broad agreement that leadership is dispersed within schools, not only confined to formal leadership positions?
- Are parents encouraged and supported to play leadership roles in the school?
- Are students of *all* backgrounds routinely involved in some form of substantive leadership? For example as learning technology leaders or in student action teams.

2. School governance

- How are the principal and leadership team, teachers, parents and students involved in shared decision-making?
- Does the school's governing body (school council or board) add value to the school and students?
- Does the school council/board reflect the school's demographics?
- Does the school have a clear and coherent plan for the future that includes shared school-family-community goals?
- Does the school publicly display its shared vision and goals in understandable, explicit terms to its community in a variety of ways?

3. Management and values

- Do key school leaders have good people management skills?
- Is there genuine warmth between students and teachers? Is the school a safe, respectful place?
- Does the school greet visitors in a friendly and helpful way? Is the reception area comfortable?
- Are office staff able to handle inquiries efficiently?
- Is there a well-publicised policy about values, behaviour and relationships? Does it apply to all school community members? How is the success of the policy monitored - and by whom?
- Are conflicts and complaints managed well? Is a proper process for handling any concerns or complaints made clear in a leaflet?

4. Teaching and learning

- Do school documents and the school's leaders convey a strong sense of continuous improvement and innovation in teaching and learning?
- Do school leaders draw attention to their use of educational research?
- Are teachers given time for professional development and resources to plan and work collaboratively to develop the most effective teaching and learning?
- Do families and teachers have opportunities to learn together as to how to best collaborate to improve student achievement?
- How is the school working toward culturally and socially inclusive teaching and learning? Does the school have a cultural and social inclusion policy and plan?
- How does the school assist all students to have a strong mix of both deep academic knowledge and applied/practical learning in classroom and community settings?
- Is the school developing really 'personalised learning' that is built around all learners' needs, aspirations, talents, interests and right to all-round personal development?
- Do students receive regular feedback that is timely and focused or is most of the feedback an explanation of where students 'lost marks' in an assessment?
- How are all students supported to acquire a strong capacity to speak clearly, publicly, competently and confidently?

5. Curriculum

- How is the school addressing the right of all students to curriculum breadth, depth and balance, and to high standards in all learning areas, not just some of them?
- Is there a narrow focus on literacy and numeracy creating a divided curriculum between the so-called 'basics' and key learning areas such as science, the arts, history and languages?
- Does the school have a vision of quality languages education for all students? What is the practical progress towards this? What is the percentage of students who are bilingual?
- How does the curriculum support students to explore concepts in depth, and enable teachers to connect new ideas with students' personal experiences and insights?
- To what extent is the curriculum planned by the school to respond to local needs, interests and priorities?
- Is the school part of a cluster of primary and secondary schools? Do teachers have the opportunity to plan and integrate key learning areas from a P-10 or P-12 perspective?
- Does the school provide clear guidelines about the curriculum and the expectations for students at each year level?

6. Technology and communication

- Given that students can be inundated by online information, how are they supported to separate deeper learning and knowledge from superficial fact-gathering?
- Does the school have a technology policy and plan (created, ideally, by a team involving teachers, parents and students)? This may articulate:
 - A shared vision, goal and objectives for ICT
 - Learning, curriculum and ICT links
 - Family and community partnerships
 - On-line protocols and turn-around times
 - Professional learning for all stakeholders
- Are teachers and other staff provided with adequate time for supporting two-way communication between the school and families?
- Is there a practical plan to improve school communication over time?

7. Partnerships and community

- Partnerships create something together that could not be developed by any one person, group or organisation.
- To what extent does the school link and align the many settings in which students learn, develop and find support? These include the home, workplaces, community organisations, and sports, arts and recreation.
- To what extent are students themselves able to draw upon, and make links between, these multiple areas of their life and learning?
- Will each student have a personal life story of mixing broadly with students from diverse social, cultural and religious backgrounds?
- Are parents informed at the beginning of each year about what will be covered in subjects and the expectations about student attendance, homework and participation and possible supporting family activities?
- When was the last time the school held a forum in which teachers, parents and students were involved in developing school values or a strategic plan or exploring key questions such as:
 - What are the challenges schools are facing?
 - What can be done to further build the school-family-community partnership?
 - What does learning of the future and what does schooling of the future look and sound like?
 - What is a great school, and what might we do to further improve our school?

