

An exploration of the essence of strategic planning and the urgency of the need for its implementation in public schools.

Strategic Planning: The Public School Setting

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Education is moving into a period of unprecedented change. Changing demographics, economic transitions, the transformation of mainstream values and competition are having and will continue to have a profound effect on the entire educational system[1]. Furthermore, the tendency over the last several decades to expand the mission of the schools with limited resources has resulted in poor goal clarity and an inability of schools to place adequate resources behind important priorities when needed[2]. Competition for resources is a harsh reality since available inputs are never adequate for all desired ends. While the business world has been on the cutting edge of this transition for some 20 years[3], educators must now learn to identify the competition for resources and

develop strategies for gaining greater resource levels for high priority activities.

As the notion "change as a way of life" comes to be accepted (at least in principle) many are beginning to recognize and understand the need for "deliberate contrivance of change carried out through a rigorous process of anticipating change, plotting the course, and shaping the change for intended organizational purposes"[4, p. 3]. What is past is a moot point because the future will be making different and extraordinary demands on the system[5]. Clearly, we must make decisions now that will have implications for the future of our schools. Public schooling must increase quality and productivity in order to cope with foreseeable socioeconomic problems and demonstrate behaviours, values and attitudes that students themselves will need to ensure the vitality of their own futures[6]. The task, as seen by Lorange and Vancil[7], consists of finding the most appropriate match between environmental opportunities and organizational resources.

Today's educational leaders must be concerned with taking steps now to ensure the school's continued and healthy existence a decade from now and even beyond. Duckworth and Kranyik[2] state that the greatest challenge facing the schools will be the need to move from existing curricula, structures and societal relationships to new forms that will secure the role of public education in the decades to come: "Clearly, a proactive stance toward the future is an essential ingredient in this effort" (p. 8). One of the best ways to accomplish this in an ever-changing environment is through the use of strategic planning; it is a potentially useful tool that can aid educators in creating that desired future beginning now.

The purpose of this article, then, is to explore the essence of strategic planning and the urgency of the need for its implementation in the public school setting. It is not within the scope of the article to delineate the specific process and procedures for planning — well set out elsewhere[1,4,8,9] — but simply to examine some elements critical for successful implementation; specific caveats will be addressed that might lead to unsuccessful implementation. A brief review and critique of the strategic planning endeavours within a Mid-Western School District in the USA (where the author served as a consultant) follows and finally the author will proffer recommendations and suggestions for more effective implementation of strategic planning in public schools.

Strategic Planning: The Essence

First, we should have a closer look at strategic planning. "Strategic planning is the means by which an organization constantly recreates itself to achieve

This work was carried out in the United States of America, while the author was employed as an Assistant Professor at the University of Texas of the Permian Basin.

extraordinary purpose"[1, p. 74]. It is an ongoing activity:

it's an attitude and a process that you build into the management system of an organization — you use it constantly — you redefine it constantly as circumstances change (as they inevitably do). (quoting George Wilkinson, Vice President and Senior Fellow, United Way Strategic Institute, United Way of America[10, p. 24].)

In its most powerful use, strategic planning identifies results based on an ideal vision[11]. Strategic planning focuses on the broad policy issues facing an organization. It aids in reviewing what is currently being done, what should be done and why it should be done. Strategic planning focuses on the relationships between the organization and the environment served, providing the basis for making decisions to ensure that these relationships remain relevant and productive in the future. According to Wilkinson (in [10]) strategic planning is "simply an effort to more thoroughly understand the nature of change in the marketplace" (p. 23); you have to understand the mission of your organization and have a vision of your desired future. Strategic planning is not a "mechanical, derivative process"; it results from continuous appraisal of competing organizations[3, p. 42]. Sweet[12] proposes that "strategic planning might be aptly described as representing a planning period from zero to infinity" (p. 126).

Wilkinson[10] goes on to say that the point of strategic planning is that you:

don't plan around a concrete future. You envision scenarios and wild-card events; you ask yourself what might happen that could alter your future, and if it happened what could you do differently? (p. 22).

