

ATOMIC PNG INSTITUTE

A SYSTEMS DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE OF FLEXWEAR TM LIMITED



# ATOMIC SCHOOLS

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*Building Better Systems,  
Better Schools & Better Futures*

Michael Basse

A SCHOOL TRANSFORMATION WORKBOOK

*Better Systems. Better Schools. Better Futures.*

# ATOMIC SCHOOLS PNG

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By Michael Basse

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## Disclaimer

This workbook is provided for general educational and professional development purposes. It offers frameworks, systems, and practical tools intended to support school improvement in the Papua New Guinean context.

The author and publisher have made every effort to ensure the material is accurate, practical, and useful. However, this workbook is sold and distributed with the understanding that neither the author nor the publisher is providing professional, legal, financial, or official policy advice. The systems and templates described here are starting points to be adapted by each school. They are not a substitute for the policies, standards, curriculum requirements, and directives of the National Department of Education, provincial education authorities, or relevant church education agencies.

Schools, leaders, and teachers remain responsible for ensuring that anything they implement complies with their own governing policies and local regulations. Results will vary from school to school depending on context, leadership, resources, and consistency of implementation. No specific outcome is guaranteed.

Where examples of schools, teachers, and students appear in this workbook, they are illustrative composites created to demonstrate principles. They do not depict any specific real school or individual unless explicitly stated.

## Dedication

This workbook is dedicated to the people who hold Papua New Guinea's schools together — often with very little, and often without recognition.

To the **teachers** who walk long distances, teach large classes, and keep showing up.

To the **head teachers** who carry the weight of a whole school community on their shoulders.

To the **church education workers** who have served learning and faith side by side for generations.

To the **rural and remote schools** that do extraordinary work far from the main roads, far from reliable supply lines, and far from the spotlight.

And to the **students** of Papua New Guinea — in every province, on every island, in every valley — who deserve schools built on strong systems, steady leadership, and the belief that their future is worth building well.

This book is for you. Better systems are within your reach.

## Foreword

Walk into two schools in the same district, serving the same kind of community, with the same level of funding, and you will often find two completely different places.

In one, the morning has a rhythm. Students arrive on time. The bell means something. Teachers know what they are teaching and have what they need to teach it. The grounds are clean. There is a sense of order that is not harsh, but calm — the calm of a place that knows how it runs.

In the other, the morning is a scramble. Some students drift in late and nothing happens. A class sits unattended because no one is quite sure who is covering it. Good intentions are everywhere, but they leak away through a hundred small gaps. The staff work hard — sometimes harder than the first school — and still the days feel like they are spent putting out fires rather than building anything.

What is the difference between these two schools?

It is tempting to say the difference is motivation, or discipline, or the quality of the individual teachers. Those things matter. But they are not the deepest answer. The deepest answer is **systems**. The first school has them. The second school is relying on the heroic daily effort of individuals to do the job that systems should be doing quietly in the background.

This is the heart of what you are holding. Schools matter — they are where a nation decides what its next generation will become. Leadership matters — a school rises or falls with the people who guide it. But motivation and leadership, on their own, are not enough, because they are not sustainable. People get tired. Good staff transfer out. The energetic head teacher who held everything together by force of personality eventually leaves, and the school slides back, because nothing was built to outlast them.

Systems are what make improvement *sustainable*. A system is simply an agreed way of doing something that happens the same way whether or not any particular person is having a good day. When a school's attendance follows a system, attendance does not depend on whether one teacher remembers to chase it. When planning follows a system, the quality of teaching does not collapse the week the head teacher is away. Systems take the good practice that lives in one person's head and make it the property of the whole school.

That is why this is a workbook and not just a book. You cannot read your way to a better school. You build one — deliberately, system by system, with structure and accountability and honest evaluation. The pages ahead give you the tools to do exactly that, in the real conditions of Papua New Guinean schools, with the resources you actually have.

The work is not glamorous. Building systems rarely is. But it is the work that lasts. And the schools that do it will be the ones still standing strong long after the noise has faded.

