CONTENTS

01 Introduction
03 Background
04 Motivation for Strategic Planning
05 Benefits of Strategic Planning
06 A Sound Organizational Model Lays the Foundation
08 Guidelines for Successful Strategic Planning
09 The Process
15 Conclusion
16 References
Introduction

School leaders are bombarded with techniques, solutions, and methods purporting to help their organizations improve performance, quality, and stakeholder satisfaction. However, strategy is necessary to identify and execute actions that will lead to the realization of the desired future.

Schools often develop long-range plans; however this process generally involves making decisions about the future based on present data. School planning tends toward internal analysis, toward planning as a separate institutional function. Long-range planning assumes a closed system within which organizational five- and ten-year plans could be constructed. Conversely, strategic planning is a disciplined, research-based method of inquiry that allows school districts to create their own futures through rigorous organization assessment and long-range planning, followed by operational execution.

Strategic planning focuses on the internal and external environment, quantitative and qualitative information, decisions regarding resource commitments, and on integrated, participatory involvement. Strategic planning assumes an open system in which organizations are dynamic and constantly changing as they integrate information from shifting environmental factors.

A strategic plan is a document that articulates the organization’s mission and vision, as well as the goals and objectives needed to achieve the vision. A strategic plan provides the framework and guidance for organizations to fulfill their missions with optimal efficiency and impact. Strategic planning is also a cyclical process that, through consistent monitoring and realignment with strategically agreed-upon values and goals, is continually implemented, evaluated, and revised in order to improve student achievement and district performance.

J. M. Bryson defines strategic planning as:

“A disciplined effort to produce fundamental decisions and actions that shape and guide what an organization is, what it does, and why it does it. To deliver the best results, strategic planning requires broad yet effective information gathering, development and exploration of strategic alternatives, and an emphasis on future implications of present decisions.”

This definition alludes to the important questions strategic planning addresses: Why does the organization exist? What is its mission and vision? What are the history and culture of the organization? What do stakeholders expect from the district? How does the organization envision its future and what specific goals, objectives, action plans, and tactics will carry the district to its desired future?
A critical addition to this working definition emphasizes how the organization will measure its performance toward achieving stated goals. Successful strategic planning provides the following advantages:

- Articulates organizational priorities and stakeholder values
- Aligns workforce and resources to the strategic goals and objectives
- Establishes a mission, vision, and guiding principles for effective decision making
- Increases stakeholder commitment to a common vision
- Provides a communication vehicle to inform stakeholders about district initiatives
- Effectively and authentically engages employees and other stakeholders

The benefits of strategic planning accrue to the various stakeholders in a school district in different measures and in nuanced ways. Still the notion of going through the lengthy and sometimes messy process can feel burdensome at times. Therefore, the following discussion of the benefits of strategic planning, and the motivations for strategic planning, will illustrate why it is important for school districts to engage in the process at consistent intervals.
Background

The concept of strategic planning can be traced back to the military arena as early as the Greek city-states in the fifth century BC. Although the Harvard Policy Model, a planning methodology for private business, was created in the early 1920s, modern use of strategic planning did not emerge on a large scale until the 1950s when the SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis model dominated business planning. In the decades between the mid-1960s and mid-1970s, American corporations were fixated with strategic planning.

As multiple quantitative studies of the impact of strategic planning on increased market share and profitability failed to demonstrate a positive correlation, strategic planning was abandoned for over a decade. Not until the 1990’s was the concept of strategic planning revived as part of the movement for business transformation.

