

# Why Strategic Planning?

Strategic Planning is the process of looking at all aspects of your school and planning how you wish to move the school forward. It provides the ‘big picture’ of where you are, where you are going and how you are going to get there.

Strategic Planning looks at three main questions:

Where is the school now?

Where does the school want to be in 3, 5, 10, 20 years?

How are we going to get there?

The point of a strategic plan is to improve your school or organisation by outlining the direction you wish the school to take, identifying issues impacting on your school and deciding on the priorities for action.

All schools should have a strategic plan. Without one, the school’s key stakeholders (parents, students, staff and the community) don’t know where you are going. With a strategic plan, everyone is working towards the same vision, trying to reach the same goals, and building commitment to the organisation.

A Strategic Plan also makes everyone’s work easier. For example:

It reduces the number of decisions senior management has to make since most decisions are made on the basis of whether or not they fit the school’s vision and goals;

It ensures the school staff focus on the essentials as determined by key stakeholders;

It provides direction so all stakeholders have a clear vision of what the school is trying to achieve and some understanding of the strategies agreed upon.

In some cases, a Strategic Plan is mandated by government. In some countries and states, for example, a criterion for school accreditation is provision of a written strategic plan for school improvement; while many state governments require government schools to have three or five year strategic plan/review cycles.

## When should we do strategic planning?

Decisions about strategic planning should take into account:

The school’s stage of development

The level of resources available

The level of competence of the Board and senior management in the area of strategic planning.

Obviously most schools have at least a business plan and a building master plan in their first stage of development, but often management is so busy providing infrastructure and trying to increase enrolments in the early years it does not consider there is time for formal strategic planning.

The worst time to do your strategic planning is when your school is in crisis.

That is why we recommend undertaking formal strategic planning no later than the second year of a school's operation, assuming, of course, the basic planning has been done in the establishment phase of the school; and then repeating the process every three to five years.

This does not mean that you can develop your strategic plan and then forget it.

A strategic plan is worthless if it is so prescriptive and rigid it cannot change to meet changing circumstances. This is why the plan should be reviewed, internally, every year and why annual operation/action plans need to be developed. But the formal process, especially if the school is paying for an outside consultant, probably does not need to occur any more than once in three to five years.

There are a number of reasons for this. Besides the cost, change in schools takes time. Some experts in change management suggest that changes in secondary schools take approximately 7 years; and 5 years in primary school. If the strategic planning cycle is too short, there is not enough time for initiatives decided by the school to work.

Too frequent formal processes can result in strategic planning fatigue. Some planning processes may take up to six months or more. If a new planning cycle begins too quickly, people are not over the fatigue of developing the first plan before a second one is being considered.

However, despite the importance of having a plan, there is one thing worse than not having a strategic plan; that is spending all the time it takes to develop them and then ignoring it, or finding it is unworkable.

## Strategic Planning – Theory and Practice

In recent years, strategic planning theory in schools has moved away from the traditional business model towards a 'strategic thinking' approach. This is a strategy that is less a fixed design and more a flexible learning process that relies on school managers constantly listening and synthesizing what they hear and learn from all sources.

This does not necessarily rule out a formal strategic planning process, but it assumes that any formal plan is open to change and refinement so the school leader is always open to responding to rapid change. The strategic plan arises from pragmatic, flexible strategic thinking that relies on judgment as much as on spelling out action steps and the measurement of benchmarks.

The 'strategic plan' in this scenario is simple and concentrates on very few targets over a relatively short period of time. These plans may be developed using a strategic thinking process which occurs over a series of faculty meetings and a board retreat; and it may result in the development of a rolling sequence of project-based reviews and change, focusing each year on one or two departments, key focus areas or program areas.

The important focus in this type of planning is the concentration on a few targets at a time. Schools have an approximate 10% window on students' lives. By concentrating energy and resources on the worthy goals that matter most **right now**, we can make the most difference to the lives of the students in our care. 'Being truly strategic means being clear about what the school is and what it isn't, about whom it's good for and whom it's not good for, about what it can – and can't become' (Evans 2007)<sup>1</sup>.

The other critical element, is that the principal, school Board and school staff must be 'on the same page' when it comes to strategic planning and thinking. That is, there must be a shared understanding about the key areas strategic thinking is going to concentrate on and both staff and the board must have full confidence and trust in the principal to report accurately about the school, its programs and trends in education.

### Turning theory into a simple planning process

Strategic Planning in practice then becomes a simple process as follows:

- CLARIFY THE VISION
- COLLECT THE DATA
- IDENTIFY THE CRITICAL ISSUES
- CHOOSE THE STRATEGIES
- WRITE THE PLAN

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