



The Renewed Promise of Strategic Planning to Improve K12 Public School Outcomes

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ABSTRACT: Calls to improve student achievement have intensified with the release of post-COVID-19 assessment data. However, the literature makes it clear that traditional reform efforts mandated by federal and state policymakers, including individual School Improvement Plans, have not resulted in large-scale improvements in student outcomes. Evidence from research points to local control, collaborative planning involving key stakeholders, and district support for schools as elements of continuous improvement that are the most likely to promote the conditions necessary for increased student learning and achievement. District-wide strategic planning is not a commonly implemented or studied process in K12 school districts, yet it incorporates the elements for continuous improvement recommended by the literature. This paper builds a logical argument for the promise of a district-wide strategic planning approach with aligned school implementation plans to develop local yet comprehensive and action-oriented plans to improve student achievement.

KEYWORDS Strategic planning, school reform, school improvement, school planning, K12 education.

1. INTRODUCTION

Educators, parents, community members, and policymakers share the desire to improve public school student outcomes. There has been a nearly consistent call from policymakers to improve K12 schools through laws and policy mandates, and educators work daily using various and often disconnected initiatives to improve their schools. Unfortunately, most efforts from policymakers and educators have not resulted in large-scale improvements in student outcomes.

The desire of stakeholders to increase student learning has been heightened and intensified in the post-COVID 19 era with a focus on learning loss, which disproportionately impacted the most vulnerable students. One of the many indicators of this loss is a comparison between the results from the 2022 administration of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and the 2019 pre-COVID-19 results. NAEP mathematics scores indicated a decrease of five points for fourth graders and eight points for eighth graders. Similarly, average reading scores dropped by about three points across grade levels [1]. This decrease translates to students who are a quarter to a half year behind their 2019 counterparts, and if historical trends hold, it will take years and perhaps even decades to fully recover this loss [2]. Attempts to close the gap resulting from COVID 19 era school closures are the newest iterations of the decades old conversations about continuous school improvement focused on student achievement.

The purpose of this paper is to use conclusions from research and the body of school improvement literature to build a logical argument for the further study of the use of K12 public school district-level strategic planning as a means to improve student achievement. This paper makes the case that strategic planning must not be singularly focused on mission and vision but must also include action-based school-level implementation plans in order to impact student outcomes.

2. SCHOOL REFORM POLICY FAILURE

Despite more than forty years of school reform efforts, national and state mandates have yet to improve student outcomes significantly. Failure to bring small or isolated success to scale has been well documented in educational research and literature. In 1993, Seymour Sarason labeled the failure of educational reform as predictable because of the empty rhetoric of reformers (e.g., “every child succeeds, “raise standards for teachers”) and the failure to recognize the intractability of schools to change. Sarason theorized that existing power relationships in schools and the belief that schools exist only for students were the root causes for the intractable status quo [3]. However, he suggested that change is possible if teachers are empowered to be a part of the improvement process and trained to ensure student learning rather than cover content. Despite the alarm sounded by Sarason, the focus of School reform remained relatively the same in the 1990s or 2000s.

The attempts to reform schools through common and rigorous standards and widespread standardized testing during the early 2000s also did not result in widespread changes in student achievement. Twenty years after Sarason described the inevitable failure of school reform, Tienken and Orlich used evidence from the history of education in the US to create an argument that standards, testing, charter schools, and school choice were repackaged reform initiatives that had failed in earlier iterations [4]. Furthermore, in 2021, Tienken contended that these initiatives move the United States closer to a dual educational system with high-quality schools available for the wealthy and elite and stripped-down, poorly funded schools for the remainder of the population [5]. A dual system would be particularly troublesome for the most underserved children who experienced higher levels of learning loss during COVID-19. Tienken suggested that successful school improvement depends on both the measurement of inputs (curriculum and instruction) and outputs (assessment results) and that standards and assessments are necessary but should be developed locally by teachers. The emphasis on local decisions regarding curriculum, instruction, and assessment made through teacher collaboration echoes Sarason's teacher empowerment and training arguments two decades earlier.

