

A model for strategic policy development and capability in education

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Practice Insights prepared for the Australia and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG)



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Contents

A model for strategic policy development and capability in education.....	2
Introduction: building strategic policy capability – the vision, the journey and lessons learnt.....	4
The challenge – how to achieve a ‘world-class’ education system.....	4
Framing a response – a whole-of-system approach to strategic policy development	7
Getting down to work – a strategic policy model	8
Designing the Model.....	9
Bringing the Model to life and overcoming obstacles.....	11
Assessing results – is the Model being used and has it made a difference?.....	11
Reflections and lessons learned	13
Conclusion	14
References.....	15

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Introduction: building strategic policy capability – the vision, the journey and lessons learnt

South Australia's Department for Education (the Department) has a 10-year vision to become a 'world-class' education system. It aims to deliver on the vision by significantly lifting public school students' achievement. Strategic policy plays a critical role in helping achieve the vision by targeting long-term improvements in the areas that drive better outcomes for students. Historically, however, some of the Department's strategic policy has been less impactful than hoped. Performance has been varied in policy development, implementation and outcomes achieved.

Between 2018-2020, the Department's Strategic Policy and External Relations Division developed and implemented a best-practice, repeatable and scalable model for strategic policy development. It was aimed at shifting the way in which strategic policy is thought about and produced within the Department, and building stronger capability to design and deliver it. The successful uptake and use of the Model by executives and practitioners across the Department since is a result of key design factors, including a deliberate approach to governance, collaboration and co-design, and constant communication and socialisation.

This 'Research/Practice Insights' report outlines the process of diagnosing existing capability, developing a Strategic Policy Model and related tools, and the deliberate approach to governance, collaboration and co-design. The report is being published, with the permission of the Department, because ANZSOG believes it has broader application across jurisdictions. It is an example of how a model for strategic policy can be designed, implemented, and used to drive an agency's long-term strategic goals.

ANZSOG has been part of the South Australian Department for Education's journey including providing the original diagnosis of policy capability. Other organisations or jurisdictions interested in assessing and building their own infrastructure for good policy can contact ANZSOG's Research and Advisory team at research@anzsog.edu.au

The challenge – how to achieve a 'world-class' education system

Public education systems across Australia are investing in long-term strategies aimed at improving student educational outcomes (see, for example, NSW Department for Education, n.d.; Victorian Department of Education and Training, n.d.; Department of Education Western Australia, n.d.). The policy imperative underpinning these strategies can be found in the declining literacy and numeracy achievement of Australian students. The most authoritative international assessment benchmark – the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) – demonstrates that Australia's performance in education has been declining over the last two decades (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2019a, p. 4). Australia is being outperformed by some of its geographic neighbours, and by other Western nations it was previously outperforming (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2019b; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2003, pp. 9, 33, 35, 36).

Faced with this under-performance challenge, in 2018, South Australia's Department for Education (the Department) designed and implemented a 10-year strategy aimed at lifting public school students' outcomes to meet the benchmark of world-class education systems. The strategy measures itself against the 'Universal Scale', which compares school systems across the world using the results of national and

international assessments¹ (McKinsey & Company, 2010, p. 117). In 2017, the achievement level of South Australian public education students was sitting at the bottom-end of ‘good’ on the scale’s continuum of poor, fair, good, great and excellent (Department for Education South Australia, 2021b, p. 2). The goal of the 10-year strategy is to lift achievement levels from the bottom-end of ‘good’ to ‘great’. As part of meeting this goal, the Department’s ambition is to achieve ‘growth for every child and student in every preschool and school’ (Department for Education South Australia, 2021b).

¹ The Universal Scale uses available assessments like PISA, Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and local tests, normalises the different assessment scales and produces a universal score, which is then classified as Excellent: greater than two standard deviations above the mean; Great: greater than one standard deviation above the mean; Good: less than one standard deviation above the mean; Fair: less than one standard deviation below the mean; Poor: greater than one standard deviation below the mean.

Figure 1: Department for Education vision



Source: Department for Education South Australia, 2021b, p. 2

The reform strategy is ambitious for two reasons. The first is the size and pace of change required – few education systems jurisdictions internationally have increased performance at such a rate (McKinsey & Company, 2010, p. 19). The second is the inherent challenge of shifting large and complex systems. South Australia's public education system comprises 894 preschools, primary schools and secondary schools, with a workforce of over 30,000 people (Department for Education South Australia, 2020; Department for Education South Australia, 2021c). Almost half of all preschools and schools are in country areas, with the attendant challenge of distance and higher socio-economic disadvantage. And the system is largely decentralised – preschools and schools are responsible for their own budget, planning and site-specific goals, including student learning outcomes. The Department provides stewardship and supports for sites to deliver on them.

