Chapter 9. Making Strategic Planning Work

The term strategic planning brings to mind for some people a disciplined and thoughtful process that links the values, mission, and goals of a school system with a set of coherent strategies and tasks designed to achieve those goals. For others, strategic planning induces a cringe brought about by memories of endless meetings, fact-free debates, three-ring binders, and dozens—perhaps hundreds—of discrete objectives, tasks, strategies, plans, and goals, all left undone after the plan was completed. As one frustrated administrator said to me, "When do we get to stop planning and start doing?"

Advocates of strategy (Cook, 2004; Porter, 1980) suggest that strategic planning is essential in any complex endeavor. This need is illustrated by an exchange between Alice and the Cheshire Cat in Lewis Carroll's (1898) Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. Alice begins,

"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"

"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat.

"I don't much care where—" said Alice.

"Then it doesn't matter which way you go," said the Cat. (p. 64)

The real lesson from the little-known math instructor is a warning not only against the absence of a plan but also against the perils of excessive confidence in one's own hard work as a substitute for vision. School leaders around the globe work hard, as confident as Alice that they will get somewhere. They march valiantly past the Cheshire Cat colleagues and stakeholders who have seen the limits of hubris many times in the past. Leaders must, Dodgson makes clear, possess not only earnestness and energy but also clarity and focus. Otherwise, our most prodigious energies will follow Alice down the proverbial rabbit hole.

This chapter considers both advocates and critics of strategic planning and suggests some principles that can guide educational leaders in that process. I also share some promising research on the specific elements of school and district planning that are most linked to improvements in student achievement.

Strategery—When Planning Goes Wrong

Schmoker (2004) notes how many strategic planning processes that were designed to impel a district to action can have the opposite effect, substituting the development of long-term vision, mission, and goals for the imperatives of daily action to improve student results:

We wound up setting an impossible number of "goals," even as the word was used almost interchangeably with "action steps" or "objectives." Even the "evaluation" or "results" columns were often indistinguishable from the "goals" and "action steps"—as mere implementation or training was used as evidence of having met a goal. Nonetheless, these annual plans, like the hundreds I've seen since then, were approved pro forma. There was real fear of criticizing their content and so alienating any of the numerous constituents who had spent their valuable time producing
them. Instructional quality—and levels of achievement—were typically unaffected by any of these processes. (p. 426)

Kotter (2007) suggests that education is hardly unique in failing to transform strategy into action, concluding that more than 70 percent of business strategic plans are never implemented. Cartoonist Scott Adams has ridiculed the mission, vision, and strategic planning process when, appearing to be a strategy consultant, he helped groups of leaders to create ponderous and banal mission statements until the earnest participants learned that they were part of a ruse by the creator of Dilbert. Indeed, the "mission statement generator" that once resided at www.Dilbert.com could create some eerily realistic mission statements by stringing together consultant jargon. Even Saturday Night Live got into the act with the malapropism "strategery." Somewhere between self-important navel gazing and unremitting ridicule we should be able to find some practical guidance for school leaders who want to have rational planning processes but who want the plans to lead to improved student results.

Elements of Effective Planning

In a recent analysis of hundreds of plans from schools, central office departments, and entire districts, Stephen White (2005) and I (Reeves, 2006b) outlined some practical suggestions to get more out of the planning process. First, we analyzed the plans using a double-blind scoring rubric; that is, each plan was reviewed by at least two independent raters and scored on between 15 and 20 different dimensions of planning, implementation, and monitoring (PIM). If the two scorers failed to agree more than 80 percent of the time, they started the process again until they achieved consistent ratings. We then compared the elements of the plan ratings to student achievement in a baseline year, and then to gains in student achievement in the next year. The findings were striking: even after controlling for demographic variables of the schools, schools with higher PIM scores had higher student achievement and significantly greater gains in student achievement.

These findings, however, are hardly an endorsement of the creation of school and district plans. Every participant in the study had a plan, but only some particular types of plans were associated with improved achievement. Specifically, schools with plans that had the highest scores in monitoring, evaluation, and inquiry experienced two to five times the gains as schools that had similar plans but low scores on those three dimensions.

