

EFFECTIVELY IMPLEMENTING STRATEGIC PLANS IN LARGE URBAN SCHOOL
DISTRICTS: THE PERSPECTIVE OF FLORIDA SUPERINTENDENTS

By

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A DISSERTATION PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2013

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

An effort of this magnitude could not have been accomplished without significant help. First and foremost, I want to thank my wife, Jo, for her encouragement and putting up with me working on my dissertation while serving as the Chief Academic Officer, then as Superintendent of Duval County Public Schools. My children, Chris and Kate, also had to hear constantly about my travails or, at times, inability to focus on the dissertation. The greatest support team also included my parents, George and Corky Dannals. While dad is no longer with us in body, both of them have demonstrated a commitment to servant leadership, ethical values, and hard work. These have served me well in this endeavor.

Next, I would like to acknowledge my Duval County Public Schools teammates. Suzi Marlowe has provided extensive support in transcribing the audio tapes, as well as other help in making this document better. Denese Mealor ensured that I was scheduled into classes, my fees were paid, and I was able to run the district while in a car going to Gainesville. Finally, I am appreciative of the reminders that Dr. Denise Hall and Dr. Dana Kriznar, fellow members of our cohort, provided. Dana was our “mother superior” and, without our cohort’s help, I would still be floundering.

I must also acknowledge Dr. James Doud, former head of the Educational Leadership Program at the University of Florida. Jim agreed to arrange for professors to come to Jacksonville for the first year and a half, which made the classwork possible. Jim also was a great teacher and role model to me. The other individual I would like to acknowledge is Dr. Bernard Oliver, my dissertation chair, former district administrator, and friend. Bernie ensured my very old Master’s credits were counted to enter the program and has been an excellent supporter and guide as my chairman. I would also

thank the other members of my dissertation committee: Dr. Eilene Oliver, Dr. Linda Eldridge, and especially Dr. Jean Crockett for their suggestions and support.

Dr. Jon Supovitz, Mr. John J-H Kim, Dr. Cheryl Fountain, Mr. Kenneth Manuel, Ms. Patricia Willis also assisted in thinking through the design, questions, and significance of this study, as well as providing support and a friendly push to complete the study. I am also deeply indebted to the nine Florida superintendents who gave so generously of their time, sharing with honest passion how they used strategic planning in their districts.

Finally, I recognize a host of work, church, and neighborhood friends who were always concerned about my progress. They seemed genuinely interested in the topic and how it related to the work in which I was engaged. They also encouraged me to share what I had learned through teaching and consulting, which I intend to do.

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Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School
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December 2013

Chair: Bernard Oliver
Major: Educational Leadership

District-led reform has become more prominent in the last 20 years with an emerging body of research, mostly case studies, describing promising practices in large urban school districts with rapidly increasing student achievement. This study explores how strategic planning is used to implement these promising practices as seen through the perspective of superintendents. Nine superintendents from large school districts in Florida, representing almost 1.5 million students, who served during the 2007-12 time span, were interviewed in person using a semi-structured question format. Questions centered around four areas: 1) How were the strategic plans created, what were the major components, and what were the roles and responsibilities of key participants? 2) How were the districts' academic, financial, and human resources plans aligned and implemented in the plan? 3) How did internal and external forces advance, modify, or inhibit the plan? and 4) What recommendations would they give other superintendents using strategic planning to improve student performance. Using a constant comparative methodology within grounded theory, as well as cross-case analysis, several themes emerged.

Findings included how critical strategic planning is to create a sense of urgency, improve transparency, guide where resources are focused, ensure accountability, and improve community perceptions. A clear agreement regarding direction, roles, and responsibilities between the superintendent and the school board must happen first. District and school-based staff need clear direction, appropriate resources, regular monitoring, orientation towards results instead of compliance, and a cross-divisional ownership of the strategic plan's outcomes for students. Engagement of internal and external stakeholders in the creation and monitoring of the plan is also essential.

Conclusions included that, while limited to one state (Florida) over a defined time period with unique challenges (2007-12), many of the findings can be generalized to other urban districts. Further study could include interviewing other key individuals, such as school board presidents, union presidents, senior district staff, principals, teachers, and key community leaders to see how their perspectives of strategic planning are similar or different from superintendents.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to build upon the literature and research over the last twenty years that has focused on identifying the promising policies and practices large urban school districts have implemented to improve student achievement and how they have accomplished it. The focus will be to determine how superintendents implemented strategic planning to improve student achievement. The study will address four research questions:

1. How were the strategic plans created, what were the major components, and how were they monitored?
2. How were the districts' academic, financial, and human resources plans aligned and implemented in the plan?
3. How did internal and external forces advance, modify, or inhibit the plans?
4. What advice would superintendents give to other superintendents embarking on a strategic planning process?

While it builds on earlier and more extensive research on effective classroom and school level practices, the systemic change research at the district level is a unique field that is still very much in its infancy (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2001). Until recently, reform efforts have not focused on school districts, but have focused at the state or local level. School districts are beginning to be respected as a key element in successful educational reform bringing "coherence, consistency, and equity to a fractured policy arena" (Hightower, Knapp, Marsh, & McLaughlin, 2002, p. 1).