Given the ambitious nature of the 10-year vision and the scale and complexity of the education system, strategic policy² has and will continue to play a significant role in its achievement. Strategic policy helps the Department target long-term improvements in the areas that drive student outcomes, including teaching, leadership, engaged parents, support services, and resourcing (Department for Education South Australia, 2021b).

Historically, however, some of the Department's strategic policy has been less impactful than hoped. Performance has varied in terms of policy development, implementation and outcomes. The 10-year vision would require a new way of approaching strategic policy, one that would need to:

- build a common and shared understanding of priorities, goals, and ways of working among leadership and policy practitioners
- promote excellence in practice
- ensure consistent positive impacts for students and schools to help the system move from 'good' to 'great' on the Universal Scale.

Framing a response – a whole-of-system approach to strategic policy development

The Department is led by a Chief Executive, who presides over a Senior Executive Group (SEG) comprised of Executive Directors from 11 divisions across the Department responsible for the overall management and operation of South Australia's public education system. In 2017, the Department's central strategic policy division – the Strategic Policy and External Relations Division (SPER) – was established. One of its initial mandates was to support a whole-of-system approach to strategic policy development, responsibility for which has traditionally been dispersed and vested in individual divisions with relevant subject matter experts.

In 2018, SPER drew on insights from its early strategic policy work to undertake a preliminary current state assessment of strategic policy development across the Department. Staff consulted during this assessment raised multiple issues including poor strategic policy commissioning, a lack of role clarity between policy generalists and those who hold deep substantive knowledge of key areas of the Department's activities, and at times a disconnect between central staff responsible for system or strategic-level initiatives and service-level staff who are impacted by the initiatives (the policy-delivery divide).

SPER identified the need for and potential benefits of a best-practice, repeatable and scalable approach that

² There are multiple different definitions of strategic policy. The Department considers strategic policy to be policy that sets vision, direction and goals, and the activities to achieve those goals, over the long-term.

could be adopted across the Department to design and deliver high-quality strategic policy. The Model needed to:

- help guide strategic policy development, without being overly prescriptive
- be relevant and applicable across a range of contexts and different levels of policy (strategic projects, strategic policy and system strategies)
- be simple and accessible, so that it was ‘easy to use and hard to avoid’
- serve to build the Department’s expertise and policy capability over time.

Importantly, the Model needed to be owned by the whole Department and serve as a way of working together, given the ongoing challenge of shared responsibility for strategic policy development within the Department. Using this framing, SPER sought and received approval from the Department’s SEG with the Chief Executive as sponsor, to explore end-to-end best practice models to deliver its strategic agenda.

Getting down to work – a strategic policy model

As a first step, SPER engaged Sally Washington and Professor Michael Mintrom working under the auspices of the Australia and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG). Their role was to undertake a thorough assessment of the Department’s current state of policy and practice, using input from Departmental staff at all levels. The intention behind the commissioning was to ground the development of a model in an objective and comprehensive understanding of current issues, building on initial observations already made by SPER and the broader Department in commissioning the Model.

The current state assessment was undertaken late in 2018. It involved conversations with more than 30 individuals, including the Chief Executive, five members of SEG, policy advisors situated within SPER, and policy advisors situated elsewhere in the Department. It identified similar issues to SPER’s initial assessment, but emphasised that to consistently deliver high-quality strategic policy, the Department needed to focus on:

1. clearer prioritisation and commissioning
2. improved governance (including project management)
3. improved engagement with end users and effective communications across the Department and sector
4. a stronger focus on relationship and capability building
5. meaningful implementation design and evaluation as integral parts of the policy process.

As a second step, Ms Washington and Professor Mintrom developed a prototype strategic policy framework and commissioning tool. The ‘Get-to-Go’ tool, adapted from a similar tool used in New Zealand, was designed to facilitate thinking at the outset of a strategic policy process, to uncover what information is needed, what analytical approach will be followed, who needs to be involved, and what governance and project management is required.