High scores on monitoring are awarded to schools in which there is a consistent and frequent (at least monthly) analysis of student performance, teaching strategies, and leadership practices, whereas low scores on monitoring are associated with schools that engage in the futile exercise of the educational autopsy—an analysis of last year's scores long after it is too late to do anything about them.

High scores on evaluation are awarded to schools in which every program, initiative, and strategy is subject to the relentless question "Is it working?" Whereas low-scoring schools settle for descriptions in the passive voice ("teachers were trained"), schools with high scores on evaluation are learning systems in which faculty members challenge themselves to find the relationship between their professional practices and changes in student achievement. The distinctive characteristic of schools with superior evaluation systems is that their leaders can identify practices that they have stopped doing as a result of insufficient evidence of effectiveness.

Schools that excel in the "inquiry" variable are those that attribute the cause of student achievement to teachers and leaders rather than to student demographic characteristics. This variable is reminiscent of the "Pygmalion effect" (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968), which was demonstrated when teachers were told that their students were either fast or slow learners, although in fact there was little difference among the student groups. Within a single school year, students lived up to—and down to—teacher expectations, rendering the relationship between teacher belief systems and student achievement a self-fulfilling prophecy. Similarly,
schools whose plans reflect a confidence in teaching and leadership as the cause of student achievement have had achievement gains three times greater than schools whose plans reflect a focus on student demographic characteristics as the primary causes of student achievement (Reeves, 2008). This new evidence suggests that the Pygmalion effect is as strong among adults as it was 40 years ago between adults and students.

One-Page Plans

Einstein warned that we should seek to make things as simple as possible, but not more so. Therefore, the replacement of piles of three-ring strategic-planning binders with slogans is hardly a productive step. However, there is evidence that schools are well served by one-page plans that are clearly focused and sufficiently simple so that all participants in the process understand their role in executing the plan.

Joe Crawford, former assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction in Freeport, Illinois, reports significant gains in achievement and reductions in equity gaps during the more than five years in which each school and the district as a whole have used one-page plans (personal interview, October 5, 2007). The percentage of students who met or exceeded state standards in reading and math increased for both majority and minority students by more than 30 percent over five years. Crawford's "plan on a page" identifies four key areas: student performance, human resources, partnerships, and equity. For each of these key areas, the plan lists between two and five goals and measures. For each goal, there is a clear statement of actions to be accomplished. For example, here is one of the district's 2007–2008 goals for student performance: "By June 2008, 87 percent of the students will meet or exceed [reading standards] and 92 percent will meet or exceed [math standards]." Here is the associated action plan: "By August 31, 2007, each school will identify students below grade level on state exams and/or local assessments to receive additional support to move students to grade level." (See Appendix B for Freeport's "Plan on a Page" for 2007–2008.)

The transition from traditional plans to the plan on a page was not easy, Crawford reports. But Superintendent Peter Flynn built partnerships with the community and businesses, including the Freeport African-American Ministers United for Change. This group was a powerful advocate for developing new strategies to close the equity gap. There was broad dissatisfaction with traditional planning processes that consumed paper, time, and resources but did not lead to improved results. In addition to brevity, the new planning practices focused not only on test scores but also on measurable adult actions and on quarterly performance updates for students and adults throughout the year.

Strategy Without Strategic Plans

Contrast these two definitions of strategy. On one hand, Kotter (2007) offers simplicity itself: strategy is a collection of actions that add value. Cook (2004), on the other hand, purports the following:

> Strategic planning remains today as simple as it was 5,500 years ago: it is the means by which those of one accord continuously create artifactual [sic] systems to serve extraordinary purpose. All that is required is strategic organization, dealing with strategic issues, making strategic decisions, and taking strategic action. (p. 75)

In the end, school leaders must decide if the essential purpose of planning is to develop a tool to improve student achievement—actions that add value—or if the planning process is an end in itself. School leaders can, in brief, embrace strategy with plans that are focused and brief and that provide consistent monitoring and evaluation. Most important, effective strategies are executed by teachers and leaders who begin the process with the confidence that their professional practices influence student achievement.