What has emerged in the research to date is a fairly consistent set of high leverage practices. These will be discussed extensively in Chapter 2. Few studies have focused on how to implement these practices using strategic planning as the organizing vehicle. Fewer still were based on the views of urban superintendents describing the

reality of implementing such plans. Such a perspective is critical if we are to move from theory to practice in improving large numbers of urban school districts.

As presented in Chapter 3, case study methodology was used to collect data, specifically using a semi-structured interview format. This methodology was chosen because it reveals what, why, how, and with what results decisions were made in a particular district. To analyze the results, grounded theory, specifically the Emerging Model developed by Glaser (1992), was employed. In addition to using a constant comparative approach using grounded theory, cross-case analysis was also used to compare across districts. This provided not only the opportunity to see how similar or different their responses were to the same issues, but also increased the ability to generalize results to a larger audience.

This study was limited to interviewing nine superintendents in large urban school districts as defined by the Broad Prize for Urban Education criteria. Interviewees had to have served at least three years as a superintendent in Florida during the 2007-12 time period. Limiting the study to one state, one time period, and only superintendents may have limited the ability to generalize the other places, times, and perspectives. However, to do so made the study limited to a reasonably similar context, given the wide differences among states in financial capability and accountability systems.

Results of the study were reported in Chapter 4. The first two sections present what superintendents saw as the purpose of strategic planning and describes the process they used in creating, implementing, and monitoring their plans.

Next, the alignment of academic, fiscal, and human resource plans within the strategic plan are discussed. While a number of systems have to be aligned in order to

maximize success, these three areas were predominant in Chapter 2 where high-impact strategies were outlined. Superintendents described specific issues and solutions that required the alignment of these three areas.

Finally, in Chapter 4, pitfalls, possibilities, and advice were presented with a specific focus on the relationship of the superintendent with key groups. These included first and foremost the school board. Having an agreement regarding directions and roles and responsibilities was absolutely essential. Next was the relationship with the district staff, clarifying their part in the district succeeding by focusing on results, working together, being constant learners, and being flexible on which strategies and organizational structures to use in achieving the goals. The relationship with other groups included the unions, the community, and the state and federal representatives, as each played a critical role in the success or blockage of implementing the strategic plan.

The discussion of the findings, conclusions, implications for practice, and suggestions for further study are presented in Chapter 5. The findings and conclusion build upon, but extend the background literature of Chapter 2. Next steps include a number of questions to be answered with further study.

Problem Statement

Too many students, especially students with disabilities, students needing English Language Learning services, students from low income families, and racial/ethnic minority students are not graduating ready for college, careers, and citizenship. They are concentrated in large urban school districts that, for the most part, have not significantly improved student performance.

Improving students' performance in large urban school districts has become widely recognized as an important national goal of the United States. Beginning with *A Nation At Risk* in 1983, to the SCANS report in 1992, and culminating with the *No Child Left Behind* legislation in 2002, there has been a concerted effort to mobilize the nation to better prepare its young people to succeed in the global, information-driven economy of the 21st century. Having all students succeed matters to the individual students and their families, to the local community, and to the nation to maintain its economic viability and social stability (Marshall & Tucker, 1992).

Nowhere is the promise of the American dream least realized than in large urban areas where large numbers of students perform poorly on standardized tests, fail to graduate or graduate with minimal skills, and attend college at lower rates, leaving them unprepared for participation in the new economy (Hess, 2005). The fact that a large percent of the students served in large urban districts are racial/ethnic minorities, often come from low income families, are more frequently identified as having a disability or starting with limited English proficiency, exacerbates the challenges of having all students reach high levels of academic achievement (Hill, Campbell, & Harvey, 2000; Murphy & Shiller, 1992; Noguera, 2003). Urban districts are also characterized by teachers who are not as well prepared and by turnover of leadership, particularly at the superintendent level (Resnick & Glennan, 2002). Some have argued that unless major social changes are made in urban communities, school districts will be limited in their ability to significantly impact student achievement (Noguera, 2003; Rothstein, 2004), while others point to positive examples of schools that have brought all student groups up to high levels of achievement and argue for a "no excuses" approach (Thernstrom &

Thernstrom, 2003; McAdams, 2006). Current student performance is unacceptable, especially for poor and minority students who have experienced low expectations and limited effective support. It is a moral issue where “a quality education for poor and minority children is the defining civil right of our time and the test of our commitment to equal opportunity” (Hess, 2005, p. 2). While recognizing the challenges of urban education, the “no excuses” advocates argue that schools and districts can have a significant impact on student performance (Education Trust; Murphy & Shiller, 1992). Resnick and Glennan (2002) state that given high quality learning opportunities, poor and minority students can succeed academically.

The issue today is not whether it is possible for urban students to learn well, but rather how good teaching and, therefore, learning can become the norm rather than the exception in urban settings. The problem, in other words, is taking powerful teaching and learning to scale in urban school districts. (p. 61)

To date, however, there are very few high poverty urban districts that have produced excellent results in all or almost all of their schools (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2001; McAdams, 2006; Zavadsky, 2009).

