The Obama administration’s planned investments of $100 billion in American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds and an additional $4 billion in Race to the Top funds offer tremendous opportunities for school systems to focus intently on the work that will bring the greatest learning results for students. However, these new funding programs also have the potential to be just two more things (albeit big things) to which districts react haphazardly. Whether our society will reap a return on these massive investments depends on whether school systems are able to use these funds strategically.

The word *strategy* is most commonly heard in school systems in the context of strategic planning, an exercise districts go through every three to five years or with the arrival of each new superintendent. The sheer number of goals, strategies, and initiatives proposed in most strategic plans actually detracts from the district’s ability to focus, and it is often unclear how implementation will lead to improved outcomes for students. As a result, most systems are unable to be precise, agile, and intentional about giving students what they most need to succeed.

That is why it’s important for school systems to distinguish between strategy and strategic planning. Stacey Childress of the Harvard Business School defines strategy as “the set of actions an organization chooses to pursue in order to achieve its objectives. These deliberate actions are puzzle pieces that fit together to create a clear picture of how the people, activities, and resources of an organization can work effectively to accomplish a collective purpose.” Developing strategy requires systems to identify a few high-leverage ways to improve instruction and student learning. These few, carefully chosen things are well aligned, coherent, mutually reinforcing and add up to a whole that is greater than the sum of its individual parts.

The Power of Strategy

Schools and school systems are noisy places. Crises, big and small, come one after another. Local, state, and national politics add to the din. Many systems live in a persistently reactive mode to these external stimuli. We reassure ourselves that we are being responsive (usually a good thing), while in fact we are driven to distraction. The results of all this distraction are predictable—and unacceptable. Improvement efforts are fractured, disconnected, incompletely implemented, and never assessed.

Strategy is about filtering this noise. It’s about deciding what systems and the individuals in them must do on behalf of students and their learning, and then putting that decision into action. It provides a focus based on data and beliefs about what will be most effective in helping students learn. By committing to and pursuing strategy, we have a calm center from which to act clearly and deliberately. Crises don’t magically disappear, but we approach them with a clearer sense of priority.

Strategic planning is intended to be the vehicle for developing strategy. In high-performing organizations in education and in other sectors, it is. Yet in many school systems, strategic planning reflects a “culture of compliance,” in which participants feel they are going through the motions just to satisfy demands imposed from above (only a few of which may be actual federal or state requirements), rather than being empowered to ask probing questions and make informed choices. Planning may also be approached as a community-building activity. Both the compliance and
community-building orientations leave systems with plans that tend to be broad, shallow, and not very useful (see sidebar “Strategic Plan vs. Strategy.”) **Strategic Plan vs. Strategy**

*A strategic plan typically*
- focuses on the status quo
- addresses an external audience
- takes a broad, incremental approach
- includes discrete, unrelated initiatives
- fits within the current structure and culture
- is rarely revised based on new information

*A strategy typically*
- pursues new ways to accelerate improvement
- addresses an internal audience
- focuses on doing a few things well
- integrates a few key initiatives
- requires people to work together in new ways
- is continually reconsidered and adapted

The reality of how systems improve is dynamic, unlike the neat chart of roles and responsibilities published in a typical plan. Without systems in place for discussing implementation, learning from it, and refining the strategy accordingly, the effects of the work are diminished and the plan becomes irrelevant. The answer is not to abandon strategic planning. Instead we must ensure that planning is driven by a clear understanding of strategy and is simply one step in building the system’s capacity to act in a focused and coherent way.

**Three Questions**

Schools and school systems that are making substantial progress for children have broken out of a reactive mode and are clear about their answers to three questions: *(What are we doing? Why are we doing it? How are we doing it?)* The simplicity of the questions belies the complexity involved in answering them.

**What?** Most school systems we know have far too many answers to the question *What are we doing?* Their work is often fragmented, poorly aligned, and limited in its effectiveness. In a system with a robust strategy, there is a clear sense of how the carefully selected initiatives they undertake relate to one another, the organizational changes they require, and the support adults in the system will need.

**Why?** Strategic school systems have clear answers to this question. Based on data, research, and discussion, school leaders have bet on a few key initiatives that they believe will have the highest impact on student learning, instead of the myriad other ways their system might invest its resources and energy. And they communicate this rationale to stakeholders throughout the system.