Better systems. Better schools. Better futures. Let us begin.

## Introduction

### Welcome to Atomic Schools PNG

This workbook exists for one reason: to help Papua New Guinean schools improve in a way that *lasts*.

Not improvement that flares up for a term and fades. Not improvement that depends entirely on one extraordinary person. Lasting improvement — the kind that survives staff transfers, difficult years, and the ordinary wear of time, because it is built into how the school works.

The approach is called **Atomic Schools** for a reason. An atom is small. On its own, a single atom seems insignificant. But matter is built from atoms, and everything solid in the world is the result of countless small units arranged into a stable structure. Schools are the same. A great school is not built from one grand gesture. It is built from many small, consistent, well-organised actions — repeated reliably, day after day, until they become simply "the way we do things here."

That is what a system is: small good actions, made reliable.

### The Problem This Workbook Solves

The central challenge facing many schools is not a lack of effort, intelligence, or care. It is **inconsistency**.

Inconsistency is the quiet thief of school quality. A reading programme starts strongly in February and has quietly disappeared by May. A behaviour policy is enforced firmly by one teacher and ignored by the next, so students learn that rules are negotiable. Attendance is recorded carefully some weeks and not others, so no one really knows who is missing or why. Lesson planning happens diligently until the term gets busy, and then it slips.

None of these failures comes from bad people. They come from relying on memory, mood, and individual willpower instead of on systems. Willpower runs out. Systems do not.

This workbook is built to replace inconsistency with structure — gently, practically, and in a way that fits the realities of PNG schools.

### The Core Principle

Everything in this workbook rests on one idea:

***Schools do not rise above their systems.***

A school can have a brilliant vision statement on the wall and still be chaotic, if it has no systems to turn that vision into daily practice. A school can have dedicated teachers and still struggle, if their dedication is wasted plugging gaps that a good system would have closed. Your school will perform at the level of its systems — no higher. If you want a better school, you do not start by demanding more effort. You start by building better systems, and then the same effort produces far better results.

### How This Workbook Is Organised

This is a working document, designed to be used, not just read. It moves through eight parts:

- **Part 1 — The Foundation of Great Schools:** the core principles everything else is built on.
- **Part 2 — The Atomic Classroom:** routines, organisation, discipline, reading, and learning habits.
- **Part 3 — The Atomic Teacher System:** productivity, planning, assessment, accountability, and wellness.

- **Part 4 — The Atomic Student System:** identity, leadership, attendance, goals, and accountability.
- **Part 5 — The Atomic School Culture:** standards, cleanliness, respect, communication, and recognition.
- **Part 6 — The Head Teacher Playbook:** leading through systems, operations, staff accountability, data, and sustainability.
- **Part 7 — The 90-Day School Transformation Program:** a practical, month-by-month plan to put it all into action.
- **Part 8 — The Future of PNG Education:** building better schools for the next generation.

The **Appendices** provide printable templates — audits, trackers, planners, and dashboards — that you can copy and use immediately.

### How to Use Each Chapter

Every chapter follows the same structure, so you always know where you are:

1. **Opening Story** — a short, true-to-life scenario.
2. **Core Concept** — the key idea explained plainly.
3. **PNG School Example** — how it looks in a real Papua New Guinean context.
4. **Practical Framework** — the actual system, step by step.
5. **Reflection Questions** — to apply the idea to *your* school.
6. **Activities** — hands-on tasks to do with your team.
7. **Action Steps** — what to do this week.
8. **Implementation Checklist** — to track that it is actually happening.
9. **Chapter Summary** — the essentials in brief.

### A Note Before You Begin

Do not try to do everything at once. A school that tries to change forty things in a month changes nothing, because no single change is given the time and attention it needs to take root. The power of the atomic approach is in choosing a few systems, building them properly, and letting them become habit before adding more.

Read with a pen. Mark the pages. Argue with the book where you disagree. Adapt every template to your own school. This workbook is not a set of orders from outside — it is a toolkit to be made your own.