What has occurred more frequently than change in classroom practice is the adoption of programs or policies that are initiated at the federal, state, or district level and driven by business or special interest groups. These programs compete for human and material resources, are often disconnected from each other, and create confusion and frustration on the part of practitioners (Supovitz, 2006, p. 13). The result is a lot of activity with little real progress (Hill, Campbell & Harvey, 2000; Hill & Celio, 1998; Fuhrman, 1993; Elmore, 1993; Zavadsky, 2009). Stein and D’Amico (2002) described the problem as

the simultaneous existence of the numerous reform programs—each of which is associated with its own training package—can lead to diffuse and conflicting efforts, no single one of which has the power or momentum to significantly influence teaching and learning inside the classroom. (p. 64)

Even some of the efforts in the 1980's and 1990's to promote school-based decision making had little impact on teaching and learning practice or collaboration (Fullan, 1993). Neither non-traditional superintendents, educational management firms, nor takeover of large urban districts by mayors or states in cities like Baltimore, Washington D.C., Hartford, Cleveland, Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, and Oakland have had a significant positive impact on student achievement unless they also implemented better initiatives, policies, and organizational effectiveness (Hill, Campbell, & Harvey, 2000). Fullan (2002) further observes:

What are the “big problems” facing educational reform? They can be summed up in one sentence: School systems are overloaded with fragmented, ad hoc, episodic initiatives – [with] lots of activity and confusion. Put another way, change, even when successful in pockets, fails to go to scale. It fails to become systemic. And, of course, it has no chance of becoming sustained. (p. xi)

Resnick and Glennan (2002) describe nine inhibiting factors to urban school reform:

1. District bureaucracy and fragmented programs driven by specialized funding while efforts to move decision-making to the school level have not been effective.
2. Too much restriction on teacher time from union rules.
3. Too much focus on operations and politics.
4. Too little time spent on teaching and learning.
5. Current research has often not been used.
6. Professional development for teachers has been narrow, episodic, and frequently tied to external categorical programs.
7. Efforts to prepare, recruit, and support new teachers are weak and fragmented.

8. Principals and district staff lack sufficient knowledge and skills to provide instructional leadership.
9. Ensuring high levels of implementation of best practices and programs in every classroom is a problem—teachers still want to make all of the instructional decisions without outside direction. (p. 161)

In a review of the research on large urban district reform, Anderson (2003) focused on three areas of findings: the challenges faced by large school districts to improve student achievement, the strategies they used, and the evidence of effectiveness in improving teaching and learning. Challenges included poor achievement for minority and low-income students, internal politics causing a lack of focus on students, a high number of inexperienced teachers with high turnover, low expectations, a lack of a demanding curriculum, a lack of instructional program alignment, fragmented professional development, high student mobility, weak central office support, inadequate school leadership, inflexible collective bargaining agreements, and a lack of funding to support reform efforts.

Urban school reform takes place in a political and community context. The same business or community pressures that drive the need for reform, often expressed as frenetic activity, limit any real reform and cause reform to be primarily symbolic. In this context, reform can be seen as a tactic to ease political tensions. It is better to be seen as doing something even if it has little impact on student performance. The problem with symbolic rather than real change is that it wastes resources, produces cynicism, and undermines fundamental changes in teaching and learning (Hess, 1999; Fuhrman, 1993). Hess describes the community's expectations as it relates to the hiring of a new superintendent:

It seems so hopeful. The city school board hires a promising new superintendent, the local papers are filled with accolades and testimonials

to his or her acumen, and the new administration announces a wave of exciting initiatives amid bountiful goodwill. The community eagerly awaits active leadership and cutting-edge reforms, interpreting them as evidence that the superintendent is serious about the task. Far too often, however, this exciting beginning comes to naught. Within two to three years, the once-revered leader either has disappointed or departed, leaving the task of leadership to a new white knight. Before too long, the dance begins again. (p. v)

Sometimes an external reform-oriented superintendent is brought in to fix a school district in crisis characterized by very poor student performance, especially among poor and minority students. They inherit bloated, recalcitrant bureaucracies with poor financial controls, ineffective human resources and other support services departments. The superintendent is like Gary Cooper in the movie "High Noon." The community hires him with great initial support only to abandon him to fight the crisis alone. Even if he wins, it creates enough tension that he is asked or chooses to leave (Hill, et al., 2000). McLeod and Yee (2003) provide a similar description of an urban superintendent as a "miracle worker" or "lone ranger" with the "vision and courage to make tough, quick decisions often at odds with unions, bureaucracies or special interests; fire principals; mobilize teachers; balance the budget; and raise student achievement" (p. 54). Within a few years, board conflicts over policy issues and impatience with the rate of change emerges. "Tumultuous tenures and tenuous public support, with little recognition, seem to be the common working conditions experienced by superintendents in each large city school system" (p. 54). After a difficult resignation or dismissal, the departing superintendent is blamed for any failures. "The public no longer sees the superintendent as the 'messiah' but instead the superintendent becomes the 'scapegoat'" (p. 54).

Such short-term leadership with quick-fix solutions deflects attention from “improving instruction, constructing positive school cultures, and encouraging and rewarding professional competence” (Hess, p. 6). Instead of numerous reforms, the most effective strategy is to focus on a few initiatives based on solid theories of teaching and learning and develop deep district capacity in these areas (Hess, 1999; Casserly, et al., 2011; Zavadsky, 2009; Supovitz, 2006). It is better to implement a few initiatives well rather than numerous initiatives poorly because “a wealth of research on school reform suggests reforms fail because of inadequate implementation, planning, and coordination” (Hess, p. 7).

