



Strategic Monitoring

*Tools and Techniques for Successful
Strategic Plan Implementation*

An ECRA White Paper

Introduction

A strategic plan is only as effective as its implementation, and successful implementation requires proactive strategic monitoring.

The ultimate effectiveness of a strategic plan rests in its use as a framework for decision making that builds upon a common mission, vision, and guiding principles held by the community. Operational execution of a strategic plan provides the following advantages:

- Articulates organizational priorities and stakeholder values
- Aligns workforce and resources around student outcomes
- Simplifies goal setting and decision making frameworks
- Aligns the Board, central office, and schools around a single set of goals and objectives
- Allows a unified vision and stakeholder values to filter through the system
- Allows flexibility to be responsive to unique culture and priorities
- Creates accountability for developing systems and processes outlined in the strategic plan
- Provides a communication vehicle to inform stakeholders about district initiatives

While the benefits of strategic planning are vast, many strategic plans fail to achieve desired outcomes in the implementation phase. A strategic plan that collects dust on a shelf and fails to be integrated throughout the district will not be successful. Every educator remembers a time when a research-based program failed to achieve its intended outcomes due to a lack of implementation fidelity, time, resources, support, or professional development. In the same way, strategic plans must be fully implemented and realized to have the desired impact on students.

The only way to ensure a successful implementation of a strategic plan is through strategic monitoring. This white paper contains the information and tools necessary to utilize your strategic plan fully, allowing for the realization of your district's desired future.

Strategic Planning Process Review

When utilized, a strategic plan framework aligns district resources with stakeholder values and priorities in order to guide key decisions and initiatives. The HYA Strategic Planning Process, detailed below, provides the district with actionable and measurable goals and a consistent communication vehicle. While the HYA Strategic Planning Process is provided as an example of the strategic plan development process, other research-based methods of strategic plan development should follow a similar pattern.



The current state of the district, stakeholder values and priorities, and external trends and environment are all systematically considered and incorporated.



The strategic planning process incorporates a mixed methods approach to develop a strategic plan based on sound research and stakeholder values.

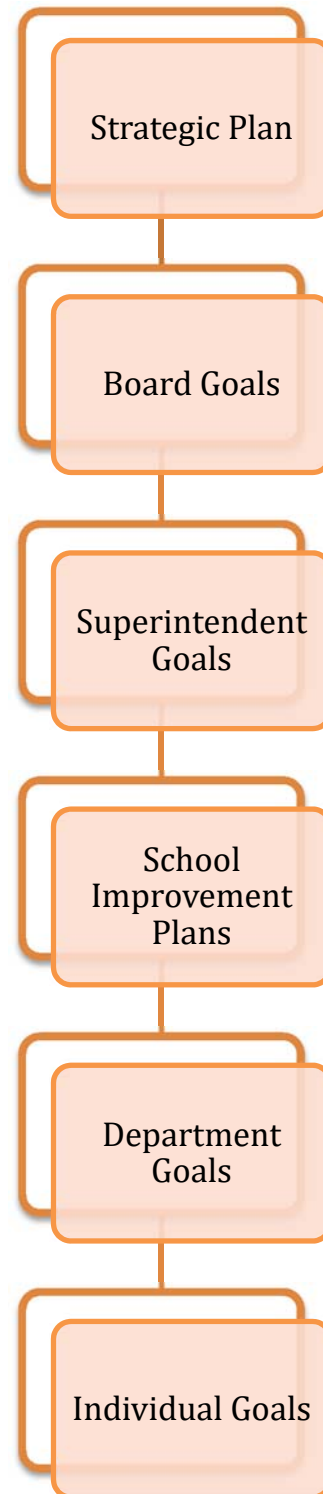


The resulting strategic plan provides a plan with actionable and measurable strategic goals and a consistent communication vehicle.

Alignment

Strategic plans are the unifying wrapper for all goal setting and decision making in the district. The Board, central office, and schools align their plans based on the goals and objectives identified in the strategic plan. Strategies and initiatives may vary from school to school and department to department but should all support the ultimate aims identified in the strategic plan. Strategic plans are implemented over a three to five year plan, while Board goals, Superintendent goals, and School Improvement Plans are generally developed annually. Aligning annual goals to the district strategic plan provides continuity and allows for the accomplishment of multi-year initiatives.

