



Don't write another shelf document

4 keys to creating a strategic plan your entire community will embrace



A WHITEPAPER PRODUCED BY K12 *INSIGHT*

STRATEGIC PLANNING

A shelf document is not a plan. It's not a strategy either.

Almost every school district has a strategic plan. Chances are, your district has one too. Or maybe it's in the process of creating one. In either case, these plans are usually developed for one of two reasons:

1. It's a state requirement and your accreditation depends on it.
2. Because strategic planning has been identified by someone as something your district should do (read: best practice).

Neither of these are particularly good reasons, which is why so many school district strategic plans, no matter how well-intentioned or grand in vision, end up shoved in somebody's desk drawer or gathering dust on the shelf. »

School district strategic plans fail, more often than not, because they were not developed from the ground up with support and buy-in from parents, teachers, staff and students. Often, these plans are hastily assembled by an internal committee, or—worse—by a small team of educators or administrators tasked with leading the district’s accreditation efforts.

A strong strategic plan is more than a plan. It enhances your district’s brand, positions your team as one that listens to its community, educates and informs the public about key initiatives and goals, and gives everyone a stake in your district’s continued success.

To drive meaningful change, your next strategic plan must reflect the needs and priorities of your entire school community. It should be actionable, with concrete strategies that lead to genuine accomplishments. And it should hold everyone accountable, complete with measurable objectives and key performance indicators, or KPIs, that enable school leaders to effectively track the results of their hard work and commitment over time.



Want to learn more about strategic planning? Read on. >>

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This whitepaper offers four critical steps to help you create a strategic plan that your entire community will wholeheartedly support. If you're considering launching a new strategic plan this school year, or improving on an outdated or ineffective strategy, read on.

That was the experience at the Tuscaloosa City Schools (TCS) in Alabama, where enthusiasm and support are booming in wake of the district's most recent strategic planning effort, which focused on community engagement. The entire process took the district nearly three years, says Public Information Officer Lesley Bruinton, who adds, "it feels like there's more excitement for public education than ever in Tuscaloosa."

Here's some advice on how to involve the community in your planning process from the ground up:

► **Develop a strategy.** Figure out how you are going to engage key constituencies and ensure that everyone has a voice in the process, AASA's Domenech advises. Be deliberate in outlining your strategy before you start asking people to weigh in on it.

► **Focus the conversation.** "Your discussions with the community need organization and structure," Domenech says. In Virginia's Fairfax County Public Schools, where Domenech previously served as superintendent before heading AASA, the administration would invite the community to attend public meetings where staff and parents and others would break out into smaller, more intimate groups, usually of 10 or 12 people. "Each group would have a facilitator and an outline for the discussion, so we were receiving guided input,"

"If you develop a plan on your own, then try to impose it, it won't work."

DAN DOMENECH,
EXECUTIVE
DIRECTOR, AASA

1 **SEEK INPUT FROM THE PEOPLE WHO MATTER MOST**

By including multiple voices and perspectives in the planning process up front, K12 school leaders can seek to eliminate blind spots in their strategy—while building solid support for their vision.

"To be effective, a strategic plan requires the support of all stakeholders," says Daniel A. Domenech, executive director of AASA, the School Superintendents Association. The entire process, from your initial research to community input to writing and sharing the plan out, needs to feel organic. "If you develop a plan on your own, then try to impose it, it won't work," he says.

Engaging your community doesn't simply help you achieve buy-in for your goals—it can lead to valuable insights into district improvements. It also energizes the community, which can provide the momentum you need to move your plan from the theoretical to the real.

“Any avenue we could use to connect with families, we pursued. We used all the tools we had in our arsenal.”

LESLEY BRUINTON, PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER, TUSCALOOSA CITY SCHOOLS, ALABAMA

Domenech says. The more intimate, focused conversations helped district leaders zero in on key goals and priorities.

► **Use multiple channels.** Public meetings are critical to the planning process, but you also have to give stakeholders who can't attend in-person meetings a way to enter the conversation—and keep the community well informed both during and after the process. For its part, TCS used multiple channels to accomplish this. It sent out automated phone messages, ran ads in the local media and created a special area on the district website where community members could go to share their feedback on the strategic plan. For this last part, the district used an online community engagement platform called Let's Talk!, from *K12 Insight*.

2 TURN PRIORITIES INTO ACTION ITEMS

Every strategic planning process should begin by asking broad questions about the district's needs and priorities. What do students, teachers, administrators, parents and other community leaders perceive are the district's biggest strengths—and which areas need improvement?