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to extend our knowledge and practices regarding how implementation of key strategies can improve student achievement in large urban school districts. The focus will be the process of creating and implementing a strategic plan to actualize these key strategies. This will be reported from the unique perspective of superintendents because they have to implement the statutes, policies, and procedures of federal and state and local government and are held accountable for results.

While there has been a growing body of thought and research regarding what needs to be done at the district level to create excellence in all schools, relatively little has been written on how to implement these key strategies through a strategic planning process. As one urban superintendent is quoted as saying, “We know what areas we need to focus on and that systemic alignment is important; we just don’t have the specifics on how to pull the pieces together to take reform to scale” (Zavadsky, 2009, p. xxiii).

The purpose of the study then is to study the process of connecting the what with the how of district-led school reform as reflected in strategic plans led by superintendents. From the perspective of nine recently serving Florida superintendents, the following questions will be addressed:

1. How were the strategic plans created, what were the major components, and how were they monitored?
2. How were the district's academic, financial, and human resources plans aligned and implemented in the plan?
3. How did internal and external forces advance, modify, or inhibit the plans?
4. What advice would superintendents give to other superintendents embarking on a strategic planning process?

Definition of Terms

A Nation at Risk (1983): The report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education asserted that schools in the U.S. were failing woefully in preparing students for the future and, unless addressed, would cause the U.S. to lose its standing as the number one country in the world. It touched off a wave of local, state, and district reforms, especially requiring a more rigorous curriculum.

A+ Plan (1999): Florida's accountability plan built on earlier state plans dating back to 1973, and preceded NCLB. The purpose was to generate better effort and performance at the district, school, and student level. It was comprised of four components: state-developed performance standards (known as the Sunshine State Standards); state assessments (FCAT) in reading and mathematics in grades 3-10, writing in grades 4, 8, and 10, and science in grades 5, 8, and 11; public reporting of schools graded on an A-F report card; and consequences for students, schools, and districts based on assessment results.

Differentiated Accountability (DA): Building on Florida's A+ accountability, DA was developed in 2008 as a pilot, then fully implemented in 2010. The purpose was to differentiate oversight and resources by categorizing schools into level of need. While still using school grades, DA looked at progress or regression in performance over time. Depending on the intensity of need, schools, school districts, or the state led the school improvement effort. Regional support/oversight teams were established to serve five geographic regions. DA was also used as a pilot to provide research for the reauthorization of NCLB and, in a modified form, was approved as a waiver to that legislation by the U. S. Department of Education.

Great Recession: A major economic downturn in the U. S. economy that lasted from late 2007 until 2012, which was longer than any recession since the Great Depression of the 1930's. It was characterized by a dramatic drop in housing prices, sales, and construction; the stock market losing half of its value; high unemployment; and a severe drop in vacationers coming to Florida. The results for state and local governments, including school districts, in Florida were a precipitous drop in revenue, especially from property and sales tax.

Large urban school district: School districts are units of school governance within a state and consist of a governing board and a superintendent, who is the chief executive officer. In Florida, each of the 67 counties constitutes a school district, resulting in small, medium, and large districts. Of the 20 largest school districts in the nation, six are in Florida. For the purposes of this study, the Broad Prize for Urban Education definition was used to identify the districts: at least 37,500 students, 40% or more of the students on free/reduced lunch, and 40% identified as racial/ethnic

minorities. In addition, the county needed to be listed as an urban area as defined in the National Assessment for Education Progress (NAEP) assessment system.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB): NCLB was the name of the 2002 reauthorization of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). It supported standards-based reforms by setting high standards and establishing measurable student outcomes using state-developed tests. Each state determined what the “proficiency” level would be for an individual student in reading and mathematics. States were required to eliminate gaps based on race/ethnicity, free/reduced lunch status, disability, and English Language Learner (ELL) status. The expectation was that by 2014 all students would reach proficiency. Schools that met the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) target to reach full proficiency by 2014 was deemed as “Meeting AYP” and any school that did not meet the target in any cell was labeled as “Not Meeting AYP.” The law dramatically expanded the federal role in public education through annual testing, academic progress reports, teacher quality, and funding changes.

SCANS Report (1992): SCANS, which stands for the Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, was led by the U. S. Department of Labor. It grew out of a concern that students were not being prepared for the highly technical jobs of that time, much less the jobs on the horizon. The report outlines five competencies and a three-part foundation of skills and personal qualities needed for successful job performance.

Strategic planning: A process in which an organization clarifies its purpose (mission), what it would look like if the mission was successful (vision), values (core beliefs), priorities (goals), measurements to benchmark progress (targets), and a plan to

reach the goals (strategies, initiatives, and actions). An implementation plan for each objective is developed, monitored, and modified based on current data using a continuous improvement model. In a school district, the strategic plan combines other plans such as academics, finances, and human capital development.