The importance of teacher quality remains a current theme in the school reform and improvement literature. In *The Politics of Distraction*, Hattie theorizes that the fundamental flaw with school reform is the pervasive myth that the quality differences between schools are more significant than the quality differences within a single school. In other words, data supports the reality that there is more variability among student outcomes in the same school than when comparing the overall student performance among various schools. The myth of good and bad schools does not hold up under the scrutiny of data analysis. However, addressing the quality difference between teachers in the same school requires difficult conversations and intense work, which many educators want to avoid [6]. Furthermore, Hattie suggests policy makers' attention to ideas that "appease the parents," "fix the infrastructure," and "fix the students" are among the distractors that prevent school and district-level educators from identifying, valuing, and enhancing teachers and principals with the highest level of expertise and working to develop collective expertise and efficacy.

Educational policy is typically created by politicians without the technical expertise or the time to understand the lessons from decades of research and literature. Many US policy-driven change efforts are partisan and mistakenly focused on reform fallacies. Systems of accountability that label whole schools as failing regardless of the population of that school do nothing to solve problems or increase student performance [7]. Furthermore, schools in communities of poverty are the most likely to be labeled as failing, thus further moving schools towards the dual educational system described by Tienken. There is a strong connection in the literature between poverty, child development, and student performance, yet most policy does not consider this research [8]. The strategies and initiatives that will be successful in a school that predominantly serves low-income students are not necessarily the same as those that will be most useful in a middle-class suburban school. Research shows that a one-size-fits-all approach to school improvement is doomed to failure and that viable solutions should be developed to respond to local conditions.

3. STRATEGIC PLANNING DEFINITION AND CHARACTERISTICS

Evidence from decades of research shows that local control is necessary to identify and solve complex educational problems. If the focus in education does not shift from traditional political reform to school improvement initiatives developed to address specific conditions within a community or school, it is doubtful that student learning will increase at the pace necessary to ameliorate the COVID-19 learning loss. Locally controlled, strategic planning at the school district level provides an opportunity to develop strategies and initiatives that align with conditions within a particular school and the stakeholders' expectations.

The literature does not provide an agreed-upon definition of strategic planning for K12 school districts, so descriptions from the nonprofit sector may prove helpful and provide direction for educators. Allison and Kaye describe strategic planning as "a systematic process through which an organization agrees on – and builds commitment among key stakeholders to – priorities that are essential to its mission" [9]. Bryson added to that definition by calling strategic planning a "deliberative, disciplined effort to produce fundamental decisions and actions that shape and guide what an organization (or other entity) does, and why it does it" [10]. Strategic planning is typically characterized as a leadership tool that sets the organization's direction in a manner that engages and includes stakeholders' ideas [11].

Perhaps an agreed-upon definition of strategic planning for K12 schools is elusive because it is not a single initiative but rather a set of mind frames and activities that guide leadership to the collective development of an ideal future and the actions required to move closer to that future [12]. Strategic planning can take a variety of forms. However, it usually focuses on the big picture, vision, proactiveness, flexibility, practicality, and the process should result in targeted actions. Given the complexity of strategic planning, effective leadership is essential to promote and guide a

successful process [13]. Ebener and Smith define the essential work of leaders as strategic change based on a shared vision or common goal and claim that strategic planning is essential for the success of all leaders [14].

Strategic planning is a distinctly different process than traditional long-range planning. Strategic plans are typically developed from a broad range of input from various stakeholders, including teachers, and the process is considered a simultaneously top-down and bottom-up approach [15]. Furthermore, strategic plans assume an organization constantly changes, so strategy must adapt to new data and circumstances. Strategic plans focus on process over product, consider qualitative data, and offer creative solutions to problems of practice [15]. Another vital distinction between long-range and strategic planning is that strategic planning focuses on the system as a whole and the alignment of the parts within the system. Conversely, traditional long-range planning tends to focus on separate planning within the silos or components of a system [16] [17]. Most organizations engage in some form of long-range planning, but not all of these efforts can be categorized as strategic.