9. Performance

- How is the school's performance monitored and evaluated? How is this communicated to the school community?
- Is the school adding educational value to student achievement beyond that which may be predicted given the social class backgrounds and prior attainments of students? What is the evidence for this?
- Is the school supporting both the personal (e.g., individual teacher professional development) and systemic (e.g., being part of a P-12 cluster) sources of performance improvement? System factors are likely to increase in importance.

8. Joined-up change

To what extent is the school developing its own broad, 'joined-up' approach to educational change? Evidence may include:

- A clear and compelling message as to why change is needed
- A clear, shared vision of what is to be changed and achieved
- Ownership of change among teachers, parents and students
- A shared policy framework that joins up all of the changes

Is the school developing a joined-up approach involving:

- The vertical 'parts' of education (e.g., school clusters, P-12 schooling or a learning community involving a TAFE college, university or kindergarten)
- The horizontal links with the wider community (e.g., health agencies, workplaces, businesses, community organisations, and groups such as sporting clubs)
- Sharing resources such as sport and performing arts facilities

Is the school an integral part of the local community? Do students take part in a variety of activities including after school community-based sports and other local community activities? Are these local community links listed on the school website? Is the school involved in local community renewal (e.g., in replanting local areas)?

10. Resources and facilities

These issues are obviously not just matters for any one school but may reflect, of course, broader inequities in school funding.

- Are there adequate resources and support for the efforts of staff (in partnership with families and the community) to improve the opportunities and outcomes of students?
- Are key school improvement initiatives fully funded and appropriately supported and not simply reliant on the goodwill of teachers and staff to bring about their successful implementation?
- Are the buildings modern and well-maintained? Are the grounds neat and safe? Are the toilets modern and well cared for?
- Does the school feel warm and inviting? Does the school have clear, friendly directional signs (in community languages, if appropriate)
- Is there a good mix of large and small spaces for learning? Are there facilities for music, sport, technology, art and science?

Conclusion

This ten-part checklist is useful as a systematic, objective way of evaluating what a school is doing well now and the extent to which it is proactively seeking to shape the future of education.

These features of a great school are always, of course, a 'work in progress' for schools tackling the challenges of continuous improvement and developing 21st century learning.

Many of these things are not done consistently or are longer-term goals due to a lack of time and resources (and the huge workloads faced by principals and teachers) that make it difficult for schools to do everything that they would like to do.

The checklist is a catalyst for conversations and flexible actions, not a straitjacket for conforming to any one idea of a 'great school'.

The checklist is the product of hundreds of individuals who shared their knowledge and experience with VICCSO. It is:

- Informed by the ideas and experiences of many parents and students of diverse backgrounds - from across the government, independent and Catholic education sectors
- Based on the views of many principals and teachers who provided criteria for what comprises a great school and also helped us to understand the challenges and constraints.

Leadership teams, staff committees, school councils and boards, parents and friends groups and Student Representative Councils can all use the checklist to identify areas for improvement and monitor progress over time.

Assessing a school takes time. We need to see beyond surface appearances to realities, beyond immediate impressions to future possibilities, beyond assumptions to truths.

As well, the marketing campaigns of some schools together with media-created league tables may present parents with a narrow focus on some aspects of great schools and obscure other features of great schools and the challenges facing all schools.

A checklist can support parents in thinking holistically about their child's education. It can also assist all school community members to consider the many school and community factors that serve to make up a great school. A school also obviously needs adequate resources and support to do all of the things that may make it a better school over time.

About

This is an abbreviated version of a checklist that first appeared in a VICCSO newsletter in November 2010, and a revised version that is published on the VICCSO website at www.viccsso.org.au/content/checklist.

This version has been adapted from the original by the TLN in cooperation with Nicholas Abbey, President, VICCSO. Contact VICCSO on (03) 9429 5900 for further information.