Incorporating strategic planning considerably later than the business world, school districts have an uninterrupted record of embracing the process as a regular feature of their organizational life. At the same time, an increasing focus on accountability and academic achievement contributed to the movement for school transformation in the 1990s. For the public sector, regularly engaging in the process of examining the mission and vision, assessing current state, setting goals, determining action plans to achieve their goals, and measuring progress towards meeting the goals has become a characteristic of successful schools. School districts were able to avoid many of the mistakes made in the private sector during the heyday of strategic planning, as described by Henry Mintzberg in his analysis of business planning, *The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning.*
Motivation for Strategic Planning

Successful organizations proactively initiate strategic planning so they can be more responsive to changing circumstances, underlying trends, and shifting demands. iv

Strategic planning in school districts differs significantly from the planning process in the private sector because the notion of products, markets, timelines, and clients is not relevant to the mission of schools. The motivation for strategic planning falls into two categories: those that result in concrete structures and systems for the district and those that manifest themselves in broader, abstract effects within the organization.

In the first category, the strategic plan provides a base from which progress can be measured, establishing priorities for efficient and effective resource allocation, improving communication between stakeholders, creating more relevant institutional structures, and articulating goals to improve performance.

The broader, more abstract motivating factors relate to the benefits derived from the very nature of the strategic planning process. In many cases, engaging in strategic thinking can be as important as the final product. The notion of incorporating everyone’s best efforts resonates with the core values of educational organizations. In light of the uncertainties and external pressures facing American education, Robert Bradford reminds planners that, “It is vital to analyze WHY the future will be different – and why the current changes we see today may or may not continue in the future.” v Thus, the statement, “The primary benefit of the planning process is the process itself and not a plan,” vi resonates strongly with educators and affirms Bryson’s definition of strategic planning. At the same time, the completed plan provides a roadmap for all stakeholders regarding the direction and aspirations of the school district.

“I am hard pressed to think of any organization that has sustained some measure of greatness in the absence of goals, values, and missions that become deeply shared throughout the organization.”

Peter Senge
The Fifth Discipline
Benefits of Strategic Planning

There are many reasons school districts turn to strategic planning. Some districts have a rich history of documenting and monitoring values-based goals. For these districts, strategic planning is a continuation and updating of their traditional systems. Other districts turn to strategic planning when faced with the potential and challenge of new leadership, to address changing student populations, or to end a cycle of ineffective management and programming. For these districts, the strategic planning process provides a values-based, systematic approach to re-assess community values and planning for the future.

Academic literature offers other significant benefits that are derived from a successful strategic planning process, including those on the following list.

- Establishes a vision, mission, and beliefs for the school district
- Relates organizational capacity to community need
- Raises board members’ awareness of current issues and operations
- Establishes a path to accomplish its desired future
- Creates a document suitable for public relations
- Provides a path which allows the community to work together to accomplish the goals, objectives, and activities that constitute the strategic plan
- Gives the school district better control over external forces and the ability to anticipate and/or react to them
- Allows the school district to set specific data-driven priorities
- Serves as a tool for decision making and resource allocation
A Sound Organizational Model Lays the Foundation

The foundation of a successful strategic plan is a sound organizational model. ECRA has developed a proven organizational model detailed in the diagram below. The ECRA Strategic Planning Model facilitates the strategic planning process from inquiry through execution, monitoring, and accountability.
Mission, Vision, & Guiding Principles
The mission is reviewed and a vision for the future and guiding principles for decision making emerge through research and analysis. By the end of the strategic planning process, the renewed mission, vision, and guiding principles will articulate and document the organization’s reason for being, its aspirations, core beliefs, and philosophies.

Research Findings
Data are collected and synthesized in the context of the district’s mission, vision, and guiding principles and articulated into research findings. In this phase, ECRA conducts in-depth research to document the current state of reality in the context of the mission and vision, as well as stakeholder values and priorities for the district’s future. External trends and government regulations are considered as well.

Strategic Goals
Strategic goals are extracted from the research findings. Strategic goals are broad, long-term aims that operationalize the District’s mission and vision into general intentions that reflect the desired future position of the organization.

Objectives
The objectives are tangible strategies necessary to accomplish the strategic goals while staying true to the mission, vision, and guiding principles. Strategies may positively impact more than one goal area.