Collect as much information as you can from surveys, meetings and focus groups. Compare this information with classroom observations and student engagement and achievement data. Then, with continued input from the community, begin the process of distilling all of this information down into three to five core areas of focus in your plan. Each focus area should include a clearly stated goal, key objectives, specific actions, and a measure of success.

Here are three things to keep in mind when planning your action items:

► **Know the difference between goals and objectives.** “Goals can be grandiose statements, but objectives should be specific and measurable,” Domenech says. For instance, you might set one of your goals as, “Every child deserves a high-quality education.” Your objectives would define what you mean by that statement, such as: “Every child will be able to read at or above grade level by the fourth grade.” Objectives “have to be measurable,” Domenech says; “otherwise, they're useless.”

► **Define the strategies that will help you reach your objectives.** What specific actions will you take to accomplish your goals? You can't put your plan into practice without this key information. Outline the steps you'll take to execute every core element of your strategic



plan, as well as who or what department will be responsible for driving the organization toward that goal.

► **Don't overlook the importance of KPIs.** “This is where the rubber meets the road,” offers Jubal Yennie, superintendent of Albany County School District 1 in Wyoming. Yennie’s district is in the process of creating a strategic plan, and district leaders are working with the community to identify effective KPIs to track their momentum toward stated goals and objectives. Without these, Yennie says, “we won’t be able to monitor our progress.”

3 COMMIT TO THE PLAN

Strategic planning doesn't end when you have a final draft of your plan; rather, it begins. True success requires a long-term focus and commitment to meeting the plan's objectives. Here are two strategies to help guide you:

► **Budget smart.** Make sure you have the resources available to carry out your plan and meet your goals. “The budget is a true reflection of a school system’s values,” Domenech says. “If you’ve defined your objectives, but you don’t have a budget to accomplish them, you don’t really have a plan.” For your strategic plan to work, it has to be aligned with the district’s budget overall objectives.

► **Walk the walk.** As a school leader, your priorities are reflected as much by your actions as your words. While communicating the importance of your plan with staff and other stakeholders is critical, what you choose to do each day—and how you focus your time and resources—matter just as much. Make sure you set the right tone with your staff and your community, then lead by example.

3 keys to strategic planning success

EVERY STRATEGIC PLAN MUST:

- Include and reflect the aspirations, goals and values of all stakeholder groups, and get intellectual and emotional buy-in.
- Be relevant to district and community issues and forward-looking.
- Be written so it is easily understood by everyone. Be free of education jargon.



4

MONITOR. ADJUST. REPEAT.

Your school district's next strategic plan needs to be both dynamic and evolving. [Hint: Do not carve it into stone.] Success requires constantly monitoring progress toward the plan's goals and objectives. If the world is changing around you, don't be afraid to change with it, especially if something in the plan isn't working.

► **Examine the data.** What information will help you determine how you are doing? If one of your objectives is to have all students reading at grade level by the fourth grade, then you might look at elementary achievement scores on state exams. "That type of analysis requires data," Domenech says.

► **Build a dashboard.** Take each KPI and pull it into a universal dashboard, so you can monitor your progress and answer questions from board members and others at a glance. Having that kind of information at hand helps you make changes on the fly. "It's easy to see your metrics on an ongoing basis, so you can make adjustments as you go," Domenech explains. On other hand, "if you wait until the end of the school year, it's usually too late."

► **Review the plan at least once annually.** Engage stakeholders in a continuous dialogue about the plan and your progress toward its goals. Communicate your progress at regular intervals, such as board and PTA meetings, and take a temperature check by asking for community feedback. Collectively, determine whether any adjustments should be made to the plan for the following school year.

Your plan needs a plan

Start by asking whether your strategic plan does these 5 things well:

- Does the plan enhance the district's brand?
- Does it position leadership as a team that listens?
- Does the community understand the goals of the plan?
- Does it give the community a stake in the school system's future?
- Does it explain the challenges that stand in the way of that success?

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Put your next strategic plan to work

Learn More

The Challenge

Your strategic plan is your roadmap to success. But strategic planning doesn't happen in a vacuum. For your strategy to work, it has to include input from your community.



Plan with purpose

Effective strategic planning takes time, skill and effort. But getting it right has the potential to pay tremendous dividends for schools and their communities down the road.

www.k12insight.com/strategic-planning

To learn more about how K12 *Insight* can support your district's strategic planning process, sign up for a free consultation at www.k12insight.com or call **703-542-9600**.

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