According to Steiner[13], strategic planning "can stimulate the future on paper" (p. 47). This comparatively inexpensive practice allows an organization to make better decisions about what to do regarding future opportunities and threats than simply waiting until events just happen. The planning process itself clarifies opportunities and threats that lie ahead. Strategic planning actually flushes up to top management key issues and helps to establish appropriate priorities for dealing with them.

Strategic planning is dependent on visionary leadership from the top of the organization and a strong sense of commitment and involvement from all members of the organization. This vision, along with every step of the planning and implementation, must be communicated thoroughly and continuously throughout the organization and community — a point that cannot be emphasized too strongly. Communication at each step of the process is indeed a critical element of successful strategic planning[14].

Organizations embarking on a course of strategic planning need to be cognizant of some of the shortcomings as well. Several caveats are offered for consideration. Public sector institutions, such as schools, face unique problems making strategic planning efforts more challenging than in the private sector. According to Duckworth and Kranyik[2], politics, lack of leadership continuity, and the constantly changing public demands for services based on special interests are real considerations. Steiner[13] suggests some limitations of strategic planning including the fact that the environment may prove to be different from that anticipated. Organizations may well encounter internal resistance (particularly if the groundwork is not well laid). Planning is expensive; furthermore it is difficult, hard work requiring high levels of imagination, analytical ability, creativity and fortitude to choose and become committed to a course of action. In addition, strategic planning entails self-imposed limitations on the organization.

Organizations may well encounter internal resistance

Jones[15] offers some important thoughts as to why strategic planning might fail. He suggests that the single greatest mistake is to place the process in the hands of staff (without the solid backing of top management) and then expect the plans to be implemented throughout the institution. Credibility is quickly lost this way and implementation frequently becomes impossible; unless the top administrators view strategic planning as important enough to personally lead the process from beginning to end, it has only a small chance for success. Jones goes on to say that adequate training for those involved in the process is a must. If individuals do not buy into the "big picture" it is difficult for them to understand the importance of their efforts.

Bean and Kuh[16] state that the most potentially troublesome issues in the plan development phase are related to misunderstandings about the process, and failure to apprise relevant constituent groups of the progress of the planning team. The most serious problem faced during the initiation phase is the inability of the members of a complex institution to identify clearly the purposes of planning. They suggest that completed sections of a plan must be communicated in a timely fashion to those it will affect. They go on to cite another implementation problem in the failure to describe accurately exactly what the plan entails to those responsible for implementation: "simply

distributing copies of the plan will not result in participants reading or understanding it and knowing what is expected of them" (p. 47). They stress that a reasonable amount of redundancy in communicating their plan may be necessary. Bean and Kuh[16] go on to say that it is necessary to ensure flexibility in the implementation of the plan in the light of the ever-changing environment.

Some Thoughts on What the Literature Suggests

Although strategic planning has its roots in the business world, and the original literature is found within business journals and books, there is an ever-increasing volume of information to be found in professional educational journals with regard to strategic planning in the public school setting. To wit, the entire April 1991 issue of *Educational Leadership* was devoted to strategic planning. Certainly, strategic planning is "in" and one can expect to see a continuing trend with articles addressing this important issue.

The majority of the articles reviewed present strategic planning as if it were the panacea for education; while strategic planning provides significant hope, there is definitely a need to continue to examine and reflect critically on what is being done. It is tempting to jump on the bandwagon just to be able to say one is into strategic planning. Implementing strategic planning within public schools is somewhat different from implementing it within the private business sector and so there is a need for school administrators to identify factors which might lead to successful or unsuccessful implementation within their school districts. Nebgen's[14] forthright and honest appraisal of the implementation of strategic planning in the Tacoma public schools is greatly appreciated. There is a continued need for those districts which are successfully implementing strategic planning to share their success stories with the rest of the world. This would give needed impetus to districts which are discouraged and/or floundering in their planning endeavours. A case in point follows.