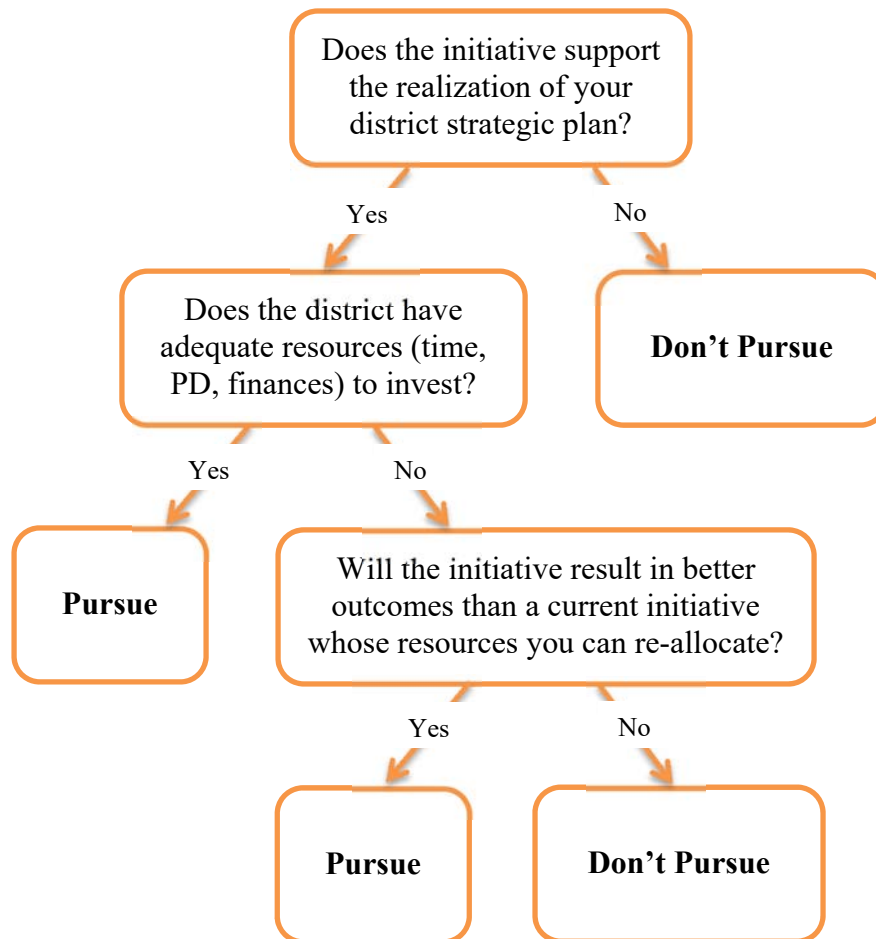
Aligning all goals to the strategic plan allows the vision and values identified during the strategic planning process to filter throughout the system, while also allowing school, department, and individual goals to be responsive to the unique culture and priorities at their respective level. For example, an elementary school may choose to support an objective around student engagement by integrating more arts in daily instruction, while a high school in the same district may increase student engagement by assigning freshman homerooms based on common interests to encourage the development of positive peer relationships. Both actions have the potential to increase student engagement, but by allowing each school to determine the method by which to accomplish the ultimate aim, the elementary school can be responsive to parents who are requesting more arts, and the high school can address parental and educator concerns regarding transition support for freshmen.



Decision Making

District and school leaders are bombarded with new ideas and initiatives. Every conference has insight on the best, new method for reading instruction or technology integration. All may be good potential initiatives, but implementing multiple changes at once strains employees and finances, limiting possible gains.

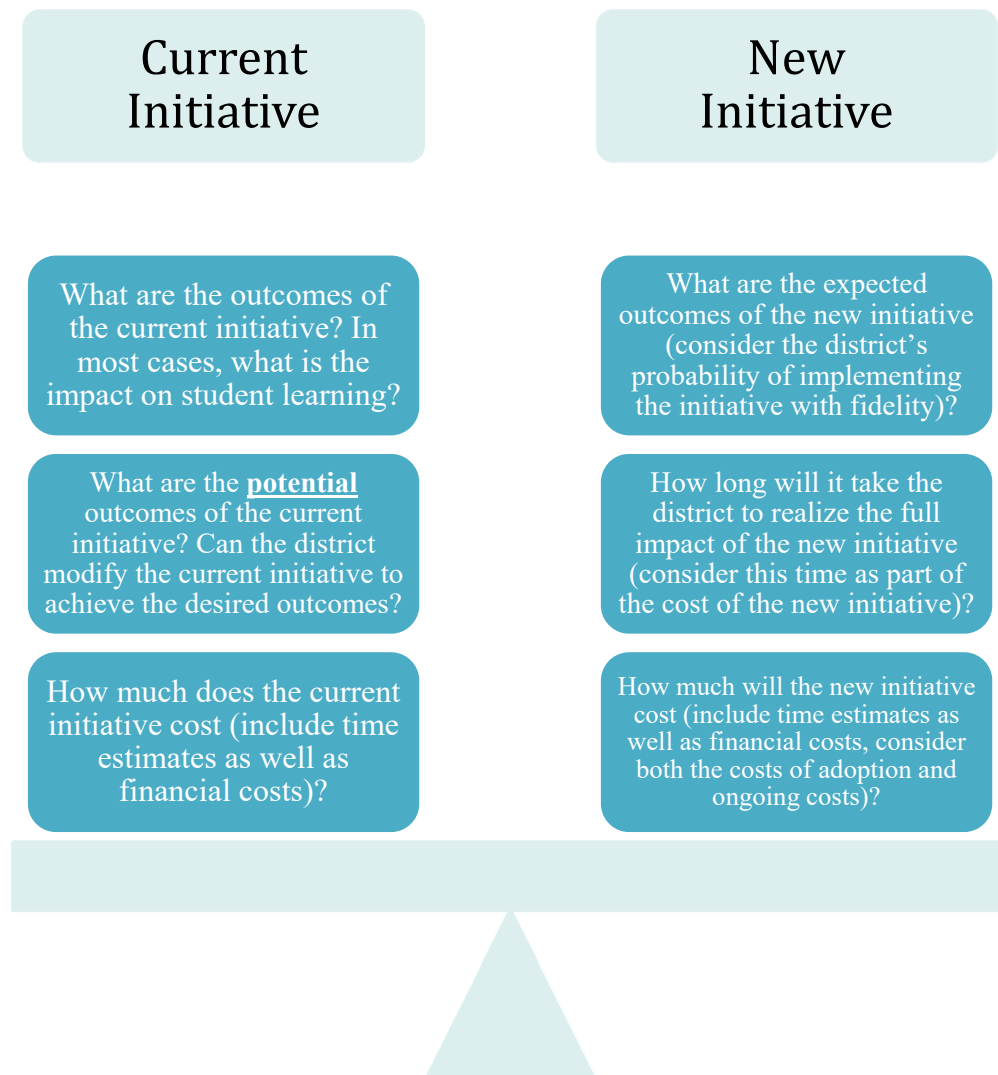
Aligning decision making to the strategic plan allows district leaders to allocate resources effectively, providing a system that prioritizes what matters most to stakeholders and has the greatest impact on student learning.¹ The district strategic plan and supporting documents provide a lens, such as the one detailed below, through which decision makers can evaluate whether a potential initiative is aligned with the district vision, values, and priorities and thus worth allocating resources to implement.