As a third step in the process, SPER established multi-disciplinary and multi-layered governance of the project comprised of people across the Department to help guide the work and co-design the full Model and its associated products. The governance structure was important because the Model needed to be developed from the ‘bottom-up’, so it delivered on what policy practitioners said they needed and received buy-in from across the Department, including at the executive level. There was also a need to ensure the Model spoke to context – that it aligned with existing frameworks and infrastructure, provided a platform to influence change, and contextualised policy levers that drive education and care needs. The governance arrangements also provided the basis for what would become a policy network across the Department to build capability and ways of working in support of the Model (discussed further below).

The governance groups were convened regularly throughout 2019. They provided advice on the creation of the Strategic Policy Model guide, tools and resources, and engaged in conversations that shaped the way the content evolved. The groups looked at other Australian and overseas models for exemplars in strategic policy, including the significant work of the governments of Dubai,³ New Zealand – including the New Zealand Policy Project⁴ – the United Kingdom,⁵ and the collective knowledge of the authors of the Australian Policy Handbook.⁶

Designing the Model

The governance groups, driven by SPER and anchored by the Chief Executive's sponsorship, posited a model with three interlinking components (see Figure 2 below):

1. Clear stages of policy development (plan, design, implement, evaluate).
2. Processes that support policy development (project management; governance and resourcing; stakeholder engagement and communications).
3. The enabling conditions for success (common understanding; clear mandate; quality principles).

The three components were considered integral to the development of best-practice strategic policy from the practitioner perspective, but were also backed by experience and practice in other jurisdictions.

The scalability of the Model was an important design consideration. The groups developed a 'policy taxonomy' to help executives and practitioners locate policy reform in terms of scale and complexity. It negotiated that for system strategies – that is, flagship plans of action designed to achieve long-term or overall goals or outcomes that are complex and touch on the whole system – the use of the Model would be compulsory, end-to-end. For all other strategic policy and projects, the Model is recommended, although not compulsory, and in this context it can be scaled, used end-to-end, or applied to specific tasks (for example, implementation design).

In response to areas identified for improvement by Ms Washington and Professor Mintrom, the decision was made to focus effort on front-end commissioning and planning strategic policy. The Model was therefore designed to require, upfront, that strategic development be grounded in clear expectations of scope, timeframe, resources and mandate – whether the demand or expectations were from the Minister, Chief Executive or SEG.

The heart of the Model, and where it adds significant value for practitioners irrespective of level, is the practical and action-focussed advice that sits within each of the stages of policy development. The Model explains what is involved, the key decision points, and offers tips or supporting methodologies. It also provides guidance and advice on how to respond to issues that are often complex, multi-faceted, and touch many parts of the system. The 'question-based' design of the Model was intentional – to help guide the strategic policy process, without being prescriptive or telling practitioners how to do the work, or imposing excessive restrictions along the way. It aims to foster a new way of thinking and way of working – to empower practitioners to navigate the complexity inherent in reforming a large system and help produce quality outcomes for schools and students. It also recognises that policy is not a linear process and is informed at times by political priorities and other influences.

³ The General Secretariat of the Executive Council – Government of Dubai (2018), The Public Policy guide of the Government of Dubai, UAE.

