

Talking About Change

Traditional long-range planning has its place, but when looking at the major issues your district faces, consider taking a strategic approach that is separate and distinct

School districts around the country are desperately trying to cope with a rapidly changing, always challenging, and frequently threatening environment. Today, an increasing number of school board members recognizes that traditional long-range planning is no longer a reliable way to take control of change.

Still, I was blown away when more than 200 school board members attended my “Taking Command of Strategic Change” workshop at the 2010 NSBA Annual Conference. The session introduced a relatively new approach to leading and managing change that is being successfully applied in for-profit, public, and non-profit sectors.

This approach, which I call the “Strategic Change Portfolio” process, involves:

- Identifying your district’s major issues. Look at your challenges, such as significant demographic changes or projected revenue shortfalls, as well as your opportunities to improve.
- Selecting the issues that merit attention now because of what’s involved.
- Developing initiatives or projects aimed at dealing with these issues.
- Managing how the initiatives are implemented, using a strategic portfolio that is separate from your main-

stream operations.

In practice, organizations that apply this approach run two concurrent, parallel planning processes. A comprehensive process updates your annual operating plan and budget; the second focuses on addressing a small number of high-stakes strategic issues.

Workshop participants asked a number of questions during our 75-minute session. Here are my responses to three of them.

How many truly strategic issues can a district deal with at any given time, and how do you select the ones that deserve attention now?

The great majority of issues facing your district at any time are operational and incremental in nature. Almost always, they can be dealt with effectively in the process of updating your annual operational plan and budget.

“Strategic” does not mean long-range, nor does it have anything to do with arbitrary and meaningless time frames, like three or five years. Instead, a “strategic” issue is so high-stakes and complex that you can’t attempt to address it through mainstream operational planning and budgeting. It likely would be buried and get far too little attention. The long-term financial crises many districts face is a prime candidate because it is high-stakes and

complex.

When you look at it, no district can successfully deal with more than a handful of strategic issues while still managing day-to-day operations. Of course, the exact number depends to a great extent on the district’s financial and staff resources and how smoothly day-to-day operations are going. In my experience, three to five truly strategic initiatives are about the maximum that can be handled at one time.

I have written recently about the strategic initiatives in Florida’s Hillsborough County Public School District, which is working on a Gates Foundation-funded teacher effectiveness program. The goals involved are so ambitious, the planning so demanding, and the public profile so high that this program is a prime candidate for the strategic portfolio approach. Leaving it to business-as-usual operational planning and management would be extraordinarily risky and extremely foolish.

How do you select which strategic initiatives to work on now? It’s a not-very-scientific process of human assessment and judgment. One of the most effective ways to whittle down the list is to ask: What costs will my district most likely incur if we do not take action now on each of these issues? Naturally, you want to go for those involving the highest potential costs.

When the Hillsborough school board and superintendent were invited to compete for the Gates Foundation funding, the cost of not taking action would have been missing out on a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to get \$100 million in new fund-

ing to boost student achievement. For districts in a financial crisis, the likely cost of not taking action now to address the projected gap between revenues and expenditures is likely to be a chaotic, credibility-eroding process of cutting back programs and laying off staff.

What's the most effective way to be involved as a board in the portfolio process?

The board's most significant role is to identify and select the issues that demand attention now as early as possible. As board members, you bring significant resources to the table in the form of your diverse experience, expertise, knowledge, perspectives, and ties to the wider community. Of course, the board's involvement in selecting the issues your district addresses builds a foundation of understanding and commitment for when you must allocate resources to make the changes.

Identifying key issues is best accomplished in a retreat setting, usually one that takes the board and senior staff away from the office for a day to a day and a half. Recently, I worked with a district's strategic leadership team -- board, superintendent, and senior administrators -- to identify strategic issues in such a setting. Breakout groups were used to identify key issues, and the board's planning and development committee prepared a presentation around national, state, and local conditions.

A second round of breakout groups was used to assess the identified issues and determine the consequences of not taking action versus the financial, political, and technical challenges the district would face in addressing each situation. Participants knew it did not make much sense to reach agreement on a final list of issues. That selection would be left to the superintendent, his executive team and to the board's planning and devel-

opment committee.

If we decide to hold a retreat as part of our portfolio process, what can we do to make sure that it's successful?

Bringing together your board, superintendent, and senior administrators for a day won't guarantee that they accomplish anything important. Indeed, many of you probably have experienced the "retreat from hell" that broke down into unseemly squabbling after a couple of hours or frustrated and irritated everyone by devoting half a day to craft a values and vision statement.

Here are some practical steps you can take to ensure that your retreat really does make a powerful contribution to the process:

- Retain a professional facilitator to assist in planning, leading, and following up on the retreat.

- Use an ad-hoc committee of board members and the superintendent, working with the facilitator, to develop a detailed retreat design. This should consist of a detailed set of desired outcomes, the meeting's structure (for example, the breakout groups that will be employed), and a blow-by-blow agenda.

- Make sure all of your senior administrators are involved. You need their knowledge and expertise, and they will be critical to following through on the retreat.

- Be sure you've defined the process for follow-up. For example, the facilitator will write a report, which the board's planning and development committee will review, and so on.

I hope you will consider using this process in your board work. While it is not a panacea, I believe strongly that it can be a valuable tool to help your district move onward and upward. ■

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