4. STRATEGIC PLANNING IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

Ultimately, strategic planning is beneficial if it results in system-wide improvement, including improvements in student outcomes. In 2004, Hambright and Diamantes reported that the literature was filled with articles that describe the purported benefits of strategic planning for K12 schools without evidence to support the claims. Unfortunately, they found few research-based articles that provided substantiated evidence of benefit. Their review of the literature at that time also concluded that while specific actions connected to strategic plans were a necessary component of success, they found "no clear-cut means for linking the strategic plans to the operational action plans" in the literature [15]. In the more than a decade since their work, little has been published to substantiate or refute the connection between strategic planning and student performance in K12 public schools in the US.

From the gap in the literature, one might conclude that strategic planning never gained traction or has fallen out of favor among educators. Nevertheless, strategic planning continues to be a common practice and research subject in the higher education community. In 2016, Immordio et al. studied the benefits of strategic planning at a large public university. They found that strategic planning had the potential to impact departments and programs through alignment with a shared mission and vision and by increased awareness of organizational strengths and areas of growth [11]. Similarly, a case study at the HBCU Tennessee State University demonstrated how strategic planning was used to illustrate student learning levels to provide evidence of value in an uncertain funding environment [18]. Jallal and Murray reported that strategic planning allowed complex organizations, such as universities and public school systems, to set and reach the goals necessary to survive in an era of increased competition and funding decreases. However, they caution that poorly designed or implemented processes could lead to plans that "gather dust instead of leading the institution towards its mission and vision" [19]. Strategic planning is used effectively to create student-focused change in public colleges and universities, which indicates the potential for similar benefits in K12 school districts.

The role of the K12 school district central office and the superintendent of schools have shifted over the past decade with increased accountability for student learning. Researchers have found that school improvement and reform are most effective and sustainable when there is district-level guidance and support [20]. The literature regarding the role of the school district in improvement efforts has resulted in consistent findings, including "setting a clear focus on student learning, aligning curriculum and instruction with identified student needs, using data to guide instructional improvement, and providing coherent professional development necessary for teachers to succeed instructionally" [21]. There is abundant evidence to support the necessity of the superintendent and the district office as the leaders of creating and sustaining an overarching district direction typically provided as a part of a comprehensive strategic plan. Superintendent leadership within school districts is notoriously difficult, and the tenure of superintendents is often brief. Setting direction and aligning actions through comprehensive strategic planning can move school districts toward improvement while promoting leadership success and longevity.

5. STRATEGIC PLANNING PHASES

Although no single and generally accepted strategic planning model exists for school districts, a set of general common recommendations can be found in business and nonprofit organization literature. Strategic planning is often completed in phases to organize and make meaning of the work. A typical work plan is as follows:

- **Phase I** – Organizational readiness, including process development, recruitment of participants, and communication with stakeholders.
- **Phase II** – Stakeholder engagement, data collection, and analysis, including perception data, environmental scan, and organizational performance data.
- **Phase III** – Identification of direction and strategic issues, including vision, mission, values, strategic issues, goals, and objectives.

- **Phase IV** – Development, implementation, measurement, and adjustment of action plans, including strategies, measures, budgets, and timelines. Phase IV is ongoing throughout the life of the plan and is sometimes referred to as the continuous improvement cycle. [13] [14] [22] [23]. While the phases of the strategic planning process are listed in sequential order, the process is typically not linear.

The actual strategic planning steps and their order depend on local conditions and the desires of participating stakeholders. Strategic planning is a flexible and iterative process in which stakeholders create drafts of plan components and revise them multiple times before making a final decision [13]. Strategic planning occurs within the context of an organization and must be sensitive to industry and local conditions [13]. For example, school districts must consider budget cycles, the academic school year, previous change efforts and mandates, and school board desires as the strategic planning process is planned and implemented.