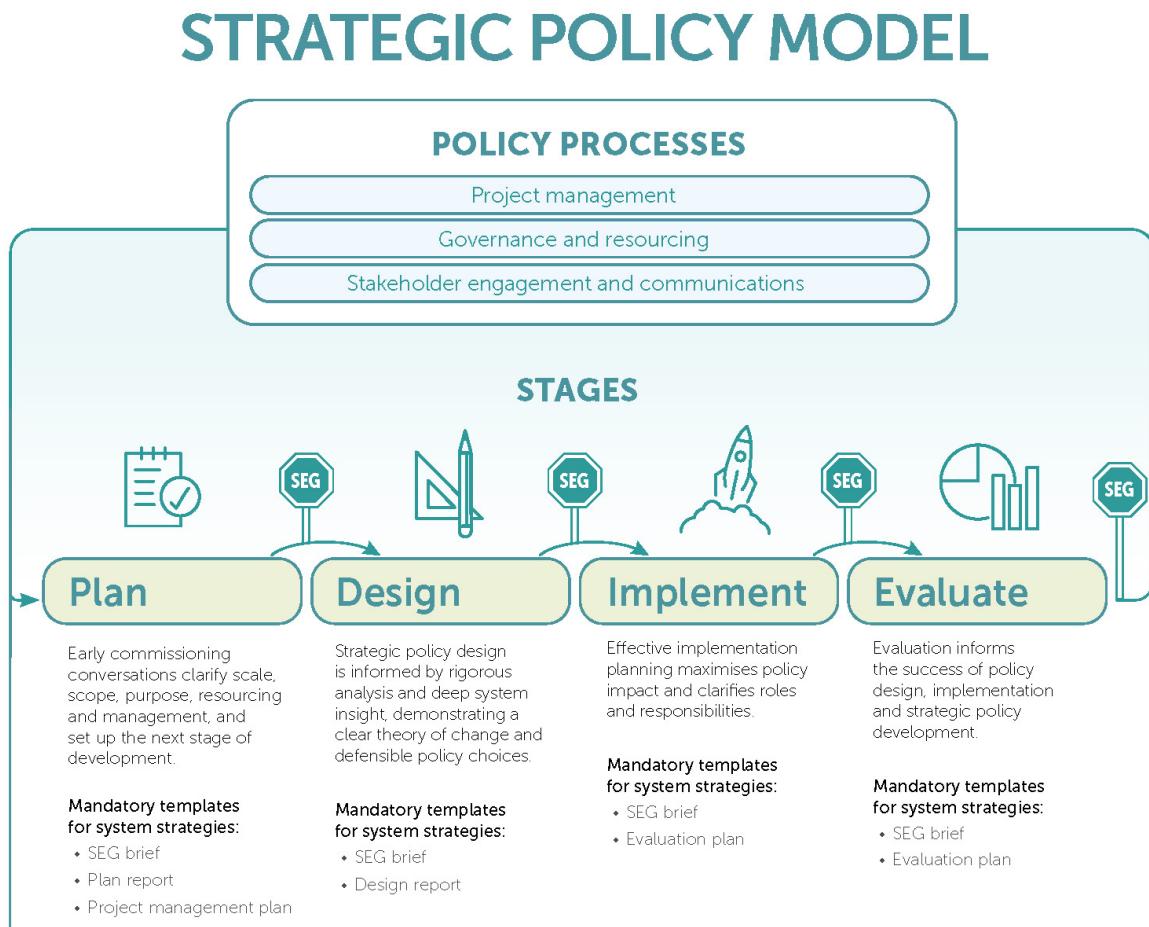
⁴ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet of New Zealand (2019), The NZ Policy Project.

⁵ UK Policy Innovation Unit (2011) Effective Policy Making: Workbooks 1-5, London.

⁶ Catherine Althaus, Peter Bridgman, Glyn Davis (2017) The Australian Policy Handbook: a practical guide to the policy making process, New South Wales.

The Model was also designed with decision ‘gates’ between each of the four stages of policy development – plan, design, implement, evaluate. This was done to provide the Department’s SEG with continuous baseline decision making information for every strategic policy proposal, thereby improving their capacity to weigh up and compare strategic opportunities and problems. This in time will help support more sophisticated analysis about system policies in relation to each other – to enable prioritisation – rather than policies being presented in isolation, ‘one by one’, to SEG. The Model also provides reference material and templates for completion at each stage to help inform SEG about the decision required in a consistent format.

Figure 2: Strategic Policy Model overview



Source: Department for Education South Australia, Strategic Policy Model, p 5 (unpublished)

To support implementation and to help build ongoing capability, the governance groups also developed a suite of tools, templates, and resources for use in conjunction with the Model. These included:

- A policy skills framework that identifies the skills, knowledge and behaviours required of a policy professional, and provides guidance to managers and sponsors on forming multi-disciplinary teams to deliver strategies. This was adapted from a similar New Zealand model.
- Commissioning conversations guidance and get-to-go tools which help to define the policy vision, goals, and objectives at the beginning of the process, noting the need to front-end effort on commissioning.
- Collateral for articulating theory of change, educational policy levers and instruments, and a policy solutions shortlist which help at the design stage of the Model to analyse the problem/opportunity and areas of reform within broader strategy development.

Once the Model was designed, the groups sought wide-ranging peer review, including from practitioners and executives within the Department, Ms Washington and Professor Mintrom, and broader networks within the South Australian Government. They incorporated feedback in an iterative process before the Model and associated resources were approved in 2019 and launched in early 2020. The Department also committed to continuous improvement of the Model to ensure that it evolves alongside the Department's burgeoning strategic policy capabilities.

