STATEGIC PLANNING: A FOUNDATION FOR SUSTAINING CHANGE

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ABSTRACT
This article reports experiences relative to the evaluation of a strategic planning and leadership development process adopted by a school system located in southern Louisiana. A description of the planning model utilized and its application to the areas of staff development and curriculum alignment are described. Factors associated with successful strategic planning and the benefits of implementing such a process are delineated. Despite challenges, the evidence suggested that strategic planning has served as an effective foundation upon which to ensure sustainable change geared toward continuous educational improvement.

Louisiana is seriously concerned about the quality of public education provided to the children of its citizens. The state does not have the benefit of a tradition of high quality public education and continues to be burdened with difficult social and economic conditions (e.g., Louisiana recently ranked as the worst state for children based on several indicators such as the percentage of children living in poverty, the rate of child abuse and neglect, and the high-school dropout rate) (Children’s Rights Council, 1999). In light of these conditions, Louisiana has worked recently to implement comprehensive efforts to improve education.

Education reform has generally supported higher academic standards and more local accountability for student-oriented results. Evaluation of recent reform efforts have faced formidable challenges in assessing the value of multi-faceted initiatives in improving performance indicators that must be tracked over time. In the interim, evaluators must focus on determining those initiatives that appear successful in sustaining change among individual educators and that are likely to improve school effectiveness over time.

This article reports our experiences evaluating the implementation and effectiveness of a strategic planning and leadership development process adopted by the Ascension Par-
ish school system located in southern Louisiana (Joyner & Cage, 1997). In this district, the old adage, “If you fail to plan, you plan to fail” has taken on new meaning as this system has faced changes in the sociodemographic profile of students, shifts in the local economy and increasing pressure for improved student performance by the community. Despite these challenges, the evidence suggests that strategic planning has worked as the foundation upon which to ensure sustainable change geared toward continuous educational improvement.

**Strategic Planning: What Is It and How Does It Work?**

Strategic planning can be defined 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” (Bryson, 1994, p. 155). Most strategic planning models result in a mechanism through which organizations can (a) establish consensus on key issues surrounding its mission, goals, and objectives; (b) systematically manage change; and (c) encourage a management style that is proactive (Bryson, 1995; Feinstein, 1995).

Several elements of successful strategic planning approaches are found in the model introduced in Ascension Parish by a nonprofit organization known as the Louisiana Alliance for Education Reform. The Alliance’s goal is to improve K-12 public education through the development and implementation of school improvement plans created by parents, educators, and community representatives. The Alliance provides training to school and district leadership teams focusing on (a) cultivating leadership skills (e.g., leading innovation, team development, and school redesign); (b) developing strategic planning facilitation skills; and (c) changing classrooms through planning and staff development (Louisiana Alliance for Education Reform 1997a, 1997b).

The strategic planning model and methods adopted by Ascension Parish are based on earlier work by the Institute of Cultural Affairs (1991) and adapted by the Alliance for use in educational organizations. The process consists of a series of workshops focusing on the history of each school/district, the development of a common vision among the planning group, consideration of barriers in reaching the group’s vision, strategies for successfully overcoming anticipated barriers, and the development of action plans to facilitate the achievement of the collective vision. Action planning workshops are held to move participants from planning to implementation by clearly specifying what is to be accomplished within established time and resource parameters. The above planning workshops are repeated twice a year to celebrate accomplishments and to “refocus” attention on areas to be addressed in order to continuously improve the quality of education each semester.

**Selected Effects of Strategic Planning on Lake Elementary School**

Lake Elementary School is in a rural area of the parish which is located in the petrochemical corridor along the Mississippi River. The school has recently expanded to include pre-kindergarten through eighth grade (as opposed to its preK-5 structure prior to 1998). Lake enrollment stands at about 950 with approximately 30% of the student population identified as economically disadvantaged. The principal at Lake has served in that capacity for 13 years and the majority of teachers have been in the teaching field for seven to eight years. Due to the addition of grades six through eight last year, nearly one-third of all Lake teachers are new to the school (Louisiana Alliance for Education Reform, 1998).

The demand for improved academic performance reflected in Louisiana’s reform and accountability system, the rising expectations of local employers and the structural changes within Lake Elementary provided a number of ongoing challenges and opportunities for the school leadership team to address in its action planning sessions. In the process of exploring the needs of the school and the barriers to achieving the school vision it became clear that a
collective approach to staff development and curriculum alignment were essential to improve classroom instruction and enhance student learning.

Staff Development

The identification of staff development was only the beginning of the action planning process for Lake Elementary. With the Alliance, Lake is participating in the Southwest Education Development Laboratory’s (SEDL) “Strategies for Increasing School Success Program.” One key focus of this program is exploring how teachers and administrators learn to function as a community of learners. Lake is also participating in a second SEDL project through the awarding of a Comprehensive Reform Demonstration grant allowing teachers and the principal to deepen their knowledge and application of professional learning and coaching in order to improve student achievement.