¹ Kaplan, R. S. & Norton, D. P. (2007). Using the balanced scorecard as a strategic management system. *Harvard Business Review*, 74(1), 75-85.

Decision Making (Continued)

Weighing the merits of a current initiative against the potential of a new initiative requires an understanding of the nuances of each program, as well as an understanding of the district organizational climate and culture. Before deciding, you may wish to consider the following questions.



Whichever initiative provides the greatest positive impact within the time and financial resources available should be adopted. Determining the impact and resource allocation necessary requires a thorough evaluation of both initiatives, which may include a review of student assessment, survey, focus group, interview, and financial data, as well as a review of academic literature.

Board Monitoring

To ensure continued focus on initiatives aligned with the strategic plan, ongoing monitoring reports are appropriate. Administrators are ultimately responsible for implementing the strategic plan. However, a review of implementation progress should be discussed at the Board-level on a regular basis. Board-level discussions should focus on macro-indicators linked to each goal area. Instead of reporting progress on each objective or action, two or three higher-level indicators per goal are recommended. The Board may also decide to track key performance indicators that are related to two or more goal areas.

Each Board chooses to monitor the implementation of their district's strategic plan differently, yet many districts utilize similar strategies for reporting progress to the Board and communicating progress to external stakeholders. Systems used successfully to monitor strategic plan implementation include:

- Dashboards
- Presentations
- Annual Reports

Each of the options is described in the following pages.

Dashboards

The Board can utilize a dashboard to monitor progress over time and to communicate district priorities and progress to the broader community. Dashboards promote transparency and public trust while also highlighting the effectiveness of the strategic plan.² The creation of a dashboard includes the identification, collection, and reporting of macro-indicators in order to communicate progress in the areas that matter most to stakeholders.

The efficacy of a dashboard lies in its ability to facilitate conversation and spur action. The primary purpose of a dashboard is not just to monitor progress but to instigate progress.³ An effective dashboard offers a look at the measures selected by the district to determine whether goals are being met. Ultimately, dashboard indicators operationalize the goal statements into key performance indicators, which are observable expected outcomes from successful implementation of the strategic plan.⁴

² Bryson, J. M. (2011). *Strategic planning for public and non-profit organizations: A guide to strengthening and sustaining organizational achievement* (4th ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