Tactics & Implementation Plan
Upon approval of the strategic plan, specific actions and timelines necessary to achieve the goals and objectives are developed. As the model suggests, it is the role of the administration to develop the implementation plan that delineates the steps and timelines necessary to achieve the goals.

Execution
After the implementation plan is finalized, administration should develop the information systems necessary to monitor adherence, including the development of a dashboard to highlight progress on key performance indicators linked to the strategic plan.
Guidelines for Successful Strategic Planning

**Strategic versus Operational**
Successful strategic planning includes authentic stakeholder engagement while also allowing goals and strategies to be operationalized by the staff responsible for transforming district stakeholders’ vision into reality. A strategic planning model recognizes the critical connection between the community’s vision for the district and support for necessary resources. Input is sought from a broad spectrum of stakeholders regarding their perspectives on educational values, the current state of the district, and a vision for the future. The Board of Education provides final approval for the plan, the guiding principles, and overarching goals, while the administration identifies performance objectives, actions, and metrics. The Board’s oversight ensures alignment of the operational plan with the guiding principles and the Board holds itself and staff accountable for the expected results.

**Plans Live or Die in Implementation**
Research shows that when strategic planning is done well, with a disciplined and robust process that guides efforts to ensure completeness, the outcomes can be powerful. Yet, research suggests that 90 percent of organizations fail to successfully implement their strategies.

Fully operationalized strategic plans are more comprehensive and contain components that allow leaders to monitor progress and remove obstacles to accomplishing goals. A disciplined method of inquiry comprises stakeholder input, systemic data analysis, and interpretation of results. A successful strategic planning process cultivates a highly effective school district while energizing community support for systemic improvements. The result is an action-planning framework for achieving objectives aligned with the district’s vision for success. Instead of ending with the strategic plan document, ECRA’s model supports administrators as they develop, implement, and monitor the living strategic plan.

**Build Capacity for Strategic Change**
The strategic planning process is designed to build capacity for strategic change, while evaluating the current state and developing a vision and goals for the future of the district. Leadership and organizational culture are essential for effective change, as are an understanding of the current state and a common language for communicating change. Leaders must demonstrate and communicate values that align with the organization’s mission and vision to support change. An understanding of the organizational culture allows a district to leverage strengths and overcome challenges.

In order for organizational transformation to be successful, the leadership team must build a stakeholder base committed to the district’s mission and strategic plan. Leaders must think of strategic goals as a message “packet” that must be passed through the organization, understood by all, and acted upon in synchronicity. If the message is jumbled, vague, or not communicated well, the intent will be lost in translation and operational execution will not be aligned to the strategic goals. Spreading the enterprise vision throughout the ranks of the organization empowers and energizes stakeholders to contribute to the successful execution of the plan. The end result should be organizational alignment; focus across all levels of the organization that is consistent.
The Process

Effective strategic planning provides a three- to five-year framework for decision making that builds upon the common vision and values held by the community. The ECRA Strategic Planning Process comprises three concrete phases that puts the organizational model into action and empowers leaders with critical information and strategies to bring decisions into focus.

Phase I: Conducting Research

The first phase of the strategic planning process involves documenting the current state of reality and desired future position of the school district through authentic stakeholder engagement. The Board of Education, administration, faculty, staff, parents, students, and community leaders are the cohesive groups that endeavor to create a vision for their desired future through their feedback, opinions, and ideas.

In Phase I, ECRA collects, analyzes, synthesizes, and triangulates the data to identify themes and trends, which culminates in the research findings. All research findings are included in a document containing evidence to support each conclusion.