**How?** In systems that are improving results for all students, everyone works hard, but more importantly, they work smart. They are strategic in how they approach their work. Leaders in these systems are intentional in word, thought, and action. Amid the constant cacophony of options demanding their attention, they weigh trade-offs, consider evidence, and keep goals in mind. They check assumptions and consider the interrelationship of different improvement efforts. They have an idea of how an action might lead to a particular result, and they adjust their approach based on new information.

**Four Criteria**

One way to discern a system’s level of strategy is to brainstorm a list of all the initiatives underway in the system, organize them into categories, and assess them on the basis of four criteria: (1) alignment to the instructional core; (2) focus, coherence, and synergy; (3) the degree to which they are both visionary and problem solving; and (4) ownership and enactment throughout the system (see sidebar “Assessing Your System’s Level of Strategy”). **Assessing Your System’s Level of Strategy**
A district’s senior leadership team can use the following protocol to make sense of the work underway and assess the extent and quality of its system’s strategy:

1. Brainstorm all the initiatives underway in the system, write each one on a sticky note, and post them on the wall.
2. Group the sticky notes into categories (e.g., instruction, assessment, curriculum, professional development, technology, operations, and so on). Identify any “orphans”—initiatives that don’t fit into any category.
3. Rate the categories from 1 (low) to 4 (high) based on the degree to which they reflect the four criteria for effective strategy (alignment to instructional core; focus, coherence, and synergy; both visionary and problem solving; and ownership and enactment throughout the system).

A system with an effective, coherent strategy will score at least a 3 or 4 on all criteria; the work for the team will be to revisit the strategy to ensure that it is working. A system with mostly 3s and 4s and one score of 1 or 2 has some work to do to ensure the integrity of its strategy. If a system’s scores are mostly 1s and 2s, this indicates the need to build a strategy focused on improving student learning.

**Instructional core.** Most school systems say they are focused on student learning. Yet a close look at how time and resources are spent in the organization may suggest a very different set of priorities. When a system’s strategy is aligned to the instructional core, all of its work—including that of the central office and operational departments—is squarely focused on improving student learning and teaching quality.

**Focus, coherence, and synergy.** The elements of an effective strategy should be complementary and mutually reinforcing. For example, a district’s strategy might focus on improving instruction, developing a student assessment system, and creating a comprehensive student-support system. There are only three big ideas in this strategy. Each supports the others. To take one out of the equation would diminish the effectiveness of the other two.

**Both visionary and problem solving.** No school system’s vision can be attained without fixing serious problems. At the same time, the way problems are solved can help build the capacity needed to realize the vision. For instance, a district whose third-grade literacy scores are low might try to solve the problem by pulling struggling third-grade readers out for interventions to boost their reading levels and scores. This is a backward-looking, reactive approach. Alternatively, they could try to solve that problem in a more visionary way by developing a multipronged structure of support for students, starting in kindergarten, that includes targeted interventions along with efforts to increase how much students read and build their love of reading. This kind of approach addresses the problem in the context of a larger vision of the sorts of readers the system is trying to produce. Such an approach is more forward-looking and proactive.

**Ownership and enactment throughout the system.** The fastest way to know if a system has a strategy is to ask members of the senior leadership team to explain the strategy and give some examples of it in action. The clarity and consistency of response (or lack thereof) is telling. Strategy is enacted when all the people throughout the organization as well as outside partners understand what it is, know what their responsibility for implementing it is, and carry it out.

One of the most striking features of school systems where student achievement results consistently improve is a focus on learning and teaching that pervades all levels of all departments. Everyone is responsible for student learning. No matter how stormy the seas get—budget cuts, reform fads, a thousand other distracting siren songs—these school systems resist being blown off course. Their focus on learning and the data and evidence that measure learning are their “true north,” guiding the system with constant reinforcement from senior leadership about what matters most.

Systems in states that win Race to the Top grants may or may not be ready to use that funding strategically. But every state and school system wants to win the real race to the top—the one that ensures all students are achieving at high levels, achievement gaps have been closed, and students graduate from high school possessing the knowledge and skills required to choose higher education or meaningful employment that will support them and contribute meaningfully to our democratic society. The fastest runners in that race will be the states and school systems that think and act strategically. In the end, it is the children they serve who will stream across the finish line to win.
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