6. THE IMPACT OF SINGLE SCHOOL PLANS

If strategic planning offers promise as a process to understand and respond to local conditions and to improve student outcomes, the question of why it is not more commonly used remains. Answers may be connected to mandates by federal and state policies to create school-level improvement plans. During the 2000s and 2010s, many school reform policies mandated formal annual improvement planning at the school level. Examples of this approach include the School Improvement Plans (SIP) mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and turnaround plans required for School Improvement Grants (SIG) [24] [25]. These policies mandated that every school create an annual plan as a condition of ongoing federal or grant funding. The premise was that plans created by school teams to study and address local issues and to measure annual progress would result in significant improvements in student outcomes [26]. Each year, school personnel across the country diligently create these plans. Many are standalone documents without the requirement for connection to an overall district direction or other local improvement plans. For years, there was minimal research regarding the quality of these individual school plans and their impact on student outcomes.

After almost twenty years of mandates for School Improvement plans, researchers have found that annual School Improvement Plan development does not translate to meaningful change. There is little definition or agreement from policymakers or researchers about the elements of an effective plan, and often, plans are assembled by a small number of school leaders, with teachers missing from the discussion [27] [28]. Results from summative state assessments determine the direction of School Improvement Plans, and the resulting strategies are often driven by for-profit publishers, professional development providers, and consultants [29]. New plans are created each year, more money is spent, and after many hours of work to develop, implement, and evaluate the efforts, student achievement data indicates that the same problems remain unsolved [30]. School improvement planning has become a frustrating annual event with little payoff regarding solutions to pervasive problems or meaningful increases in student achievement.

School-level turnaround plans required by the federal School Improvement Grants (SIG) program also did not achieve the intended outcomes. In 2017, the US Department of Education commissioned and published a study that found that the federally funded SIG model had no impact on math or reading test scores, high school graduation rates, or college enrollment [31]. The director of the SIG program evaluation provided several potential reasons why these school-based improvement plans were ineffective at creating changes in student outcomes. "One possible reason is that the program did not significantly increase the number of SIG-promoted practices that schools used. It is also possible that the practices were ineffective or not well-implemented." [32]. The failure of individual School Improvement Plans due to poor strategy choice or lack of implementation echoes themes from business and nonprofit research.

7. ADDRESSING STRATEGIC PLANNING BARRIERS

The elements of a successful strategic planning process have been written about extensively in the management literature but have yet to be widely addressed in education. There are some variations among authors; however, the keys to success in the business and nonprofit field are generally reported as ensuring organizational readiness, utilization of a research-based process, leadership effectiveness and support, adequate participation by stakeholders, clear communication regarding the process, development of effective implementation plans, and ongoing monitoring and adjustments of implementation efforts [13] [14] [33] [34]. While there are similarities between school districts and nonprofits, unique factors for schools must also be considered, including moving beyond short-term single-school plans.

For a plan to be strategic, it must identify the organization's desired position and action steps to realize that future. Typical School Improvement Plans are one-year planning documents that are single-school focused. These short-term, mandated planning documents are often incremental rather than strategic. Strategy involves focusing on a broad direction over three to five years rather than a plan that changes direction every year [35]. Knight also writes about moving past incremental changes typically detailed in School Improvement Plans. He described one-year plans as focused on previously defined outcomes rather than focusing on a different and optimistic view of an often uncertain future. In many cases, strategic planning in school districts has been diluted or eliminated to emphasize short-term planning and schools as independent entities [36].

Inattention to implementation plans and activities is a widely cited reason that Strategic Plans fail to effect change. Norton and Kaplan reported that about 90 percent of strategic plans in all organizations, including businesses, nonprofits, and education, fail to produce change [37] and many barriers to success are found in implementation. Strategic plans successfully create change in organizations when the broad direction of the vision, strategic issues, goals, and objectives are translated into specific actions. To complicate matters further, an implementation plan alone does not guarantee success if implementation itself is inconsistent or lacking. Effective implementation includes ongoing measurement of strategies, analysis of data, and adjustments in response to that data [38]. Implementation can be complicated in school districts where individual school, grade level, and department work must be aligned with the direction of the overall strategic plan.

