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Strategic Planning: Is It Worth the Effort? The Superintendent's Perspective

Should school superintendents use the process of strategic planning to lead school improvement and change initiatives?

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Interest in applying strategic planning as a process to lead school reform became widespread in education at the beginning of the 1990' s. Since that time, many schools and districts have employed this process. In fact, in some states like Rhode Island, strategic planning in school districts is mandated by state law. The extensive use of strategic planning in education suggests that it must be worth the effort.

Since 1990 I have facilitated the development of strategic plans in scores of school districts in several New England States. My experience has led me to conclude that strategic planning has been beneficial in some districts, but not in all. My reading of the literature on the strategic planning in education left me with mixed feelings about its effectiveness as a process for conducting school reform.

As a result of the debate in the literature regarding the benefits of strategic planning and my experiences facilitating strategic planning in several school districts, I decided to conduct an informal qualitative research study of the value of strategic planning from the perspective of the school superintendent. I was interested in finding out what superintendents had to say about their use of strategic planning. I wanted to determine

if they thought the process was worth the effort. I wanted to answer the question:

Should school superintendents use the process of strategic planning to lead school improvement and change initiatives in their districts?

For this study, eight superintendents in Massachusetts were interviewed to ascertain their views of the impact of strategic planning in their school districts. The superintendents interviewed represented both urban and suburban districts. In addition, several books and articles on strategic planning were reviewed to determine what the literature had to say about the value of strategic planning in education. After reviewing the literature and interviewing the eight superintendents, a set of recommendations were developed for effectively using strategic planning in education. The purpose of this article is to report my findings about the worth of strategic planning in education based on the qualitative study.

Background

In the early 90's the application of strategic planning in education was seen as the magic bullet for school reform and soon became a household term in education reform. The Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) devoted its entire April 1991 issue of *Educational Leadership* to the topic of strategic planning (Brandt & Meek, Ed.). Authors featured in this issue discussed a variety of topics related to strategic planning (e.g. Kaufman, Herman, Nebgen, & Poole).

Strategic planning, popularized by William Cook (1990), promised educational leaders that the process would help their school districts think and act strategically, develop effective strategies, clarify future directions, establish priorities, improve organizational performance, build teamwork and expertise, and deal effectively with a

rapidly changing environment. Cook (1990) explained that “Strategic planning is an effective culmination of both a process and discipline, which, if faithfully adhered to, produces a plan characterized by originality, vision, and realism. . . . Both the discipline and the process are aimed at total concentration of the organization’s resources on mutually predetermined outcomes” (p.47).

Kaufman and Grise (1995) agreed with Cook stating that “Strategic plans tell us where to head, why to go, and what functions and resources it takes to get from here to there (p. 27). Romney (1996) further noted that “A strategic plan cannot only refocus members’ sense of purpose, but can stimulate future-oriented thinking based on a shared sense of mission” (p. 16). Schlechty (1997) argued that “properly done, strategic plans are useful, and in the hands of school leaders who are able and willing to be persistent; they are powerful tools” (p. 61).

In her dissertation research on strategic planning in three Rhode Island school districts, Canole (1999) found that strategic planning had several benefits. One of the major benefits was the change in the way people worked. “This new type of planning process involved the whole community. It was a much more democratic way of planning for the district” (p. 101). She also discovered that “strategic thinking and acting emanate from strategic planning” (p.104). More recently Lane, Bishop, and Wilson-Jones (2005) also point out that strategic planning in education has several benefits:

A strategic plan establishes a vision, mission, and beliefs for the school district; the plan establishes the path to accomplish its desired future; the plan provides for a path which allows the community to work together to accomplish these goals, objectives, and activities that constitute the strategic plan; it allows for an understanding of how a school district works, how finances are spent, and identifies the needs of the school district; and allows the school district to set a specific data-driven priorities. (p. 2)

All of these supporters of strategic planning pointed out the many possible benefits of strategic planning. However, they all noted that it is a complex process that requires leadership to ensure that it is carried out effectively. Herman and Kaufman (1991) conceded that

Most (strategic) planners encounter pitfalls; perhaps a word to the wise can prepare those new to the process to sidestep such errors. Avoiding major mistakes can mean the difference between creating just another dusty document and creating a revitalized educational system. (p. 8)

Even though there is widespread support for using strategic planning in education, there are those who do not see the value of its application. Mintzberg (1993), former president of the Strategic Management Society, was one of the earliest critics of strategic planning. Although his criticisms of strategic planning were not directed specifically at education, his views can be applied to its use in schools. For Mintzberg (1994), one of the major weaknesses of strategic planning process lies in the fact that formal planning does not produce effective strategies. He argued, "We have no evidence that any of the strategic planning systems--no matter how elaborate--succeeded in capturing the messy informal processes by which strategies really do get developed" (1994, p. 296). He continued, "Take apart any model of strategic planning, box, by box, and at the heart of the process where strategies are supposed to be created, you will find only a set of empty platitudes, not any simulation of complex managerial processes" (p. 297).