“The true measure of a successful organization is not what it knows but what it does not know.”
Warren Bennis
American scholar and leadership studies pioneer

Phase I involves the following key components:

- Conduct individual Board of Education interviews
- Conduct focus groups with other key stakeholder populations (district administrators, school administrators, faculty, staff, parents, students, and community members)
- Review mission, vision, and guiding principles of the school district
- Review archival data and reports provided by the district
- Administer surveys of key stakeholder populations
- Perform rigorous analysis of student achievement data

Additional details about each research component in Phase I (interviews, focus groups, stakeholder surveys, student achievement analysis, and other archival data) can be found on the following pages.
Interviews and Focus Groups
After working with the administration to solidify the launch of the strategic planning process, research begins with the strategic leaders of the district, the Board of Education. ECRA recommends conducting individual interviews with each board member to assess each member’s expectations, perceptions of the current state of the district, and ideal future state.

In addition, stakeholder focus groups are held after the strategic planning process begins. Results are incorporated into survey development and inform the development of goals and objectives. ECRA recommends including a cross-section of stakeholders such as administrators, faculty and staff, parents, special interest groups such as PTA or athletic booster organizations, students, and community leaders.

Stakeholder Surveys
Stakeholder surveys tap the collective wisdom of groups, and are a critical part to any strategic planning process. Surveys allow key issues to emerge of which leaders may be unaware and provide validation of existing knowledge. Gathering feedback through surveys of key stakeholders is a highly effective means to collect information on stakeholder perceptions from a large sample of individuals.

Furthermore, because the surveys generate responses for each population of interest, descriptive survey analysis can clarify the expectations and perceptions of stakeholder groups, ensuring a more accurate picture of the current district reality and desire for future direction. Measuring stakeholder satisfaction helps identify problems that might otherwise go unnoticed by organizational leadership, improve public trust in school systems, and increase support for future programming and initiatives. Stakeholder surveys also serve the secondary purpose of providing the District with data to benchmark their performance internally and externally against comparable districts and institutions.

Student Achievement Analysis
A comprehensive analysis of student achievement data provided by the district is essential to any thorough school district strategic planning process. Research-driven statistical procedures are utilized to better understand the achievement of students. Analyses will include comparisons to historical and state data and an examination of both student status and growth. Evaluating student achievement allows the district to document the impact of expenditures on intended outcomes and provide formative data that can be used to improve the effectiveness of the instructional program.
Comprehensive Review of Archival Data
Archival reports and data are also reviewed. Consideration is given to initiatives already in progress. Relevant archival data is triangulated with new data to formulate goals and objectives. Examples of archival data are detailed below.

Examples of Comprehensive Archival Data:
- Mission, Vision, Values, or Core Belief Statements
- District and School Profiles
- Past Strategic Plans
- Student Achievement Data and Analyses
- Documented Curriculum
- Curriculum Audits
- Facilities Plans and Audits
- Technology Plans and Audits
- Life Safety Plans
- Budgets and Long-Term Finance Plans
- Past Stakeholder Survey Data or Reports
- Administrative Organizational Structure Charts and Documents
- Past Program Evaluations
- Assessment Plan or Assessment Program Documentation
- Policy Manuals
- Enrollment Projections and Capacity Information
- Community Demographic Information
- Any Other Reports Related to Previous Studies in the District
Phase II: Developing the Strategic Plan

The second phase of the strategic planning process includes creating a framework for broad direction and priorities for the future in a formal strategic plan document. Findings from the research phase will be synthesized, summarized, and reported in the strategic plan holistically and thematically.

Phase II involves the following key components:

- Document mission and vision for the district, guiding principles for future decision making, and the future direction desired by stakeholders.

- Develop the Supporting Evidence document that synthesizes the results of the research phase.

- Develop the strategic plan document to serve as a broad outline to guide direction for the school district. The strategic plan contains:
  - Mission
  - Vision
  - Guiding Principles
  - Strategic Goals
  - Objectives

Mission, Vision, & Guiding Principles

A district’s mission, vision, and guiding principles articulate and document the organization’s reason for being, its aspirations, core beliefs, and philosophies. As part of Phase II, if necessary, the mission, vision, and guiding principles will be revised to better define stakeholder values and what they desire for the district’s future direction.