Bringing the Model to life and overcoming obstacles

While the Model was co-designed with executives and practitioners across the Department, it was clear it would require a holistic and ongoing socialisation strategy. Usage needed to be meaningful and not ritualised or cursory, so that it changed 'the way we do things around here'. The ambition was for staff to embrace the Model not just comply with it. This was especially important given that the Model is only mandatory for 'system strategies'. Initial internal discussions suggested that some practitioners in the Department viewed the Model as centralised, not relevant to their work, and 'overly complex'. Consequently, SPER needed to focus on demonstrating the benefits and value of the Model to generate confidence.

One of the key initial strategies for achieving this end was a series of webinars to explain and promote the Model. The original intent was for face-to-face workshops, but this was prevented by the onset of COVID-19. The webinars were intended to:

- Raise awareness and uptake of the Model and associated resources to a broad cross-section of staff, and the importance of innovative multi-disciplinary ways of working.
- Increase understanding of the Model and the value it adds to the Department's work.
- Connect with staff currently using the Model through work on system strategies or other strategic projects, to present as 'demonstration projects'.
- Encourage policy practitioners to adopt and use elements of the Model in planning, developing, implementing, and evaluating strategies and strategic policies, eg, the Get-to-Go tool.

The webinar series received strong interaction and remains online for incoming practitioners within the Department and for existing practitioners to refer to as they work with the Model. The bonus of on-line delivery was that the Department has lasting collateral to draw on.

SPER also needed to embed the Model and its way of operating into existing and future reform. This took the form of the central team either supporting Department executives or project leads directly, or providing advice and specific resources to help drive strategy development by working alongside non-trained staff, akin to an internal consultancy model. This proved to be an effective approach, although considerable uptake meant that central team resources were stretched. Teams across the Department wanted to use the Model but needed more centralised support in order to do so.

The approach to embedding the Model required excellence from the central team. Its policy staff needed to be experts in the use of the Model and its practical application, which required initial upskilling and ongoing development activities. They also needed to be champions of the Model and be adept at sharing good practice and lessons learned across the Department. As a result, SPER needed a strong approach to staff recruitment and training. It leveraged the policy skills framework, referred to above, to deliver localised professional development activities based on the skills identified as crucial for high-performing or 'expert' policy practitioners.

Assessing results – is the Model being used and has it made a difference?

Since the Model's launch in January 2020, it has been used in multiple system strategies, including:

A model for strategic policy development and capability in education

- parent engagement in learning
- early learning
- country education
- digital.

These strategies are now in or approaching their implementation phase. Some are already having a significant and direct impact in the system. For example, in June 2021, the South Australian Government announced a \$50.1 million investment over 4 years in the new Early Learning Strategy that will help the Department to support children and families seamlessly, to give every child the best start in life, which we know is critical for outcomes later in life (Department for Education South Australia, 2021a). The Model has also been used in a number of non-system strategies and projects, suggesting that it is scalable and useful for different types of policy work.

SPER's assessment is that where the Model has been used, the quality of strategic policy development has been higher and more consistent. Use of the Model has enabled better support for decision-making by the Department's SEG. The Chief Executive noted:

The Strategic Policy Model and its check-in points gives me and my leadership team greater clarity on strategic policy development, better oversight on where things are at, and more opportunities to have input into our flagship work. It has also provided an effective mechanism for our policy practitioners to work together in a repeatable, scalable way. – Rick Persse, Chief Executive

Feedback from Department executives suggest that the approach to strategic policy development is better understood by both the executive and by policy practitioners in the system. Commissioning has been more disciplined and has resulted in clearer priority signalling across the Department – enabling policy practitioners to get on with their job with a clearer focus on desired impacts for students. Importantly, the way SPER and other divisions work together to develop high-quality strategy policy has evolved significantly. It is more collaborative and driven by shared goals and role clarity. As one Divisional leader noted:

The Strategic Policy Model has been invaluable in developing the Department's digital strategy. It has provided a way of working between my division and SPER, bringing digital and policy subject matter experts together, to achieve the best outcomes for South Australian teachers and students. – Scott Bayliss, Executive Director, ICT Services Division

Importantly, feedback from policy staff indicates the Model is supporting them in their day-to-day work. As one senior policy advisor noted:

As a new senior policy practitioner to the Department, the Strategic Policy Model supported me in my work on the country education strategy by giving me clear steps in the process, excellent and useable resources and confidence that I know what is being asked for. – Claire Moffatt, Senior Policy Adviser

There is more to be done and capability development across the Department remains a particular focus. Effective policymaking requires good process, guidance, and tools – such as those included in the Model – but in order to consistently develop high-quality strategy policy and respond to changing circumstances, the Department's policy practitioners need to be highly-capable and skilled. SPER is developing further training courses to upskill not only its own practitioners, but the wider Department. SPER is also looking to refocus the Internal Policy Network to one that is geared towards sharing practice and stretching capability in using the Model and developing policy capability.