Student achievement or student outcomes: Defined as student performance on state assessment tests, graduation rates, college readiness, participation and success in college-level courses, and career readiness including industry certification. Student outcomes may also include leading indicators such as student attendance, promotion, and opinions on climate surveys.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of the study are threefold: geography, time, and perspective. This study was conducted through interviewing large urban district superintendents in Florida. While there are advantages in that the districts were operating under the same financial resources (limited and dwindling) and accountability system (heavy and top down), this also may limit the ability to generalize findings to other geographic regions in the United States.

The second limitation is time. The criteria for selection of the superintendents were those who served during the years 2007-12. This time period was unique, especially regarding the loss of resources due to the Great Recession. This may have focused efforts on how to hold on to key initiatives that produced greater student achievement rather than a more “normal” fiscal environment which could be more assertive than defensive.

Finally, while the perspective of superintendents is vital, it is only their perspective. Many other stakeholders were a part of formulating and executing the

strategic plan: school board members, district staff, school-based personnel, parents, students, community groups, etc. Due to the limitations of time and staff, their perspective is not included. The interview also requires the superintendents to reflect backwards over five years rather than taking place in real time. While this may increase a broader view of what happened, details may be lost and memory may be selective.

Significance of the Study

Urban superintendents are bombarded by a variety of pressures from state legislators, school board members, employees, parents, community groups, and vendors. They are being asked to do more with less and produce now. In order to make significant progress in student achievement, a number of key strategies have to be implemented in a coordinated and comprehensive process (Fullan, 2011). A powerful, focused, aligned strategic plan that is effectively executed can produce positive change across the district.

Superintendents have a unique perspective in this process. Working with a school board, they have to create and implement the vision, theory of action, goals, strategies, and accountability mechanisms. It has to be aligned with state and federal accountability requirements, integrate the efforts of various district departments, and provide clear direction, support, and accountability to schools.

This is done in a political and fiscal climate where tough questions have to be answered. Where is our focus? Which strategies should be supported and which should not? How do we create alignment and synergy between our key strategies across various district departments and schools? Do we have or can we build the capacity to execute our selected initiatives with a high degree of fidelity? How do we communicate our plan, engage our stakeholders, and hold staff accountable for results?

This study proposes to answer these by addressing the four research questions stated previously. It will add to a growing body of research on large urban district reform. The stakes are high for students and their families, educators, communities, states, and ultimately our nation. As the strategic plan goes, so goes the district's success and reputation. Increasingly, as the school district goes, so goes the city. Hopefully, this study will add to the theory and practice to create more great school districts with more promising futures for our greatest resource, our children.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

To begin this review, a brief history of the school district change process will be presented. The study will then review the literature on effective district-directed change initiatives. The next section reviews the history and definition of strategic planning, as well as its theoretical foundation in systems theory, change theory, and complexity theory.

Next, a total of 34 case studies will be grouped into five sections. The first section will be devoted to historical case studies conducted between 1999 and 2006 focusing on common initiatives, policies, and practices used by urban school districts demonstrating sizeable gains in student achievement. The second section presents two in-depth case studies of San Diego and Duval County (Jacksonville, Florida) to understand the context and interactions in urban district reform. The next group of studies is more recent (2006-12) and conducted by notable organizations like the Council of Great City Schools and McKinsey and Company. The fourth section summarizes the findings of the winners of The Broad Prize for Urban Education from 2006-2012. The last section is composed of recent (2008-12) doctoral dissertations on district-led reform and the role of superintendents.

Historical Context

This discussion of the connection of reforming public schools and the impact on the community-at-large is not new. Tyack and Cuban (1995) indicate that for over a century the reform of public schools has been seen as a major way to improve society. Education has been viewed as the answer to all of our national social or economic ills. Americans have expected educational reform to solve entrenched community problems

and actualize their hopes for a better tomorrow. Rather than trying to change adults, reformers chose to educate their children. While the goals of reform may have been grandiose, “actual reforms have typically been gradual and incremental” (p. 5). The response from educators to call for reform has often been symbolic without changing core practices or structures. They have “variously welcomed, improved, deflected, co-opted, modified, and sabotaged outside efforts at reform” (p. 7). Examples of continuing structures that have been relatively stable over a century include age-level grade placement, division of knowledge into subjects, self-contained classrooms with one teacher, and the use of Carnegie units to determine high school completion.

Tyack (1974) in *The One Best System* described these schools created by reformers in the early 1920’s to address the waves of immigrants coming to America and prepare them for the low to moderate skilled jobs needed for the factories. Designed around the factory model, the goal was to provide for a somewhat lockstep process getting the majority of students to basic literacy levels while preserving the college preparatory track largely for the white, male, middle and upper class. McAdams (2006) further defines some of the characteristics of schools in the ‘one best system’:

1. Move students through a standard length school day and year.
2. School is not designed to bring all students to standards.
3. Instead, students learn what they can in the allotted time and then move to the next grade.
4. Focus is totally on schools with little or no school-to-school interaction.
5. Teachers can close their doors and teach what they want.
6. Principals are middle managers with no real authority other than carrying out district directives.

Despite reform efforts, the process of selecting and sorting which students will be prepared for college persists today in reality if not in intent.