Although Fullan (1993), a recognized expert on the change process in education, is not opposed to using strategic planning, he cautioned educational leaders not to jump into strategic planning when beginning new change initiatives. He questioned the use of strategic planning by saying, "Spending too much time and energy on advance

planning, even if it builds in principles of flexibility, is a mistake. Participation, elaborate needs assessment, formal strategic plans are uncalled for at the outset of complex change processes” (p. 31). He further asserted that vision building and strategic planning come later when leading complex change processes. In working on school reform in teacher education in Toronto, Fullan discovered that “. . . . “we deliberately rejected launching immediately into large-scale strategic planning. Instead, we began with a few readiness principles: work on the teacher education continuum, link teacher development and school development, commit to some field-based programs, work in partnership with schools, infuse our efforts with continuous inquiry” (p. 32).

In a recent article in *Phi Delta Kappan*, Schmoker (2004) reflects on his experiences as a consultant working with school districts implementing strategic planning during the 1980's. His experiences led him to conclusion that the process is not very effective due to its complexity. He states, “Looking back, it is clearer to me now that these [strategic] plans -- for all their seemingly tight, logical connections between mission, belief, goals, actions, responsibilities, and evaluation -- were like beautiful but badly leaking boats” (p. 435). He questions the value of the planning process itself and the difficulty of “our ability to meaningfully monitor this huge number of initiatives” (p. 435).

Methods

The eight superintendents interviewed for this study had extensive experience with strategic planning. In all of their districts, strategic planning had been in place for three or more years. The following questions were asked in informal interviews with each of the superintendents:

1. Why did you decide to implement strategic planning in your school district? What did you hope to accomplish?
2. What changes have you witnessed in the district as a result of strategic planning?
3. What specifically has been accomplished with strategic planning?
4. Has the staff changed as a result of strategic planning? Do they think and act strategically?
5. What have been the successes and struggles experienced with the strategic planning process?
6. How has strategic planning affected your position as superintendent of schools?

Findings

The superintendents overwhelmingly agreed that strategic planning was worth the time, money, and effort in their districts. They stated that their main reason for implementing strategic planning in their school districts was to “establish a focus and direction for the work of the district”. They felt that strategic planning allowed them to “establish clear and concise goals and objectives for improving teaching and learning”. One superintendent said he believed that the process of strategic planning helped him “formulate a strong working relationship with the community and elected officials to support education”. Improved working relationships resulted from them working together on the development and implementation of the strategic plan.

When asked what changes they had witnessed in the district, all eight superintendents interviewed agreed that strategic planning:

- Improved communication between the school department, community, and town officials
- Provided direction for the school board
- Aligned other planning process to the district-wide strategic plan
- Created a willingness of staff to work on school improvement priorities

- Established uniformity among staff in working toward accomplishment of prioritized goals
- Created alignment of the budget process with strategic plan goals and objectives

One superintendent remarked that “the strategic planning process allowed his staff to continually ask how other initiatives are related to the strategic plan”. He saw strategic planning as a “decision screen through which the school board and staff could assess whether or not to take on new initiatives”.

Superintendents also reported that through strategic planning their districts had made very specific improvements such as:

- Improvement in district Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) test scores.
- Creation of focused curriculum planning initiatives
- Implementation of more thoughtful professional development planning
- Improved use of technology by teachers to support teaching and learning
- Implementation of a curriculum improvement process
- Improved communication within and outside the district
- Development of K-12 benchmark assessments in mathematics and language arts
- Alignment of curriculum with state curriculum standards

When asked about the school culture question, regarding staff acting more strategically as a result of strategic planning in their districts, the superintendents gave mixed reviews. One superintendent remarked that strategic planning “resulted in greater collaborative and collegial relationships within her district”. Another superintendent reported that “not all staff changed as a result of strategic planning”. However, he pointed out that, “those staff and community members, who had participated in the strategic planning process, were much more focused on results”. Another remarked that, “although most staff had not changed dramatically, central office and building level administrators were thinking differently”. He noted that they “are more inclined to use

data to make informed decisions as a result of the strategic planning process". One superintendent said that "most of her staff was still stuck at the awareness level" regarding the use of strategic planning. She did say, however, that "staff was more apt to get involved with proposing and implementing solutions to problems as a result of their involvement in the strategic planning process". Finally, one superintendent said this was a difficult question to answer and saw no major observable changes in the way staff thought or acted as a result of the district strategic planning process.