8. DISTRICT STRATEGIC PLANS WITH ALIGNED SCHOOL ACTION PLANS

Strategic planning at the district level refocuses improvement as a systemic effort to identify and achieve a common direction. In a systems approach, schools are viewed as connected and interdependent parts of a larger school district rather than isolated entities. Problem-solving on an individual school basis as a part of a mandated School Improvement Plan does not provide the economy of scale or consideration that many students in the district may face similar challenges without instruction or resources aligned to meet them [39]. Growing evidence shows that school district involvement and support are necessary for large-scale improvements in student outcomes [40] [41]. A report for the American Enterprise Institute suggests that successful school improvement requires the larger school district system to create, support, and build capacity for change. The same report states that “districts successfully promote student achievement by connecting key reform elements such as curriculum standards, human-capital strategies, intervention supports, performance management and accountability standards, and strong relationships with internal and external school system members” [42].

The recent focus in the literature on the importance of the school district, along with decades of school improvement research, can be considered a renewed call for district-level strategic planning. To be effective, future efforts at strategic planning must move beyond the singular focus of developing a shared mission and vision [43] to action steps developed by individual schools aligned to the overall district's shared vision and priorities [20]. The strategic plan then empowers the district leaders to create structures to support the aligned work occurring at the school level and to build professional capacity at a scale larger than one school. In this renewed mindset that provides a unifying message and direction, schools will be empowered to customize strategies and yet receive support from the district leaders. Dianne Oliver summed up this approach by stating that “collaborative leadership at district, school, and teacher levels is at the heart of scalable, sustainable school improvement and reform efforts” [20].

9. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

The current body of literature provides ample evidence to create a logical argument that strategic planning at the school district level has excellent potential to improve student outcomes. While it is easy to find articles and books that espouse prescriptive strategic planning models with assumed benefits, these models have limited field testing. Consequently, there is a lack of empirical evidence to document the impact of district-level strategic planning with aligned school action plans on student-level outcomes. In order to establish the viability of strategic planning as a vehicle for school improvement, researchers can partner with school districts to implement and study the models that adhere to best practices. Initial research may be focused on the strategic planning experience to develop recommendations for implementation. Ultimately, however, researchers will also need to measure district and student performance outcomes related to the strategic plan goals and strategies to determine the impact of a process conducted with fidelity. Some of this research may also be done without directly engaging with school districts by using data from the publicly available dashboards on school districts' websites. A significant gap in the strategic planning literature for school districts will need to be filled to entice educational leaders and boards of education to use the process as an ongoing method for continuous improvement. Educators are more likely to engage in a process if research-based evidence of its effectiveness exists.

Action research and case studies can also be conducted at the individual school district level. Districts can begin an entirely new strategic planning process and document the process and results or engage in a more limited manner by working with school-level teams to align School Improvement Plans with existing visions, missions, and district goals. Districts may also choose to engage in a strategic planning process to understand and address internal and external stakeholder perceptions and to engage stakeholders in developing a shared vision that guides the district's work.

10. CONCLUSION

The need for rapid increases in student achievement is more intense than ever because of the learning loss resulting from COVID-19-era school closures. Research provides evidence that school reform policy has been ineffective over the past forty years, and large-scale improvements in student outcomes have been elusive. The research suggests that future efforts to improve student outcomes should be developed at the local level to respond to specific conditions; however, the development of individual School Improvement Plans has not resulted in the desired gains and appears to be too narrow in focus when not aligned to a larger district plan.

The literature also makes it clear that teachers are a key stakeholder group that must be included in curriculum, instruction, and assessment decisions. A well-developed and research-based district-level strategic planning process can result in a culture where stakeholders understand priorities and collectively work towards a shared vision of student success through clearly defined and measured action steps.

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