Strategic Planning in a Mid-Western City in the USA

A Brief Analysis and Critique

The Mid-Western City School District (MWC) began to actively pursue strategic planning with the MWC planner/grantsman being sent to Bill Cook's "Strategic Planning for America's Schools" seminar to be trained as a strategic planner facilitator in the fall of 1988. This move was in response to a perceived need for better planning in the district by the newly elected, single-member district board of trustees. Prior boards had traditionally operated in a crisis management mode,

responding to mandates and needs only when absolutely necessary. The newly elected board found themselves out of compliance with numerous legislative mandates, in particular the 22:1 teacher student ratio for kindergarten to fourth grades; the school district simply did not have sufficient classroom space. Although a ten million dollar bond had just been passed within the district, the facilities that were to be built would just barely address the student/teacher ratio mandate and allowed for no enrolment growth in the district whatsoever.

Upon the planner's return, a planning team of 25 district and community members was assembled. This team developed statements of beliefs, a mission statement, strategic policies, strategies and four major objectives to carry the district through 1995 (see Appendix). This team, in essence, developed the district's strategic plan. Action teams totalling 175 district personnel and community members subsequently formed strategies to reach the four major objectives. Until April 1992, the district planner had presented two planning updates to the board of trustees and in May 1992, following a two-day meeting with the original planning committee, presented the first annual update and review of MWC's strategic plan.

The issue was solidly defeated

The focus of the 1992 planning and in fact the district's number one priority had centred around objective IV of the plan which states that:

By 1993, the Mid-Western School District will construct or plan facilities to accommodate the projected elementary and secondary enrolments through the year 2000 for each attendance area (see Appendix).

Action plans for this objective include completion of two Elementary Schools (adding classrooms for grades 4-6) prior to 1992-1993, planning and construction of two elementary schools prior to 1993, planning and construction of one full junior high school prior to 1992-1993, remodelling the science laboratories of two high schools prior to 1993, construction of multipurpose rooms for all campuses prior to 1995, and that all recommended construction be included in a bond issue election prior to November 1990.

A bond election to be voted on 6 October 1990 was subsequently called in August 1991. Although considerable effort seems to have gone into the bond

endeavour, the issue was solidly defeated. After reconsidering all issues, including the recommendations of a board-appointed Bond Advisory Committee, the MWC board of Trustees again, in the spring, called for the bond issue to be put to vote on 4 May 1991 and, this time, it passed. One strategy employed this time was the separation of renovation and construction to existing facilities from the new (and controversial because of its location in the city) junior high construction.

The author was elated to see that the MWC school district was actively engaged in strategic planning; the elation soon turned to frustration, however, with the realization of the limited extent to which the plan had been disseminated (both formally and informally). There has never been an official "unveiling of the plan"[16]; in fact, the majority of teachers and even many mid-management administrators are oblivious to the fact that the district is involved in this process. Inadequate communication seems, in fact, to be the hallmark of the MWC school district. It behoves both the planning director and MWC's superintendent to attend to Nebgen's advice[14] with regard to communication and strategic planning.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Certainly, if public school districts are to be successful in implementing strategic planning, there is a call for both current and future public school administrators to be exposed to both the philosophy and the process; hopefully, an increasing number will actually go through formal training. A course in strategic planning should be a requirement for all university programmes currently certifying public school administrators. It would be very worthwhile for teachers to be exposed to the process as well. As the word spreads, an increasing number of school systems will gain the confidence needed to pursue a course of strategic planning.

**Strategic planning
is a most
optimistic hope**

It would be advisable for all school systems wanting to embark on a course of strategic planning to send several persons from the district to be trained as facilitators. Perhaps part of MWC's problems stemmed from the fact that only one person had been through the training.

It would be very interesting to see the effect on public education if the Central Education Agency (i.e. Ministry of Education) pursued strategic planning; it

can only be surmised that the quality of education would improve for all parties concerned.

Strategic planning is a most optimistic hope for the salvation and future of a country's public school system. It is a useful tool that can serve as a continued challenge for educators to look at anew each year. As Abraham Lincoln once said, "The dogmas of the quiet past will not work in the turbulent future. As our cause is new, so must we think and act anew". Educators need to stand tall and face forward; it is time, even past time that we plan for the future. Magical, simple solutions do not exist. No-one can foretell the future, not even the greatest of strategic planners. But because the future is uncertain there will be an endless need for intelligent, energetic and visionary administrators. What is in fact urgently needed in public education are visionary leaders who can inspire their colleagues enough to commit to strategic planning and to "trust the process".