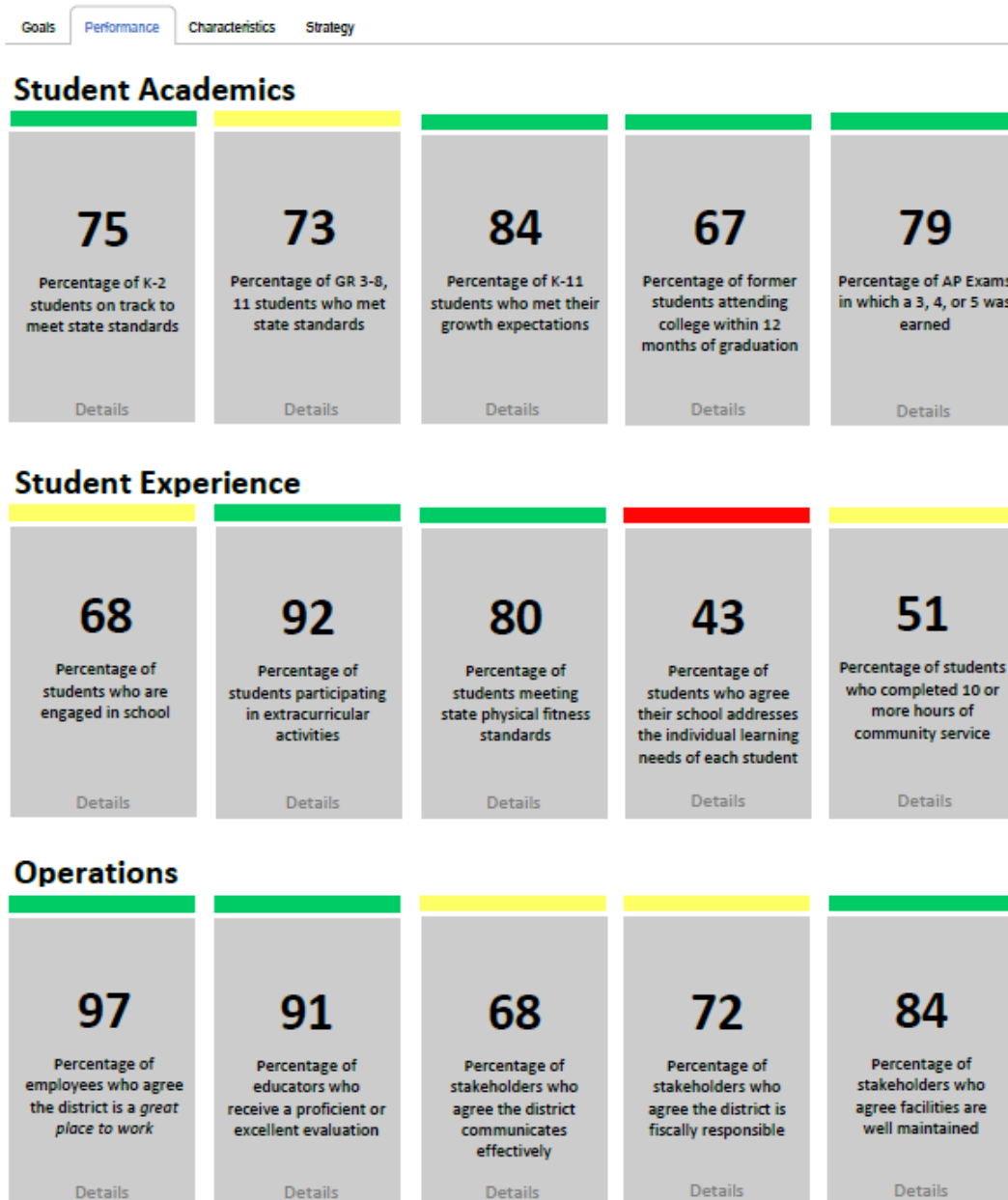
³ Cokins, G. (2012). A kit with a broken string: The balanced scorecard. *Strategic Management*. Retrieved from <http://businessfinancemag.com/blog/kite-broken-string-balanced-scorecard>.

⁴ Allio, M. K. (2012). Strategic dashboards: Designing and deploying them to improve implementation. *Strategy & Leadership*, 40(5), 4-13.

Dashboards (Continued)

The district may choose to mark some indicators as private, so only internal employees can view and monitor indicators that are sensitive in nature. These indicators may be important to the continuous quality improvement of the District.

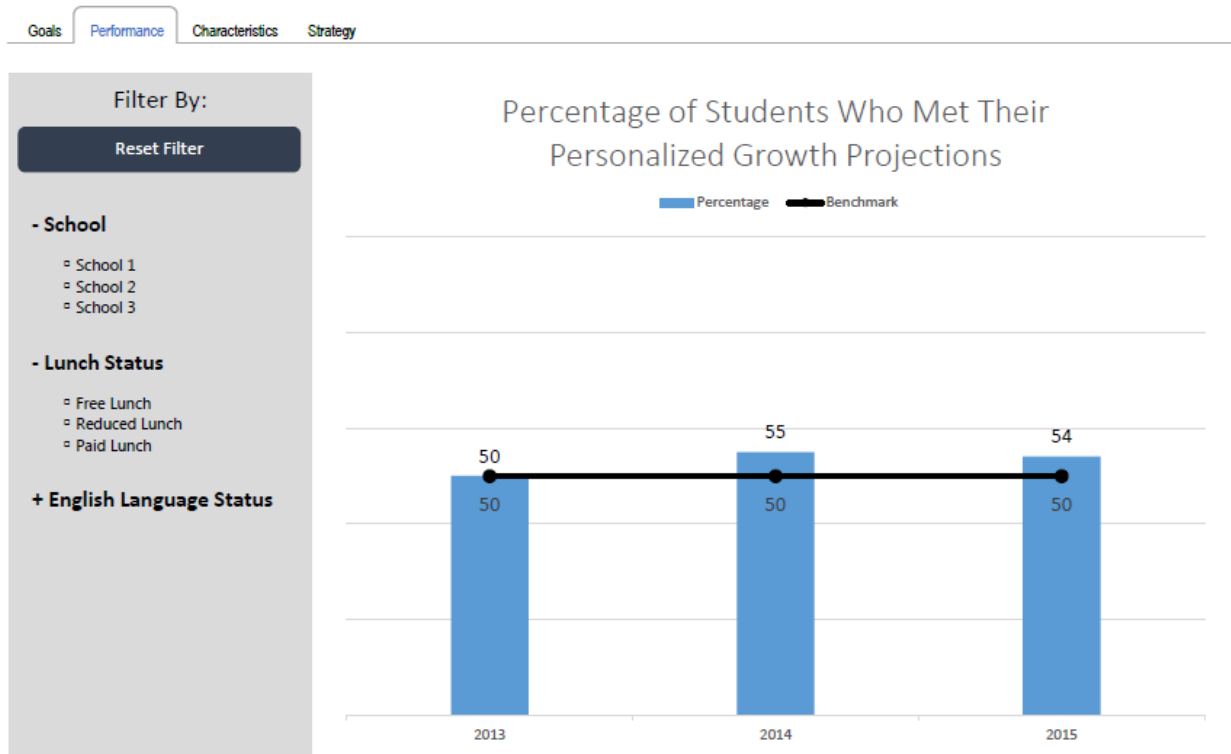
In the sample dashboard below, the district highlighted five indicators for each goal in their strategic plan (Student Academics, Student Experience, and Operations). The dashboard displays a color-coded snapshot of the current state of the district. Clicking on an indicator will provide additional details such as trends and benchmarks and also the option to filter results, as seen on the following page.