Cuban (1993) describes the process of reforming schools as a cycle. Changing economic, political, or social conditions prompt an awareness that a problem exists. Policy makers discuss the problem and possible solutions. Various groups including school reformers propose specific policies, some of which are adopted and implemented. Educators are criticized for poor implementation of, and lack of commitment to, the new policies and practices. Disappointment over the implementation and results is experienced and the cycle starts over.

Since 1983, there have been three major waves of reform. The early 1980's focus was on a more rigorous curriculum, more credits required, and higher teacher standards for credentialing. Very little fundamental change occurred. In the late 1980's, school restructuring, site-based management, and teacher empowerment were the focus with little substantive change in teaching and learning. The early 1990's began the emphasis on systemic school reform which is district-level led, with a focus on decentralizing some district-level functions and recentralizing some aspects of curriculum, professional development, and accountability (Hess, 1999).

Tyack and Cuban (1995) attribute some of the disappointing results of educational reform to the length of time necessary to implement the advocated changes, the uneven implementation of changes within classrooms in the same schools and between schools in the same district, and the differences various reforms have on different groups. The most important area, the classroom, where teaching and learning take place, has been the hardest to change. In Cuban's (1993) separate analysis of

school reform and classroom practice over the last century, he concludes there has been a slight change in practice in the elementary classroom but little evidence of any significant change at the secondary level. Most secondary teachers use only direct instruction to help students acquire knowledge and rarely use either a workshop/coaching model to help students apply knowledge, or Socratic seminars to increase students' understanding of ideas (Murphy & Shiller, 1992). There needs to be a willingness to change current instructional practice with more effective practice based on current research (Murphy, 1992; Resnick & Glennan, 2002; Hess, 2005).

District-Directed Change Initiatives

The focus on the school district as the critical unit of change is a fairly recent phenomenon. In part, it was an outgrowth of concern that application of the effective schools research had resulted in some highly effective schools, some mediocre schools, and some very poor schools. If all students were to be successful in meeting high standards, then all schools had to be successful. As early as 1993, Michael Fullan argued that “schools, even empowered ones, will never become hotbeds of continuous reform and improvement if left to their own devices” (p. 145). Fullan (2002) elaborated on the need for quality across the school district:

Focusing school improvement on individual school buildings within a district leaves some teachers and children behind in average and low performing schools. Leaving teachers behind in average and low performing schools is a subtle, but powerful, form of discrimination. School-aged children and their teachers, families, and communities deserve better. It is morally unconscionable, I believe, to allow some schools to excel while others celebrate their mediocrity or languish in desperation. Entire school districts must improve, not just parts of the district. (p. ix)

It is only through reorganizing and energizing district-level operations that the kind of broad, deep change that is necessary to have all schools perform at high levels

is possible. Since the school board, which adopts policies, and the superintendent who implements policies and procedures, are at the district level, they are able to leverage the resources and community support needed to sustain long-term growth. Only the district can interact with city-wide business, civil rights, religious, and community interest groups (Schlechty, 2001; Supovitz, 2006). To be successful, school reform has to be systemic—that is, it must be:

1. Significant or large scale;
2. Comprehensive, including all parts of the school district; and
3. Managed within the context of the community-at-large (Stone, Hening, Jones, & Pierannunzi, 2001).

Thompson (2003) defines a high-performing school district as one where “the overwhelming majority of students in all the schools are meeting high standards regardless of the students’ ethnic or socio-economic background and where the district decisively and effectively intervenes in schools where student performance is declining or flattening” (p. 102). McAdams (2006) presents a similar definition for a reform governed school district as one where all students learn at high levels, the achievement gaps are eliminated, and effective management of operations are used.

In a review of the literature (Hightower, Knapp, Marsh & McLaughlin, 2002), several themes emerged describing school districts that were successfully implementing reform versus those that were not. Successful districts focused on building the knowledge and skills of its teachers and principals through workshops, coaching, peer visits, creating professional learning communities, book talks on professional literature, and the use of consultants. They also focused on building a positive culture and common vision while involving principals and teachers in setting goals and strategies.

Special attention was paid to pacing the reforms over time to increase buy-in and minimize resistance. The districts had managed to achieve a balance between central and decentralized control and clarified which decisions were made at which level to reduce conflicts and fragmentation.

Hill and Celio (1998) identified seven major initiatives intended to produce district-wide change:

1. Standards – a clearly aligned system of standards, curriculum, assessment, professional development, and materials with the results of the assessments having consequences for students, teachers, and schools.
2. Teacher Development – teachers take ownership of own learning and practice, resulting in more enthusiastic and engaging teacher-student interactions.
3. School Designs – from the New American Schools movement and Comprehensive School Reform grants, these provide an organized, consistent approach to teaching and learning.
4. Site-based Management – reduces size and control of district office placing greater decision making at the school level allowing more flexibility, creativity, ownership, and student and parent engagement in decision making.
5. Charter Schools – creates parental choice within a public school context, more flexibility, more freedom from bureaucracy, and more competition for students among schools.
6. Contract Schools – creates parent choice, flexibility on management and staffing, and accountability for results in the contract to be paid.
7. Vouchers – creates high quality private providers to drive innovation, parent choice, and market driven conditions.

While these seven are somewhat distinct, there are obvious overlaps in practice.