Overall, the superintendents interviewed believed that the strategic planning process had a positive effect on their position as superintendent. One remarked that his involvement in strategic planning gave him a clear direction and allowed him to be seen as an instructional leader. Another superintendent said, "I honestly feel I have been more successful as a superintendent as a result of developing our strategic plan. Clearly, my attempts to bring the community and the school district together to establish common expectations and goals to improve our schools would have been far more challenging, if not impossible, without strategic planning". A third superintendent pointed out that his school board tied his annual evaluation to the implementation of the strategic plan. He stated that this made his job much easier. Another superintendent stated that "Our existing strategic plan is of great value to me. I believe it allows me some credibility in our community when I am promoting and seeking support for specific efforts within the school department". All of the superintendents interviewed said that the strategic planning process gave them credibility as a leader in the school district because they were able to set a clear direction and focus for improvement efforts.

Overwhelmingly, the superintendents interviewed saw the strategic planning process as being very helpful to them in leading educational reforms in today's demanding era of school accountability. They also indicated that the size and make up of their districts did not impede the use of strategic planning. In fact, all those interviewed recommend that other superintendents consider the adoption of strategic planning in their districts.

Implications

Findings from the review of the literature and interviews with superintendents led to the following recommendations for superintendents and other educational leaders contemplating using strategic planning in their districts.

Communicate a clear purpose for strategic planning. Establishing and communicating a clear and compelling purpose for conducting strategic planning is the one of the most important things a superintendent can do prior to launching a strategic planning initiative. It is critical that the fundamental reasons for strategic planning be communicated to school committee members, staff, parents, and community members. One superintendent cautioned that before undertaking the process, "all stakeholders need to know why the process is being implemented and what will be its benefits". Nebgen (1991) maintained that "the key to effective strategic planning is on-going communication". When asked what led to the success of strategic planning in her school district, she responded, "What was the key to the success of strategic planning? In our opinion, communication at each step of the process – has been the critical element in the development of our five year plan" (1991, p. 26).

Establish broad based ownership for strategic planning among key stakeholder groups. Ownership reflects a personal and collective commitment of staff and the

school's stakeholders to engage in strategic planning. Ownership occurs when those impacted by strategic planning can identify with its process and purpose. Since the strategic planning process requires wide involvement from staff and community members, it is important to develop ownership in the process. Goodstein, Nolan, and Pfeiffer (1993) asserted that involvement in the process is not enough, "Top management must be united and committed to the strategy that this process develops. That unity of commitment is the single most important factor in implementing the strategy" (p. 2).

Enhance the district's capacity for effective implementation of strategic planning.

Since strategic planning requires the involvement of several stakeholder groups, it is important to build capacity for designing and implementing the plan. Capacity includes the knowledge, technical skills, and resources that the district, its staff, and stakeholders need in order to successfully engage in strategic planning. Several of the interviewed superintendents noted that, prior to implementing strategic planning, training of the strategic planning team was conducted and needed resources were allocated to support the process. Goodstein, et al., argued that "The allocation of resources is perhaps the true *acid test* of the organization's strategic plan" (1993, p. 3).

Hire an outside facilitator. The literature on strategic planning recommends that an outside facilitator be hired to facilitate the work of the strategic planning committee. Dlugosh (1993) recommended that "It is advisable to obtain the services of a neutral, third party to facilitate the plan. This allows several board members and the superintendent to be an active part of the strategic planning team" (p. 8). Bryson (1988) agreed and said that "Outside consultation and facilitation can help. Often

organizations and communities need some consultation, facilitation, and education from outsiders” (p. 228). All of the superintendents interviewed indicated that they employed the services of an outside facilitator. One remarked that, “Using a facilitator outside of the district enabled freer thinking among members of the strategic planning committee when developing the plan”.

Use the strategic plan! The greatest impediment to the successful use of strategic planning in education is the failure to implement the plan. Goodstein, et al., argued that “Strategic planning, in and of itself, is an academic pursuit, of little direct use to any organization. The payoff of strategic planning is in its application, in the execution and implementation of the strategic plan” (1993, p. 325). One of the interviewed superintendents said that “the strategic plan was only a document and that it was the implementation of action plans that brought the plan to life”. Kaufman (1995) noted, “A strategic plan is futile if not used. . . . And the planners grow frustrated seeing their product sit on shelves” (p. 23).

Conclusion

Although there has been growing opposition to strategic planning in the literature in recent years, experience, practice, and the literature show that strategic planning can be an effective process for leading school reform and change initiatives in education if the five conditions cited above are in place. In the conclusion to her dissertation Canole (1999) said,

While this study presents the strategic planning process as a useful tool in educational reform, it can only guarantee results under certain conditions. Critical to the success of the strategic planning process is 1) the belief that among all stakeholders that change can and will occur, 2) a long-term commitment to the strategic planning discipline, and 3) the development and mastery of strategic thinking and acting behaviors. (p. 173-4)

Clearly, strategic planning is not a quick fix for leading today's complex educational reforms and may not be right all districts. Romney (1996) claimed that "strategic planning is for those who are willing to be honest, who want to focus on revitalization, and who are committed to influencing and creating their future" (p. 17). When effectively implemented, it gives superintendents and other leaders a very focused and clear process for leading change initiatives.

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