

Developing A Whole-School Language Policy

0. Introduction

This is a blueprint to help you develop, write and implement a language policy for your school. It deals with the general concept of a whole-school language policy and invites you to situate this activity firmly in the context of the real circumstances of your school. Language plays a fundamental role not only in a child's linguistic education, but also in the areas of social enrichment and cognitive development. A whole-school language policy will recognize the existing strengths of both school and community, and will give clear guidelines for further reflecting and improving everyone's abilities and values. We believe that making linguistic diversity a whole-school issue will raise sensitivity and increase respect for all languages. We can transform diversity into a resource, and developing a whole-school language policy can benefit pupils, staff, parents and others associated with your school.

1. Why develop a Whole-School Language Policy?

A whole-school language policy enables your school to have a shared philosophy on all aspects of language education. This process would normally involve an exercise in problem identification, fact gathering, decision making, implementation and evaluation (Corson 1990). A continual repetition of this cycle would be ideal.

A whole-school language policy

- Is a focusing device that gives an opportunity to the school to embark on a process of reflection, and reflective practice
- Is a form of organizational analysis that provides a school with means to becoming more efficient and professional as an institution offering a co-ordinated and coherent approach to language education
- Guides school personnel to take stock of their successes, current needs and opportunities, and thus find a clearer direction
- Contains public and accessible information to everyone on relevant aspects, reinforces appropriate messages in favour of plurilingual education and thus becomes a form of commitment
- Is an instrument of communication that helps to establish effective working partnerships between the stakeholders
- Positions the school within a wider national and international context in terms of language education and provides a framework for coping with change

2. What is a Whole-School Language Policy?

A whole-school language policy is a dynamic action statement consisting of principles, aims and strategies. It is a shared document for all stakeholders and expresses a common vision of the role and status of all languages relevant to life within a school. It is ideally developed following organized discussions, a school language audit and a profiling exercise. A healthy policy would be authored and owned by all stakeholders. It should include a rationale for its aims, as well as a declaration about who is responsible to carry out which tasks by when.

The aims should be related to

- Raising all participants' awareness about, and the significance of, language and language education in their life
- The identification of needs of learners and of staff, and the suggestion of how to meet those needs
- The creation of a climate of working together, building on existing linguistic resources for the benefit of everyone involved.

Strategies for reaching the aims normally include

- The specification of home-school partnerships
- Ways of restructuring the formal curriculum, e.g. languages as subjects, language as medium of instruction, cross-curricular approaches
- Models of fostering plurilingualism outside lesson time, e.g. extra-curricular activities, participation in and out of school language events and initiatives, bringing the community to the school
- A statement about the provision of supporting means for linguistic plurality, e.g. multiple language displays in school corridors and common areas; bilingual documentation for parents, resources
- The specification of success criteria, including strategies for implementing, monitoring and evaluating the policy

3. How to develop and implement a Whole-School Language Policy?

The following is a model to a step by step approach for developing and implementing a whole-school language policy. It provides a series of helpful questions and actions that need to be considered and put in place. Time and the patience for a developmental approach are necessary.

(a) Establish that there is sufficient support for the idea

Ask:

- Why do we need to have a whole-school language policy?
- Who will lead the process for developing a policy?
- What support is available for this process to be a successful one?
- Who would benefit from it?
- Can the school sustain this policy over a long period of time?
- Who is willing to participate in the process?
- What sources are there for collecting the necessary information?
- What structures already exist, or need to be developed, in order to involve the stakeholders in the discussion?

Reflect:

- Is the Head of School, senior management team, board of governors, parents' associations, and other stakeholders enthusiastic enough about developing a whole-school language policy?
- Do any of the stakeholders already have a vision for a whole-school language policy?

- Is there a climate of trust and support among those involved?
- Are any serious conflicts likely to emerge in the process? Are there means for dealing with them?
- Can a task force of responsible personnel be delegated to oversee the process?

Do:

- Discuss the idea for developing a whole-school language policy with relevant stakeholders, e.g. senior management team, parents' associations, educational authorities
- Prepare a working document that includes a convincing vision
- Identify the perceived benefits for everyone involved
- Identify the resources (time, financial etc) that are needed
- Create a task force to set the process going

(b) *Develop a whole-school language profile*

Ask:

- Who will conduct the audit that leads to the establishment of a whole-school profile
- Is everyone convinced of the need for this audit?
- Who is willing to be directly involved in the audit and in the writing of the profile document?