In addition, the intent when developing the Model was to launch and put it into practice, and then to evaluate and refine it along the way. In 2021, SPER is undertaking a review the Model to find opportunities for updating it to make it more applicable (for all policy work), to identify where processes could be more streamlined, and how the Model could be better scaled. It is also looking to develop more objective and measurable ways of monitoring the Model's impact. These will likely include indicators such as:

- levels of uptake and use of the Model and supporting tools for different types of policy work and by

different parts of the Department

- improvements in the quality of advice and policy processes as determined by various stakeholders including the Minister, the chief executive, and SEG, and as against some objective policy quality characteristics
- improvements in the level and quality of engagement as determined by colleagues across the Department and the wider education sector
- improvements in the educational outcomes being sought in the overall departmental strategy.

Reflections and lessons learned

Shifting the way in which strategic policy is thought about and produced within the Department, and building stronger capability to design and deliver it, has been a significant undertaking over several years. It has been a necessary one. Overall, the early stages have been successful, but the focus needs to be on long-term capability development and improvement.

The success of the uptake of the Model and its early use by the Department has been principally through:

- **A deliberate approach to governance, with senior sponsorship communicating the authorising environment.** The Chief Executive and SEG have been involved in the development of the Model and communicated their strong support for it. Rick Persse, the Chief Executive and Dr Peta Smith, Executive Director SPER, fronted the first webinar to encourage staff to use the Model. Key people have been involved in the process, from diagnosis to design to delivery of the Model, including the Director overseeing the Model's development, Luke Fraser, whose enthusiasm for the change process has energised staff. The Director's role was recognised when he was asked to share the Department's experience with students in ANZSOG's Executive Masters of Public Administration. A clear authorising environment, visible sponsors and enthusiastic champions are vital in any change program.
- **Collaboration and co-design.** Staff throughout the Department were invited to share their insights and were involved throughout the process of designing the Model. The Model was 'designed with people' not 'done to them'. Their input should mean that it helps them do their job and brings the different parts of the Department together around common policy goals. This is a particularly important operating model for a relatively new centralised strategic policy division with responsibility for stewardship of this area. SPER has had to model practice and behaviour – walk the talk – and not just in demonstrating high-level policy expertise, but in its support for delivery and its collaboration with other divisions in their work.
- **Constant communication and socialisation of the Model.** The sustained approach to demonstrating value and building reputation and support over time should not be underestimated. Ongoing workshops to develop supporting tools and to build necessary policy skills across the Department were crucial. These provide an opportunity to build relationships as well as to refine the Model.

Other lessons learned in the development of the Model are relevant to organisations embarking on a policy capability development journey. These include:

- **Draw on the experiences of others.** Learning from what other organisations or jurisdictions have done and adopting or adapting tools or approaches has ensured that the Model benefits from best practice. It is important to ensure that anything taken from elsewhere fits the local context and needs, but it is not always necessary to 'reinvent the wheel'. A 'not invented here' attitude means missing out on others' successes (and failures).
- **Courageous conversations and confidence to invite outside challenge.** Inviting external assessment to 'hold a mirror up' to existing weaknesses and gaps was crucial for confirming earlier internal

assessments of performance. The insights from external ‘critical friends’ were highly valuable. Continuity of that ongoing peer review or ‘sounding board’ was also helpful. External experts can also bring insights and practice from other organisations and jurisdictions. Ms Washington and Professor Mintrom bought insights from ANZSOG and its jurisdictions. They encouraged the Department to ‘pay it forward’ by preparing this research/practice insights report for others to draw on.

Conclusion

Early signs are that the Strategic Policy Model is helping the Department in the drive towards its world-class vision for South Australian students. With ongoing refinement, and a sustained focus on capability development over the coming years, the Model will support continuous improvement in the way the Department designs and delivers strategic policy. This in turn should enable better decision-making and more impactful policy. Time will tell as to whether it will have a direct and positive impact on education outcomes. Growth for every child and student in every preschool and school in South Australia will be the ultimate test of success.

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