There is more commonality in initiatives 1-4 which are perceived more favorably by those within the public education community, and within initiatives 5-7 which are advocated by those who see public schools as a bureaucratic monopoly run by

micromanaging school boards responding to political pressure and by unions responding to their own self-interest (Hess, 1999).

Once Hill and Celio (1998) had identified the seven major initiatives, they asked advocates of each to answer a series of four questions and to justify their cause-effect logic:

1. Why do you believe the initiative can work as intended?
2. Who will do what?
3. What barriers must be overcome?
4. How will you know if the initiative is working? (p. 10)

Especially important in their analysis was a requirement of advocates to identify their hidden assumptions and discuss expectations which were often poorly supported with any evidence. Each initiative had what was described as “zones of wishful thinking” (p. 23), meaning necessary changes needed to make the initiative work were not planned for in the implementation (Hill, et al., 2000). They also challenged advocates on how their efforts could move beyond success in a few schools to effective large scale implementation in urban school districts. The authors concluded that none of the initiatives in and of themselves were “powerful enough or well enough thought through to transform our entrenched, mediocre city school systems” (Hill, 1993, p. 15). Hess (1999) also concluded that a combination of reforms was necessary to “get unstuck from the current reform morass” (p. 182). As preconditions, successful urban school district reform requires sufficient resources, time for professional development and collaboration and commitment, particularly from principals. Once these preconditions are met, the following combination of initiatives is necessary:

1. Focus on results, not activity – use state tests, graduation rates, college attendance rates, and other important data to determine success.

2. Use an aligned system of standards, assessment, curriculum, and professional development focused on effective instructional strategies.
3. High expectations for all students to not only have the knowledge and skills reflected in the standards, but also have a deep understanding and ability to do sophisticated reasoning.
4. Resources should be allocated based on need with students not meeting standards being provided additional time and support.
5. Use parental choice of schools with charter and contract schools as well as vouchers to create competition.
6. Decentralize large districts and flatten the organization with the focus of district staff on facilitating change, helping teachers cope with the stress of change, and coaching effective practice.
7. Give the superintendent broad control over classroom practice including hiring, salaries, and use of time.
8. Provide school-level decision-making over portions of the budget, hiring, and strategies used to make improvements.
9. Change the reward structures for students, teachers, administrators, and district staff to support student achievement.
10. Require school boards to be specific regarding their purpose, goals, resource allocation, and expected outcomes (Hess, 1999; Murphy, 1992; Fuhrman, 1993; Elmore, 1993; Fullan, 1993; Cawelti & Protheroe, 2001).

Reform strategies of high-performing districts were used synergistically and in concert with each other (Anderson, 2003). While different districts may have begun with different strategies, most districts used most of the strategies identified as common in the review of multiple studies. These common strategies included:

1. District-wide sense of efficacy;
2. District-wide focus on student achievement;
3. Adoption and commitment to district-wide performance standards;
4. Development/adoption of district-wide curricula and approaches to instruction;
5. Alignment of curriculum, teaching, and learning materials, and assessments to relevant standards;

6. Multi-measure accountability systems and system-wide use of data to inform practice and hold school and district leaders accountable for results and to monitor progress;
7. Targeted and phased focus of improvement;
8. Investment in instructional leadership development at the school and district levels;
9. District-wide job-embedded professional development focuses supports for teachers;
10. District-wide and school-level emphasis on teamwork and professional community;
11. New approaches to board-district and in school-district relations; and
12. Strategic engagement with state reform policies and resources. (Anderson, 2003, pp. 9-14)

Anderson further notes that while there is extensive qualitative agreement on strategies that impact student achievement, there is less empirical evidence on the impact of district-wide reform on the quality of teaching and learning. Even with a more limited area of study, such as district-wide professional development activities, there is limited empirical evidence that such activities positively impact classroom practice.

It is easy for school districts to become distracted from strategic, systemic reform in order to respond to competing demands of polarized, fragmented community stakeholders. Often the district spends more time responding to the constituent complaints than fulfilling the long-term strategic plan (Schlechty, 2001; Stone, et al., 2001). Instead, for districts to create and sustain change, they need to have a common understanding of their problems; have a shared vision and beliefs of what the district can become; have a common understanding that the goal of schools is to create knowledge work that is engaging; focus on quality and measurable results; make decisions based on what is needed for every child to be successful; be flexible in policy

and practice, especially as it relates to time, technology, space, staffing, and curriculum; use TQM methods to improve the district social structures; collaborate with other youth-serving organizations; continue to do what is working; and reward and recognize commitment to and results of the reforms (Schlechty, 2001; Fullan, 2002). Resnick and Glennan (2002) stress the importance of using research-based design principles when planning for urban district reform.

Since any long-term systemic school district change has to involve the larger community it serves, the ability to create civic capacity for such change is critical. Civic capacity is defined as the ability to “bring together diverse interests from a broad spectrum of the community to solve problems collectively” (Stone, et al., 2001, p. 75).

Another way of describing the critical success factors for superintendents is to create a coherent well thought out plan, and mobilize enough political support to overcome resistance to change (Hill, 1998). Based on the University of Pittsburg’s Learning Research and Development Center’s work, five principles are discussed:

1. Effort leads to achievement—all students can meet high standards with teacher support and student effort;
2. Classroom instruction is the focus;
3. A culture of continuous learning and two-way accountability for school improvement creating professional learning communities;
4. School-based professional development connected with teachers’ work and guided by in-school coaches; and
5. A coherent alignment of standards, curriculum, assessments, and professional development with shared beliefs on good instruction and good communication between district staff, principals, and teachers (Resnick & Glennan, 2002).