Strategic Goals

Goals are broad, long-term aims that operationalize the District’s mission and vision into general intentions that reflect the desired future position of the organization. Goal areas will be identified through data synthesis. Examples include, but are not limited to: student achievement, teaching and learning, finance, and communication.

Objectives

Objectives are tangible strategies designed to accomplish the strategic goals while staying true to the mission and vision. Many objectives relate to more than one goal area, as district functions are interconnected and ultimately student focused. However, in the strategic plan document, objectives rest under a single goal area based on the objective’s primary purpose in order to enable comprehension by interested parties and effective communication with stakeholders.
Phase III: Developing the Implementation Plan
The third phase of the strategic planning process includes developing and documenting specific actions that will be taken in order to execute the objectives identified in the strategic plan. Each objective may require one or more actions to be fully executed. The implementation plan includes information systems necessary to monitor progress toward the organization’s vision and goals.

Phase III involves the following key components:

- Planning meetings
- Develop the implementation plan which contains the following:
  - Objectives
  - Metrics
  - Actions
  - Timeline
  - Responsible Person
  - Resources
- Develop district dashboard to monitor progress toward goals

Implementation Plan
Once there is consensus related to the objectives that will be used to accomplish the strategic goals, a detailed action plan will be developed for each goal area. The action plan will include metrics, actions, timelines, responsible persons, and resources necessary to monitor and achieve each objective.

Execution
It is in the execution phase that the district takes complete ownership of the process and carries out the necessary steps to transform the plan into a decision-making framework that provides strategic performance feedback. Execution involves developing the information systems necessary to monitor adherence to the tactics and action plan and progress toward achieving the vision. However, it is crucial to remember that effective strategic planning requires ongoing strategic management to keep resources and actions aligned with the mission and vision throughout the organization. Results of activities need to be quantified, analyzed, and connected to recommendations for future action.
Development of a Dashboard to Monitor Progress

The final step in the strategic planning process is the development of a district dashboard to monitor and communicate progress toward the vision and goals set forth in the strategic plan. Dashboards promote transparency and public trust by communicating District priorities and strategic initiatives.\(^{xi}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plan</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Performance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Student Performance**
- ISAT
- National Performance Reading
- National Performance Mathematics

**District Environment**
- Student Attendance
- Class Size
- Trend in Employee Satisfaction
- Parent Perception of Quality
- Community Perceptions of Quality
- Employee Perception of Quality

**Finance**
- Fund Balance to Revenue Ratio
- Days Cash on Hand
- Long-Term Debt
- Fiscal Health

Dashboards offers a customized, online, at-a-glance look at the measures selected by the district to determine whether goals are being met. Ultimately, dashboard indicators operationalize the goal areas into observable elements. The public dashboard should consist of key performance indicators linked to system level strategic goals.

The district may also choose to implement an internal quality dashboard for administrators, teachers, and staff to use in monitoring the continuous quality improvement of the curriculum and instructional program, technology integration, staff development, and internal district culture.
Conclusion

Unprecedented change is taking place in our nation’s education system. Without effective strategic planning, school leaders will be involved in crisis management, xii spending their time putting out fires instead of lighting fires of passion and learning in students. School leaders should embrace the importance of strategy by developing plans that are focused and that provide consistent monitoring and evaluation. Most importantly, the administrators who implement strategic plans should begin the process with confidence that their tactics and action plans will support the district vision and goals and truly influence student success. xiii

More Information

To learn more about strategic planning or discuss how the ECRA Strategic Planning Process can help your district realize its vision, please contact ECRA at 847-318-0072 or via email at office@ecragroup.com.
References


ii *Brief history of strategic planning*. Retrieved from intranet.onec.go.th/world_ed/history.html


Creating the Future: Strategic Planning for Schools