Dashboards (Continued)

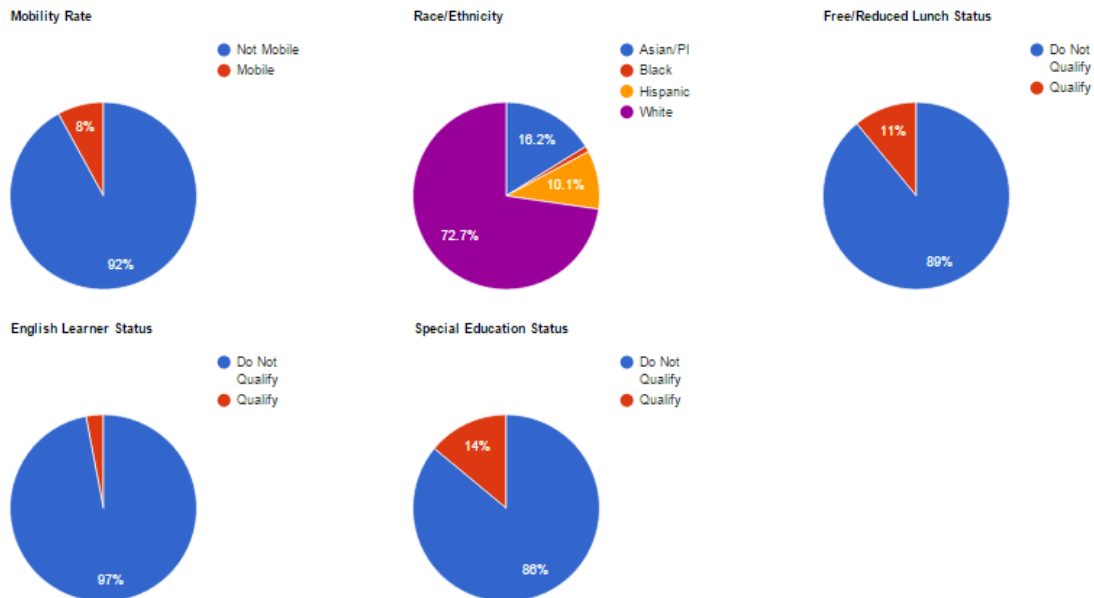
For instance, a district may choose to monitor and report the percentage of students who met their personalized growth projections an indicator, as seen in the example below. The industry benchmark is 50, so district leadership decided their goal was to continue to surpass the benchmark in the years to come. Any rating at or above 50 indicates the district met its target. The district may view the trend of their progress over the years and utilize the information to make informed decisions.

By communicating the current state and benchmark, the dashboard becomes an effective communication vehicle for external stakeholders and monitoring tool for the Board.



Dashboard may also be used to communicate information regarding district characteristics (as seen below) and details about the strategic plan. A separate characteristics page allows the District to communicate important information about the District that leaders have little or no control over, while the performance page is limited to indicators the District intends to influence through their strategic plan.

Characteristics



The most effective strategic dashboards contain the following elements.

- Indicators are linked to each goal identified in the strategic plan.
- The district focuses on only the most important indicators for each goal.
- The district only reports indicators they expect to influence through successful implementation of their strategic plan.
- A benchmark or comparison group is provided for context.
- Charts are simple and easy to understand.
- Text explanations are available for those interested in learning more.
- The dashboard is available online for easy access.
- There is a link to the dashboard on the district website, making access convenient for stakeholders.

Presentations

Presentations at regular intervals can also facilitate effective Board-level monitoring of a strategic plan. The administrative team and responsible persons identified in the strategic plan implementation or action plans should be asked to update the Board regularly regarding progress. Presentations can be integrated into the agendas of monthly Board meetings or quarterly special sessions can be scheduled.