Action planning in the area of staff development has also resulted in the creation of the Perfecting the Art of Teaching (PAT) committee. The PAT team is currently involved in a number of activities to support the creation of a professional learning community within the school. For example, one initiative involves faculty members videotaping their lessons for self review (and later peer review). The committee, in collaboration with a local university, developed a scoring rubric by which videos could be assessed in a number of areas (e.g., the incorporation of materials designed to stimulate higher-order thinking skills, the absence of gender bias in the lesson, etc.) The plan is to create an archive of “best practice” videos that may be used by others to supplement or strengthen their own instructional strategies. Another approach being used to enhance teacher performance is the allocation of time in faculty meetings for teachers to create and maintain journals where they write and reflect upon their classroom strategies and experiences.

Curriculum Alignment

Another example of how strategic planning drives action at Lake Elementary is evident in the area of curriculum alignment. During refocusing sessions, concerns were expressed about the perceived lack of integration between state standards and local curriculum materials. This concern resulted in the establishment of the Curriculum Alignment committee. The purpose of this committee is to assess the degree of alignment between standards and the school curriculum and to recommend changes in the scope and sequence of what is being taught where appropriate. For example, a greater emphasis on economics than in the past in the state standards resulted in the recommendation that second-grade teachers alter their discussion of Mardi Gras to focus on the economic impact of Carnival on the New Orleans community. The action planning process also frequently involves this group making recommendations to the budget committee regarding the need to purchase certain equipment or consumable items (e.g., hands-on science equipment in order to facilitate experiential learning).

Factors Associated With Successful Strategic Planning

An obvious question that emerged throughout the evaluation of reform in Louisiana had to do with the success of this district and school with strategic planning. In short, what did this district and school do that was different from others throughout the state who had a planning process in place but where educators and community members seemed relatively uninspired by their activities and change seemed atypical?

We have identified the following five factors as having influenced the degree of success with strategic planning in Ascension Parish:
• **Strong history of collaboration.** The parish had a long history of collaboration with six surrounding school districts through a consortium arrangement facilitated by the state-supported Regional Service Center. Further, the six pilot school faculties collaborated extensively with the Alliance as they served as the test ground for the adaptation and development of strategic change processes geared toward local needs.

• **Favorable political climate.** Numerous local and state-wide surveys revealed great public concern over the perceived lack of performance and absence of accountability associated with the public school system for producing competitive students prepared for collegiate study or the world of work.

• **Broad-based participation.** Broad outreach to community constituencies and a commitment to involving diverse groups in a substantive way in the development and implementation of the school improvement plans existed from the beginning of the planning process.

• **Focus on action planning and r-focusing.** Unique to Ascension Parish is the recognition that the implementation of strategic plans through action planning is critical and that refocusing sessions are essential to review accomplishments, monitor progress, and plan future activities to move the district and its schools even closer to their ultimate vision.

• **Multi-level planning structure.** Individual school plans were developed and used as the foundation for one consolidated district plan. A broad-based district panel was created to identify reform-oriented initiatives for the parish plan that would support the plans of individual schools. Overlap in representation on the district planning panel and school planning teams ensured that reform initiatives would be designed from the “bottom-up” as well as the “top-down.”

The case study evaluation of Ascension Parish and Lake Elementary School revealed a number of benefits of implementing strategic planning including the following:

• **Increasing effectiveness.** The planning process increases effectiveness by providing a framework for reaffirming the school/district mission, making decisions, and meeting the needs of constituents.

• **Increasing collaboration.** The strategic planning process resulted in strengthened relationships and greater collaboration between parents, educators, civic and church leaders, and business representatives in understanding challenges, setting priorities and developing programs geared toward quality education.

• **Building leadership capacity.** The strategic planning process resulted in trained facilitators and change agents who were able to share their skills and knowledge with others in order to expand local reform efforts. Further, the Alliance invested heavily in the leadership development of teachers to ensure that they were able to strategically plan, implement and sustain change over time. In short, there was an explicit understanding of the importance of empowering teachers who will be the principals, supervisors and superintendents of the future.

• **Strengthening evaluation.** The process of planning also provided an ongoing framework to assess progress toward systemic reform at the school and district levels.

• **Empowering teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders.** School personnel involved in the planning process continuously described how teacher morale had soared as a result of creatively solving operational issues. Principals reported their jobs becoming easier as teachers exhibited more leadership.
and responsibility for the effective operation of the school. Similar sentiments were voiced by parent leaders who also seemed empowered by collaboratively identifying needs, securing resources and monitoring new initiatives to ensure their success over time.

- **Leveraging resources.** The collaborative planning process built teamwork and developed expertise among individuals across the school district resulting in the sharing and coordination of educational and social services. The development of strong cooperative relationships also resulted in the successful leveraging of grant funding with resources from public and private organizations within the community.

**Conclusion**

This article focused on one school district’s adoption of a strategic planning and leadership development approach to facilitate systemic change. The process of developing a vision based on consensus and the analysis of barriers helped build commitment and community enthusiasm. The continuous cycle of setting priorities, planning actions, assessing progress and refocusing attention built trust among planning participants and increased proficiency with the process. Ascension Parish and Lake Elementary School provide clear evidence that the knowledge, skills, and partnerships that were fostered through the planning process during the past six years continue to reshape and reinvigorate education throughout the district.

**References**


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