

Develop Your District's

Vision for the Future

Strategic planning can help you navigate a sea of turmoil to improve your district's decision making process

Al Brown & Louis J. Birchbauer

A great deal of time and resources have been allocated to improving instruction. The political scene at the local, state and federal levels is constantly moving and changing. New laws impacting education are frequently being added to state statutes. Parents and community members are turning to school districts more and more for answers to local issues.

How does school leadership keep up with this ever-changing and sometimes emotionally charged climate? One method is to have a quality strategic plan.

Inclusive processes around listening, accumulating data/information and communicating lead to collaborative strategic thinking, which assists in forming a Master Plan for the future. The results are long-term, fiscally responsible educational, operational, financial and facilities plans.

This process is called Stakeholder-Driven Strategic Planning. The process is based on the research of Robert W. Ewy and involves key community and school district participants. It's designed to gather input from individual community stakeholders.

■ Strengthening Operations

Strategic planning is an important management tool to be used by school boards. Strategic planning is a disciplined, organizational management process that focuses organizational resources, strengthens operations, establishes district priorities, develops common goals, creates agreement regarding the intended outcomes, and adjusts district direction in response to a changing environment.



Timm Johnson
School Board President,
Osceola School District

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Mark Luebker
Superintendent,
Osceola School District

“The district must find ways to continue to use purposeful, organized, and strategic efforts to realize excellent results, all while saving money.”



John Hendricks
Superintendent,
Sparta Area School District

“[We] wanted to be confident that we were investing time and energy into initiatives that are important to our community and to our board of education.”

Strategic planning will assist the board of education in managing the district in a clear and focused manner.

“Schools have been placed in a reactive position because of funding limitations, legislative changes, and the social-emotional needs of students,” said Timm Johnson, school board president for the Osceola School District. “Strategic planning allows time to focus on priorities and be proactive meeting those and other challenges.”

Strategic planning is not a magic process that will solve all educational problems. It is, however, a tool for school boards to move educational operations to their vision of the future and to measure the results of their work.

There are any number of “planning processes” available to school boards. These processes can be found through educational associations, web searches, consultants and/or vendors, and in books or other printed materials. There is no perfect process. School boards and administrators should choose a planning process that meets their individual school and community needs. While there are various forms of strategic planning, the planning process should include the following components.

- **Analysis and assessment:** This is an understanding of the current internal and external environment.
- **Strategy formation:** The creation of high-level strategies and a plan document.

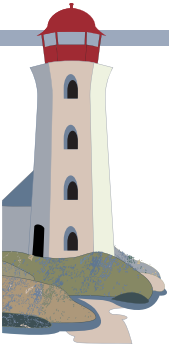
- **Strategy execution:** The plan is translated into operational planning or action items.
- **Evaluation:** The refinement and evaluation of performance, culture, communications, data reporting and other strategic management issues occurs.

The Key Work of School Boards, developed by the National School Boards Association, advocates for strategic management. An excerpt states, “Vision without action is a dream, and action without vision is aimless.”

Strategic planning is the framework for connecting the actions of the school district to the district’s vision for the future. So how does a school board and school district leadership begin a strategic plan that will lead to strategic management?

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and action without vision is aimless.”

— from *The Key Work of School Boards*
by the National School Boards Association



“It is also important for leadership to know how they are being evaluated.”

— John Hendricks, superintendent of the Sparta Area School District

■ Strategic Planning Steps

The first step in strategic planning is to create a powerful vision for the future. This vision should have the input of those parties that it will affect. This means staff, students, administrators, parents and community members should have a hand in shaping the district vision for the future. The difficulty in creating a vision is to identify the future, not to re-create the past. Districts should also periodically review the vision and refresh or update it if necessary.

The next step is to develop a strategic plan document. The planning team must identify a process to

create strategic themes and goals that will directly connect to the school district’s vision.

“The district must find ways to continue to use purposeful, organized, and strategic efforts to realize excellent results, all while saving money,” said Mark Luebker, superintendent of the Osceola School District. “The School District of Osceola is committed to improving education and building strong partnerships within the community.”

By focusing on a vision and developing strategies to achieve district goals, school districts can also build and maintain strong col-

laborative endeavors. It is much easier to be collaborative when there is a clear vision, stated expectations and identified measures for success.

The third step is to develop a deployment strategy. The deployment strategy not only states what goals are to be acted upon, but how progress in reaching these goals is to be measured and how the results of this work are to be communicated to stakeholders. Progress monitoring of strategic initiatives is a key and vital function for school boards. This monitoring of progress is also critical for keeping the strategic plan “alive.” The axiom, “What gets measured, gets done”

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couldn't be closer to the truth. By monitoring the progress and results of action plans, the board of education is communicating the importance of the plan initiatives to the public and staff.

■ Holding the Plan Accountable

It is important for boards of education to realize plan development is but the first part to strategic management. Strategy execution, monitoring and evaluation of plan outcomes are very important components of this management process. It is conceivable that without the execution/monitoring and evaluation phases, a good strategic plan can simply become "shelfware."

Monitoring the results of a strategic plan also allows a district to adjust or modify outcomes or actions in a changing environment. The one constant in today's educational operations is change. One

method of embracing change is to constantly monitor strategic outcomes and to modify the methods or goals based on the change in environment or factors affecting the school district. This is done with the vision for the school district clearly in sight.

Strategic planning not only contributes to accountability but also collaboration.

"Our leadership team wanted to be confident that we were investing time and energy into initiatives that are important to our community and to our board of education," stated John Hendricks, superintendent of the Sparta Area School District. "It is also important for leadership to know how they are being evaluated."

Collaboration and accountability can exist in systems where there are clear goals, constant and appropriate monitoring of results, and a task orientation.

■ Connecting Positively and Focusing Resources

By creating a well-thought out plan, implementing the plan with stakeholder commitment, and monitoring the outcomes, school districts can minimize much of the reactionary posturing that takes place on the leadership level.

Successful school districts understand that the secret to improving education, connecting positively to the community and focusing resources is to have a strong strategic plan. While this plan is not a "magic bullet," it will aid in the development of strong board and administrative leadership practices. ■

Al Brown and Louis J. Birchbauer are organizational consultants with the WASB. Al has served Wisconsin school districts and students for more than 35 years as a teacher, principal, and superintendent. Louis served as superintendent for nearly 30 consecutive years in the districts of Cambria-Friesland, Mosinee, Germantown, and Greenfield.



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