For efficiency, the Board should establish a rotating schedule so progress towards each goal is reviewed at least once throughout the school year. If monthly presentations are feasible, the Board may ask the administrative team to highlight a different objective or specific initiative at each meeting. Quarterly meetings are conducive to presentations across an entire goal area. For most effective use, copies of presentations should be provided to the Board prior to the meeting, so they can review content and prepare questions. Presentations can be used in conjunction with dashboards or as a stand-alone strategy.

The most effective presentation strategies utilize the following guidelines.

- Regular opportunities for presentations are scheduled throughout the school year.
- Each presentation focuses on a specific goal area, objective, or initiative.
- Presenters familiar with each topic, such as the responsible person identified in the action plans, are invited to speak.
- Board members are provided copies of the presentation prior to the scheduled session, which they use to review findings and formulate questions.
- Time for questions and discussion is allocated during or following the presentation.

Annual Reports

Distributing an annual report to the Board regarding strategic plan implementation allows for a review of progress. Annual reports can also be distributed to external stakeholders to communicate district priorities and the results of strategic plan implementation to the broader community. Annual reports should be utilized with dashboards and/or presentations to provide a high level overview that complements the regular discussion of progress prompted by dashboards and presentations.

Since many districts already distribute annual reports, alignment with the strategic plan is an efficient reorganization measure that utilizes existing communication sources to accomplish an additional aim. For instance, a district with four goal areas – one each around academic achievement, the teaching and learning environment, communication, and resource management – can create a section for each in their annual report and organize the information they wish to communicate accordingly.

The most effective annual reports utilize the following guidelines.

- Organize the report around the strategic goal areas.
- Include the mission, vision, and guiding principles.
- Communicate with the audience in mind, excluding education industry jargon.
- Share the impact on students by including student stories and pictures of results in action.
- Include information on the financial impact.
- Provide information on how to access more information (e.g., dashboard and/or presentations).
- Provide a means through which stakeholders can ask question or provide feedback.

Administrative Monitoring

It is ultimately the administration's responsibility for implementing the district's strategic plan. A review of over 1,000 articles of effective implementation identified the following precursors to success.⁵

- Provide appropriate, coordinated, and frequent training and coaching.
- Evaluate the process and outcomes.
- Utilize evaluation results to improve processes.
- Involve stakeholders in the selection and evaluation of initiatives.
- Ensure resource allocation and policies support implementation.

Action Planning

As the individuals responsible for implementing the strategic plan, administrators should develop a monitoring approach that includes detailed timelines and progress reports linked to school improvement, individual goals, and metric tracking. Research indicates that implementation plans that take a long-term view and build upon prior successes over time are more effective than implementation plans that attempt to achieve every objective all at once.⁶ The sample action plan on the following page incorporates the following areas:

Metrics - Reflects the extent to which the goal or objective has been implemented

Actions - Specific set of actions that will be used to accomplish an objective, must be clearly defined and measurable

Responsible Person - Identifies the individual person who will be responsible and held accountable for the execution of a specific action

Timeline – When over the course of the strategic plan will the action begin and end, include any other relevant milestone dates

Resource Allocation - Identifies resources (e.g., financial budget or percentage of personnel time) required to complete the action

⁵ Fixen, D. L., Naoom, S. F., Blasé, K. A., Friedman, R. M., & Wallace, F. (2005). *Implementation research: A synthesis of the literature*. University of South Florida, Louis de la Parte Florida Mental health Institute, The National Implementation Research Network (FMHW Publication #231).

⁶ Fixen, D. L., Naoom, S. F., Blasé, K. A., Friedman, R. M., & Wallace, F. (2005). *Implementation research: A synthesis of the literature*. University of South Florida, Louis de la Parte Florida Mental health Institute, The National Implementation Research Network (FMHW Publication #231).

Sample Action Plan

Goal	Metric*	Objective	Actions**	Timeline	Responsible Person	Current Resources	New Resources
Maximize the academic achievement and personal growth of each District student.	Percentage of students meeting or exceeding growth projections (Target: 70%)	Provide a comprehensive and innovative K-12 program designed to meet students’ diverse needs and interests.	Expand AP course offerings in 9-12	Fall 2016	HS Principal	\$300,000	Tests, Resources, Teacher Training, Curriculum Writing (\$70,000)
		Guarantee delivery of high quality instruction to ensure the college and career readiness of all students.	Provide appropriate instructional technology in all learning environments	Annual	Director of Technology	\$170,000	TBD after review
Ensure fiscal stability and appropriate resources for programming and facilities.	Moody’s rating (Target: AAA)	Effectively manage district resources to maintain the fiscal health of the District	Review budget monitoring systems to ensure continued prudent financial management.	Annual	Business Manager (BM)	\$20,000	None
Ensure a climate and culture to sustain excellence.	5Essentials score (Target: Well Organized)	Establish positive and collaborative relations between internal and external stakeholders.	Conduct surveys and focus groups with external stakeholders.	Fall 2015	Community Relations Director	None	\$20,000
		Inspire community-wide confidence and pride in our schools through engagement, partnerships, communication, and celebration of district accomplishments.	Increase partnerships with businesses and educational organizations in the broader community	Fall 2017	Superintendent	None	\$5,000

* Although each metric on this page is linked to a single goal area, the district may choose to track a metric that measures the realization of two or more goals.