In the Appendix that follows, the reader will be able to see the Beliefs Statement, the Mission Statement, the Strategic Policies, the Strategies, and the Major Objectives developed by the Mid-Western City Community in conjunction with the district's schools as part of their effort to develop a strategic plan for the whole district.

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Appendix: Mid-Western School District

Beliefs

We believe that ...

... All students can learn and each student has a responsibility in that learning.

... Teachers must be competent, knowledgeable, caring and committed to the success of their students.

MWC must aggressively attract, support, and retain a staff dedicated to the educational profession.

... Education is a vital part of preparing students for life in a changing social and technological world.

... A school program must be designed to provide opportunities for each student to maximize his/her potential.

... The child-centered learning environment is necessary to meet the individual needs of students.

... The learning of students is enhanced when their pride, dignity, and self esteem are fostered and their cultural diversities are understood and respected.

... Educational quality is enhanced when a supportive relationship exists between the home, the business community, and the schools.

... Quality education is insured by the priority allocation of resources to the academic program.

... Providing an educational environment that nurtures the positive self concept of both students and staff fosters mutual respect for one another.

Mission

The mission of the Mid-Western City School District is to produce competent graduates whose skills and vision enable them to accept the responsibilities of productive citizenship and to become lifetime learners who will respond to the needs of their families and community and who have respect for cultural and economic diversity.

Strategic Policies

MWC will never institute any configuration of school boundaries which would produce racially identifiable or segregated school campuses.

... Systematic long-range planning will continue to be utilized by MWC.

MWC will continue a commitment to comparable schools at all levels in terms of staff, facilities, programs, and student population.

... We will recruit the best personnel available for the job based on ethnic balance and school district needs.

... Parent involvement will be encouraged in the decision making process affecting school policies.

MWC will review all programs for student achievement, cost effectiveness, and obsolescence at least every five years.

MWC will provide for building renovations on a scheduled cycle.

MWC will not commence new programs without adequate facilities, equipment, training, and staff development.

... No one will be allowed to disrupt the learning process.

... We are committed to pursuing all alternatives before accepting the decision of any student to drop out.

Strategies

... We will design and staff elementary programs which provide early identification of at risk students.

... Programs will be designed for early intervention in reading, language arts, and mathematics.

... Opportunities will be developed to improve student self concepts through early involvement and full participation in co-curricular and extra curricular activities.

... Curriculum and instruction in all content areas will be strengthened through curriculum development, staff training, and selection of appropriate materials.

... The present alternative school will be expanded to provide credit granting course work for severely at risk students.

... The counseling program, K-12, will provide systematic services for students who are at risk.

... All teachers will receive regular staff development on working with at risk students.

Mid-Western City School District will obtain funding to make salary and benefit improvements.

Mid-Western City School District will recruit and hire certified teachers and staff.

Mid-Western City School District will develop co-operative efforts with existing minority organizations to help recruit certified minority teachers.

- ... We will research, select, and acquire each new school construction site considering the impact of the selection on the MWC cluster system.
- ... We will pursue a bond issue of sufficient magnitude to finance sites and construction needed prior to 1993.
- ... We will address the issue of comparable facilities for all campuses.
- ... We will implement a plan of evaluation for each general academic program contrasting the student performance with local and state expectations.
- ... We will actively seek parent and student involvement in the general academic program.

Major Objectives: MWC Long-Range Plan 1989-1995

Objective I. By 1995, the Mid-Western City School District will reduce the drop-out rate to 10 per cent or less of students that enter ninth grade.

Objective II. By 1993, the Mid-Western City School District will employ sufficient certified minority teachers to reflect the minority student population and will have adequate support staff for each adopted program.

Objective III. By 1993, the Mid-Western City School District through periodic, internal and external evaluation of the general academic programs will review and/or modify its overall curriculum and instruction to better meet the needs of all students.

Objective IV. By 1993, the Mid-Western City School District will construct or plan facilities to accommodate the projected elementary and secondary enrollments through the year 2000, for each attendance area.