You provide the commitment. This workbook provides the structure. Together, that is how better schools are built.

Let us begin with the foundation.

# PART 1

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*Better Systems. Better Schools. Better Futures.*



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## THE FOUNDATION OF GREAT SCHOOLS

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*Before you build anything, you must understand what you are building on. This first part lays the foundation — five principles that everything else in this workbook depends on. Get these right, and the rest follows. Skip them, and even the best classroom techniques will sit on sand.*

## Chapter 1

### Schools Do Not Rise Above Their Systems

#### Opening Story

Two head teachers, Mr. Aila and Mrs. Konio, were appointed to two primary schools in the same district in the same year. Both schools had about four hundred students. Both had old buildings, stretched budgets, and a mix of experienced and brand-new teachers. On paper, they were almost identical.

Mr. Aila was a man of enormous energy. He arrived before dawn, stayed after dark, and personally chased nearly every problem. When attendance dropped, he visited families himself. When a teacher was absent, he covered the class himself. When the grounds were untidy, he picked up a rake himself. For three years he held his school together through sheer personal effort, and people admired him for it.

Mrs. Konio worked hard too, but differently. In her first term she did almost no firefighting. Instead she sat with her staff and built things: an agreed way of taking attendance every morning, a simple system for covering absent teachers, a weekly cleaning roster tied to the timetable, a planning routine every teacher followed. It looked slower. Some thought she was not doing much.

By the fourth year, Mr. Aila was exhausted. He was promoted and transferred — and within two terms, his old school had slid back to where it started, because everything had lived inside his head and his hands. Mrs. Konio was also transferred. Her school barely noticed she had gone. The systems kept running. The new head teacher inherited a school that worked.

One head teacher had carried his school. The other had built a school that could carry itself.

#### Core Concept

There is a hard truth at the centre of school improvement, and it is the foundation of this entire workbook:

***A school will only ever perform at the level of its systems.***

Not at the level of its vision. Not at the level of its individual heroes. At the level of its *systems* — the agreed, repeatable ways things actually get done.

A **system** is simply a defined way of doing something that produces the same result regardless of who is doing it or what kind of day they are having. "We take attendance when we remember" is not a system. "Every teacher marks the roll in the first ten minutes, and the office collects and totals all rolls by 9:00 a.m." is a system.

Most struggling schools are not struggling because of a shortage of effort or good intentions. They are struggling because they depend on **individual willpower** to do the job that systems should be doing. Willpower is a poor foundation for a school, because willpower is unreliable. It varies from person to person and from day to day. It fades when people are tired, sick, discouraged, or simply busy. A school built on willpower is only ever one hard term away from collapse.

Systems are different. A good system holds steady whether the people running it are energetic or exhausted, experienced or new, present or absent. This is why the most important work a school leader can do is not to work harder than everyone else, but to *build the systems that mean the school no longer depends on anyone working like a hero.*

The shift in thinking is this: stop asking "how can we try harder?" and start asking "what system would make this happen reliably without anyone having to try so hard?"

### PNG School Example

Consider a common situation in a Papua New Guinean community school. Teacher absence is a fact of life — staff have funerals to attend, family obligations, illness, and sometimes long travel for pay or supplies. The question is not whether teachers will be absent. They will. The question is what happens to their classes when they are.

In a willpower-based school, the answer is: it depends. If the head teacher is around and notices, they scramble to cover. If not, the class might sit unattended for the morning, or be sent home, or be absorbed into another already-large class, with nothing learned. The outcome depends on luck and individual alertness.

In a systems-based school, there is an agreed **absence-cover system**, decided in advance and known to everyone. For example: every teacher keeps a simple folder of "ready lessons" — basic, self-contained activities any colleague can supervise. A standing cover roster names which teacher or senior student leader steps in for each class in an emergency. The deputy checks the roster against attendance each morning. None of this requires the head teacher to be a hero. It requires the system to exist and be followed.