** Some objectives require more than one action to accomplish the desired outcome, however in order to provide the most diverse set of sample possible on this page, only one or two action were presented for each objective.

Performance Management System

Consistent feedback and employee commitment are essential to successful implementation.⁷ Both can be accomplished through an aligned, effective performance management system. Administrators must ensure the responsible persons identified in the action plans are on-track to accomplish their assigned actions. Individual goals and responsibilities linked to the strategic plan should be reviewed at goal setting meetings, progress monitoring, and annual personnel review meetings.

Face-to-face time with employees to support and discuss initiatives results in more successful implementation.⁸ Meeting with employees regularly not only supports the employees' personal and professional development but also enhances school effectiveness and the implementation of new initiatives.

Change Management

Inspiring change in others is an ongoing process. The challenge is not in the people themselves but in convincing them there is an issue that necessitates change and that the proposed plan is the best way to address that issue.

Leadership commitment is essential to effective change management and can be demonstrated in the following ways.⁹

- Set and communicate explicit goals
- Operationalize implementation policies
- Inspire, guide, and provide direction to employees
- Recruit, develop, and retain employees in alignment with the vision
- Involve stakeholders appropriately in the decision making and implementation processes
- Commit ongoing resources and support

⁷ Hrebiniak, L. G. (2006). Obstacles to effective strategy implementation. *Organizational Dynamics*, 35(1), 12-31.

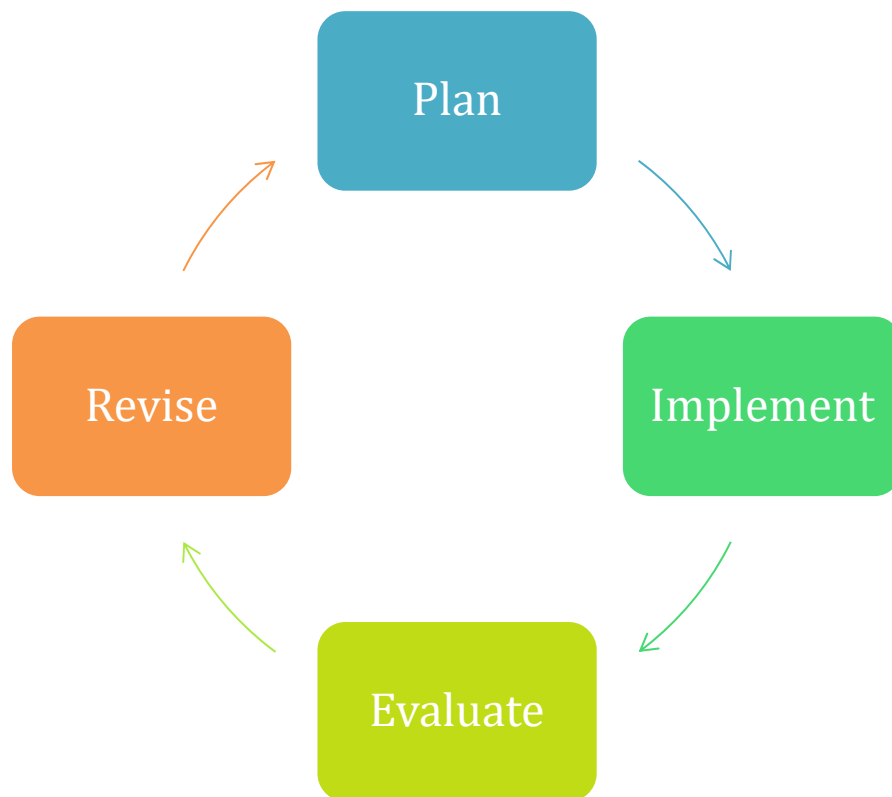
⁸ Fixen, D. L., Naoom, S. F., Blasé, K. A., Friedman, R. M., & Wallace, F. (2005). *Implementation research: A synthesis of the literature*. University of South Florida, Louis de la Parte Florida Mental health Institute, The National Implementation Research Network (FMHW Publication #231).

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Continuous Improvement Framework

Successful implementation requires effective processes. Process is especially important because the intended outcomes may not be visible until initiatives are fully implemented.¹⁰ For that reason, it is important to monitor processes as well as outcomes, especially in the early stages of implementation.