Do:

- Embark on an audit
- Summarize the results and include references to the successful aspects as well as to the weaker areas, but focus more concretely on existing opportunities and resources that the school can build on
- Decide on the needs and priorities for your school
- Explain the width of activities that the school is prepared to be responsible for under its own policy
- Formulate aims and strategies for a whole-school language policy based on these results
- Specify the implications for financial, managerial and political facets of the exercise
- Establish success criteria for your whole-school policy

Reflect:

- Have you set a realistic time-frame?
- What other events will need to give way to this process, and how can this be done smoothly?
- Is this process generating more enthusiasm or is it stifling the whole idea?
- Would it be beneficial to convince further any of the stakeholders who seem to be resisting some of the ideas put forward?

- In what way do the needs identified following the audit correspond to the initial vision?

(c) *Draft a whole-school language policy document*

Do:

- In consultation with the task force draft a whole-school language policy document that reflects the needs, aims and values of the stakeholders
- Set realistic goals that are specific and practicable
- Specify who will be responsible to do what and by when
- Formulate a budget
- Disseminate the draft and set a deadline for a specified process of consultation on the document, e.g. send a questionnaire together with the draft
- Make sure that copies are available in all the relevant languages

Reflect:

- Is the draft policy document written clearly and in a reader-friendly manner?
- Is it accessible to all possible interested parties, and others who might be able to contribute to a more refined document? Can/should it be better advertised?
- To what extent is the policy realistic and expressed in a way that it can achieve its goals?

(d) *Refine and finalise the policy document*

Do:

- Compile all the information collected during the consultation period
- Analyse the data collected while giving consideration to every comment
- Acknowledge all feedback received

Reflect:

- To what extent is the feedback reliable?
- Which feedback is most useful and appropriate?
- Is there some aspect that needs further clarification?

Do:

- Modify and re-write the draft policy document on the basis of the results obtained
- Ascertain the approval of all stakeholders for the final whole-school language policy document
- Produce a polished version of the final document, possibly in different formats, e.g. executive and main versions, key points on a flyer, poster or display, letters to public entities and private individuals
- Make a plan for the dissemination exercise
- Prepare the ground for implementation

(e) Disseminate and implement the final policy document

Do:

- Offer copies to persons involved on an individual basis
- Involve staff, students, parents etc. in the dissemination process
- After identifying the date of implementation, launch the process with a ceremony or some form of tangible operation
- Make sure that everyone is clear about their responsibilities
- Work with all stakeholders to ensure that the objectives are met

Reflect:

- Has the launching of the policy been successful and why?
- Which parts of the policy have been most welcome and why?
- Is there already an indication that there's an element of difficulty in implementing the policy?
- Should the same task force or another one be set up to monitor the implementation?

4. How to monitor and evaluate a Whole-School Language Policy?

Ask:

- To what extent is everyone performing their relevant duties?
- Do you need to make changes to the programme of implementation?
- Are the objectives of implementation being met?
- What discrepancies are there between policy and practice?
- Are all stakeholders happily involved?
- Does everyone feel they are making a contribution?
- Do people feel they are achieving some results?

Do:

- Set regular meetings with stakeholders to review the implementation phase
- Establish a structure for a formal evaluation of the various aspects of the policy to be carried out after a reasonable period of time
- Record in various ways what is going on, e.g. using video, photography, interviews, oral and written feedback

Reflect:

- What level of curiosity and excitement is being generated with regard to language education in particular, and with reference to the school in general?
- Has there been a substantial improvement in language attitudes?
- Can you measure the improvement in language skills?
- Have you observed any other side effects, whether positive or negative?

5. Conclusion

The lengthy and painstaking process of planning, implementing and evaluating a whole-school language policy should be concluded with a major conference where each of the

stakeholders could present their appraisal. A final evaluation document can be generated. Further development can be agreed upon taking into account the experience gained, the pitfalls that need to be avoided, and the success that has been celebrated.