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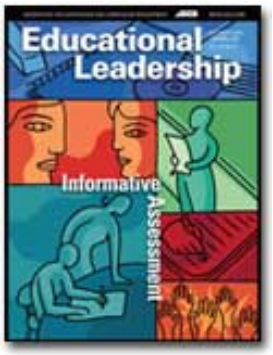

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Leading to Change / Making Strategic Planning Work

Douglas B. Reeves

For some people, the term *strategic planning* brings to mind 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, the term induces a cringe brought about by memories of endless meetings, fact-free debates, three-ring binders, and dozens of 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*?"

When Planning Goes Wrong

Advocates of strategic planning (Cook, 2004; Porter, 1980) reason along with Lewis Carroll (1898) that "if you don't know where you are going, any road will take you there." On the surface, it seems obvious. Who could argue with the need for plans?

But as Schmoker (2004) noted, many strategic planning processes designed to impel a district to action actually have the opposite effect. When he worked with schools to create strategic plans in the 1980s, Schmoker found that

> 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. School leaders need guidance to engage in rational planning processes that lead to improved student results.

Elements of Effective Strategic Planning

Stephen White and I recently analyzed hundreds of strategic plans from schools, central-office departments, and entire districts. We used this analysis to develop some practical suggestions to get more out of the planning process (Reeves, 2006; White, 2005). At least two independent raters reviewed each plan and scored them on about 20 different dimensions of planning, implementing, and monitoring. We then compared the plan ratings to student achievement at the baseline year and to gains the following year. The findings were striking: Even after we controlled for school demographic variables, schools whose plans ranked higher on the 20 dimensions had higher student achievement and significantly greater achievement gains. The following specific dimensions were of particular importance:

Monitoring. A high monitoring score means that the school conducts consistent and frequent (at least monthly) analyses of student performance, teaching strategies, and leadership practices. In contrast, low monitoring scores are associated with schools that engage in the futile exercise of the educational autopsy—an analysis of last year's scores long after it's too late to do anything about them.

Evaluation. A high evaluation score means that every program, initiative, and strategy in the school is subjected 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 in evaluation are learning systems in which faculty members challenge themselves to understand 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* because their evaluations found insufficient evidence of effectiveness.

Expectations. Schools in which leaders and teachers believe that their work is the fundamental cause of student achievement perform significantly better than schools in which leaders attribute student achievement primarily to student demographic characteristics. This variable is reminiscent of the Pygmalion Effect suggested 40 years ago in a classic study by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968). In this study, teachers were told that certain students were "late bloomers" who would make rapid progress in the coming year, although actually these students had been chosen at random. Within a single school year, the chosen students had lived up to teacher expectations.

Similarly, in the schools we studied whose plans reflected a belief that teaching and leadership affect student achievement, achievement gains were three times greater than they were in schools whose plans reflected a focus on student demographic characteristics as the primary determinants of student achievement (Reeves, in press). This new evidence suggests that the Pygmalion Effect is as strong among educators as it is between teachers and students.

One-Page Plans

Einstein warned that we should seek to make things as simple as possible, but not more so. Therefore, I'm not suggesting that we replace piles of three-ring strategic planning binders with catchy slogans. However, there is evidence that schools are well served by one-page plans that

are clearly focused and simple enough that every participant in the process understands his or her role in executing the plan.

Joe Crawford, former assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction in Freeport, Illinois, told me that during five years in which each school and the district as a whole used one-page plans, student achievement improved significantly. The number of students meeting or exceeding state standards in reading and math increased for all groups of students by more than 30 percent.

Crawford's *Plan on a Page*[1] identifies four key areas: student performance, human resources, partnerships, and equity. For each of these key areas, the plan lists two to five goals and measures. Each goal includes a clear statement of actions to accomplish. For example, the 2007–08 goal for student performance for the district indicates that by June 2008, 87 percent of students will meet or exceed reading standards, and 92 percent will meet or exceed math standards. An action plan associated with that measure states that by August 31, 2007, each school will identify students who need additional support to if they are move to grade-level performance.

A Focus on the Ends

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

> strategic planning is the means by which those of one accord continuously create artifactual 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)

School leaders must decide whether the strategic planning process is a tool to improve student achievement (actions that add value) or an end in itself. School leaders should embrace the importance of strategy by developing plans that are focused and brief and that provide consistent monitoring and evaluation. Most important, the teachers and leaders who implement strategic plans should begin the process with the confidence that their professional practices truly influence student achievement.

Endnote

[1] Freeport's *Plan on a Page* document is available for viewing on the ASCD Web site at www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/el/Reeves%20Plan.pdf

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Douglas B. Reeves is Founder of the Leadership and Learning Center; 866-399-6019, ext. 512; DReeves@LeadandLearn.com.

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