The difference over a year is enormous. In the first school, dozens of learning days quietly vanish. In the second, the same number of teacher absences cause far less damage, because the system absorbs the shock. Same staff, same absence rate, completely different results — because of systems.

### Practical Framework

#### The System-Building Cycle

Whenever you want to improve something in your school, do not start by demanding more effort. Build a system, using these five steps:

10. **Name the outcome you want.** Be specific and observable. Not "better attendance," but "the morning roll is completed and totalled by 9:00 a.m. every day."
11. **Define the steps.** Write down exactly who does what, when, and how. A system that lives only in conversation is not yet a system. It must be written, simple, and clear enough that a brand-new teacher could follow it.
12. **Assign ownership.** Every system needs one named person responsible for it running — not "the school," but a specific role. Without an owner, a system drifts.
13. **Build in a check.** Decide how you will know the system is actually happening. A weekly two-minute review is often enough. What is not checked will quietly stop.
14. **Review and adjust.** After a few weeks, ask: is this working? Is it too complicated? Simplify ruthlessly. A simple system that is followed beats a perfect system that is ignored.

Run anything you want to improve through this cycle, and you convert it from a hope into a system.

### Reflection Questions

Take time to answer these honestly about your own school:

15. Name three things in your school that currently depend on one particular person's effort or memory. What would happen to each if that person were transferred tomorrow?

16. Think of something your school does *well* and reliably. Is it reliable because of a system, or because of a person? How do you know?
17. Where in your school are good people working hard to plug gaps that a simple system would close?
18. If you had to write down "the way we take attendance here" in five steps, could you? Would every staff member write the same five steps?

## Activities

### Activity 1.1 — The Hero Audit (with your leadership team)

List every important thing that keeps your school running — attendance, cover for absent teachers, cleaning, assembly, reporting, discipline, and so on. For each one, mark it **S** (held up by a system) or **P** (held up by a particular person). Count your P's. Each one is a risk and an opportunity.

### Activity 1.2 — Choose Your First System

From your list of P's, choose just **one** to convert into a real system this term. Choose something that causes regular pain and is small enough to fix. Write it at the top of a page. You will build it using the System-Building Cycle.

### Activity 1.3 — Draft the System

Using the five steps of the System-Building Cycle, draft your chosen system on one page: outcome, steps, owner, check, review date. Keep it to a single page. If it does not fit on one page, it is too complicated to be followed.

## Action Steps

This week, do the following:

- Complete the Hero Audit with at least two other staff members.
- Choose one "person-dependent" task to convert into a system.
- Write that system on one page using the five-step cycle.
- Name the person who owns it and the day each week you will check it.
- Tell the whole staff about the new system in the simplest possible terms.

## Implementation Checklist

- Our leadership team understands the principle: *schools do not rise above their systems*.
- We have identified the tasks in our school that depend on individuals rather than systems.
- We have selected one priority system to build first.
- That system is written down in five steps on a single page.
- The system has a named owner.
- We have set a weekly time to check the system is running.
- Staff have been informed clearly and simply.

## Chapter Summary

- A school performs at the level of its **systems**, not its vision statements or its individual heroes.

- A **system** is an agreed, written, repeatable way of doing something that works regardless of who is doing it.
- **Willpower is unreliable**; systems are stable. Schools that depend on individual heroics are fragile and slide backwards when those individuals leave.
- The leader's most valuable work is **building systems**, not out-working everyone.
- Use the **System-Building Cycle**: name the outcome, define the steps, assign ownership, build in a check, review and adjust.
- Start with **one** system. Build it properly before adding more.

# End of Free Preview

Thank you for reading the free preview of  
Atomic Schools PNG — Building Better Systems,  
Better Schools & Better Futures.

This preview includes the introduction and Chapter 1.  
The full workbook contains 31 chapters across 8 parts,  
a complete 90-Day School Transformation Program, and  
10 printable templates — a practical school-transformation  
manual for the Papua New Guinean educator.

**K120**

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