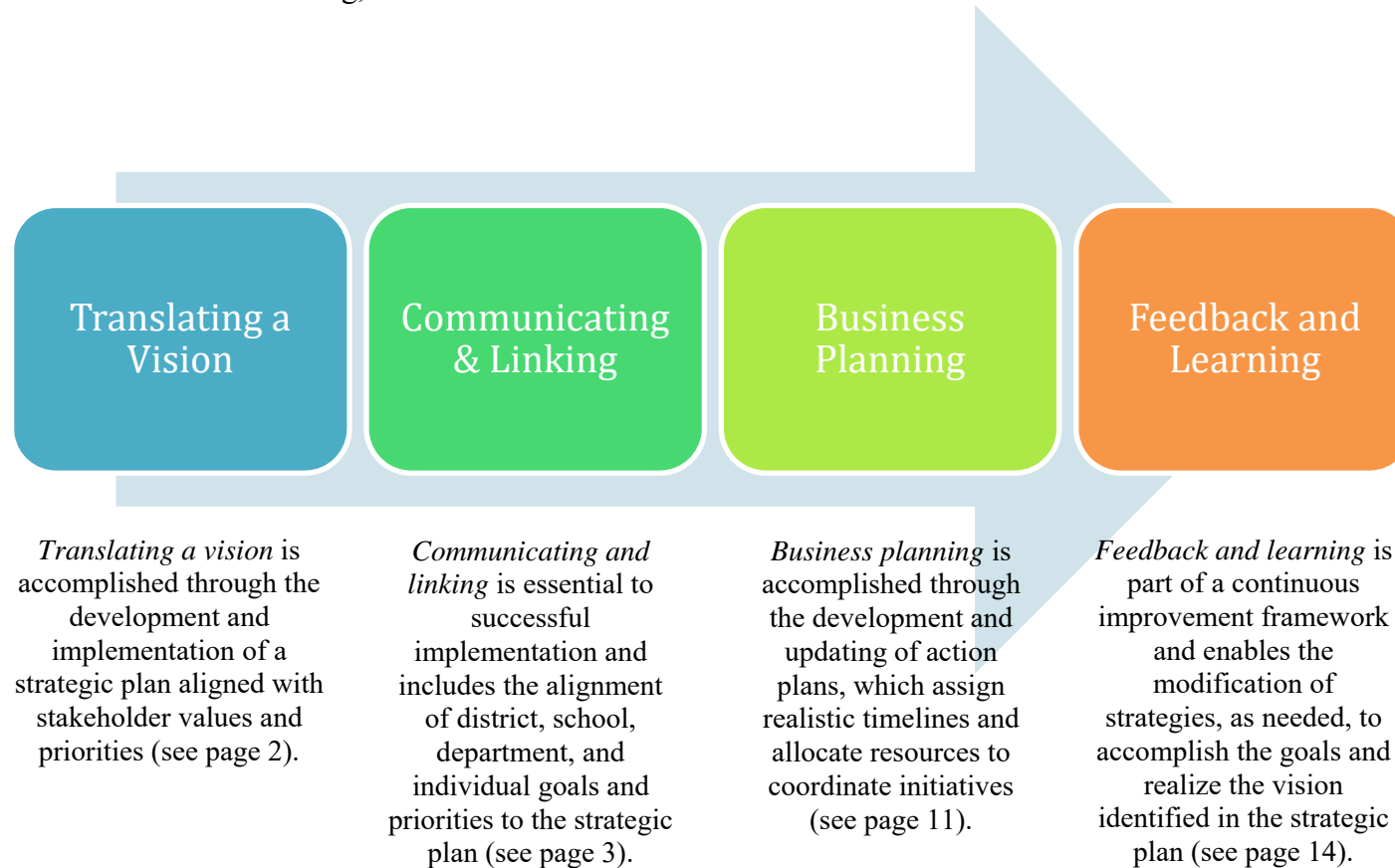
There are four main acts in the continuous improvement process: plan, implement, evaluate, and revise. Just as developing a strategic plan only leads to more effective decision making if implemented, evaluating a program or initiative only leads to better results if the information gleaned from the evaluation is utilized.



¹⁰ Fixen, D. L., Naom, S. F., Blasé, K. A., Friedman, R. M., & Wallace, F. (2005). *Implementation research: A synthesis of the literature*. University of South Florida, Louis de la Parte Florida Mental health Institute, The National Implementation Research Network (FMHW Publication #231).

Balanced Scorecard¹¹

A balanced scorecard is a tool used throughout the private sector to monitor strategy. Although developed for corporations, the prevalence of its use has resulted in the development of effective strategic management systems that are consistent with the implementation processes and strategies discussed previously. A balanced score card and the linked strategic management system detailed below and can be adapted are aligned with the implementation strategies discussed previously and can be adapted and used as a tool for administrative monitoring, if desired.



¹¹ Kaplan, R. S. & Norton, D. P. (2007). Using the balanced scorecard as a strategic management system. *Harvard Business Review*, 74(1), 75-85.

Conclusion

Realization of your district's desired future begins with the development of a strategic plan, but it is the ongoing planning, implementation, and monitoring that creates that future. Full implementation of a strategic plan incorporates the alignment of goals, planning process, and decision-making, while ongoing monitoring and support at the Board and administrative levels are essential to support a continuous improvement process and effective change management. Strategic monitoring is a multi-faceted, challenging process, but when mastered can have a profound effect of students' educational experience.

More Information

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