McAdams (2006) describes various ‘Theories of Action’ school districts use to effect positive change. A Theory of Action, which is larger in scope than a single action

or initiative, includes how students learn, what motives drive adult behavior, and what conditions create overall improvement. It is a cohesive set of strategies that complement and support each other, and, to some degree, must be done concurrently. Two common Theories of Action designed to produce incremental change are to secure more resources and use existing resources more effectively. Much of the political discussions on improving schools are polarized around these two theories. While both are important, neither alone nor together will bring about dramatic change.

In order to produce dramatic positive change, McAdams (2006) describes five Theories of Action:

1. Performance/Empowerment (P/E): A) Require results but leave methods and strategies to schools. B) Based on Total Quality Management (TQM) theory. C) Accountability with decentralized authority. D) Initially proposed formally by David Hornbeck in the Kentucky Educational Reform Act (1990). E) Best implemented by Houston, Philadelphia, Seattle, and Cincinnati in the 1990's. F) Usually involves rating or ranking schools within the district based on performance with positive and negative consequences.
2. Managed Instruction (MI): A) Defines a common curriculum, instruction, professional development, materials, and assessments. B) Built on content and performance standards. C) Curriculum is coherent and available to the lesson plan level. D) A comprehensive student management system tracks disaggregated student performance. E) Initially used in New York District #2 by Anthony Alvarado and Elaine Fink. F) Best implemented in Brazelport and Aldine, Texas. G) Other districts effectively using MI were Boston, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Duval County, Houston, Long Beach, Norfolk, Garden City (CA), Sacramento, and San Diego.

McAdams (2006) reports that all large urban districts that have made significant improvement in the last several years used Performance/Empowerment or Managed Instruction. However, both have their limitations. Performance Empowerment does not focus enough on the core business of education, which is teaching and learning. It also assumes principals and teachers have sufficient capacity, therefore allowing too many schools and students to fail. Managed Instruction, often perceived as too 'top down,'

limits the creation of new ideas and may produce a compliance, rather than a performance, culture. A blending of the best of these two theories is Managed Performance/Empowerment.

3. Managed Performance/Empowerment: A) Begins with a MI approach but moves to a P/E approach with schools being given more autonomy if they have demonstrated significant academic gains overall and in closing the achievement gap. B) Similar to the School Communities that Work (2002) design called 'Smart District' which was created by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. C) Districts that have begun to implement MP/E are Houston, Boston, Gwinnett County (GA), San Diego, and Charlotte-Mecklenburg.

Two other Theories of Action described by McAdams are Charter Districts and Portfolio Districts.

4. Charter Districts: A) Where all schools in an urban school district operate under a charter contract with the school district or the state. B) Charter schools market programs to parents and students with the market place determining success. C) District role is to ensure compliance with state safety, student civil rights, finance, property, and other legal obligations. D) District holds charter schools responsible for measurable results and renews charters based on performance. E) No urban district has completely entered into a charter district.
5. Portfolio of Schools Districts: A) Mixture of district run, contract, and charter schools with extensive parental choice. B) District schools have significant freedom like charter schools similar to the P/E theory of action. C) Districts that have moved in the direction of a Portfolio of Schools include Buffalo, Philadelphia, and New Orleans.

Fullan (2011) presents a criteria for evaluating which drivers are “right” or “wrong.” “Drivers are those policies or strategy levers that have the least or best chance of driving successful reform” (p. 66). He defines success as raising performance on higher order skills for all students while closing gaps for lower performing students. The criteria, which must all be met together, are:

1. Foster intrinsic motivation of teachers and students;
2. Engage educators and students in continuous improvement of instruction and learning;

3. Inspire collective or team work; and
4. Affect all teachers and students – 100% (p. 66).

Of the four, the first and fourth are seen by Fullan as the most critical. Right drivers work because they focus on changing the culture of school systems including values, practices, and relationships, while wrong drivers focus on changing structure and procedures.

The urgency for immediate positive change in performance in the United States and Australia has created a grasping for four primary wrong drivers. Each of these wrong drivers has a right driver opposite which, if implemented, will have positive results. Fullan agrees that the wrong drivers have value but only if used after the right driver has been implemented. See Table 2-1.

Table 2-1. Wrong and right drivers

Wrong Driver	Right Driver
1. Accountability – using standards, assessments, rewards, and punishments.	Capacity – collaborative practice, coaching, technical skill building.
2. Individual Quality – focus on individual knowledge of skills – human capital (expertise)	Group Quality – focus on positive and supportive culture – social capital (motivation)
3. Technology – tool that has been oversold.	Instruction – can use technology effectively.
4. Fragmented – hodgepodge, episodic, individual pieces in competition.	Systemic – connections obvious in practice, not just theory, in every school.

The synthesis of district-directed change initiatives is that districts that focus on improving teaching and learning in a systemic way that positively engages and impacts all students, teachers, and schools have the greatest chance for success. It is the interaction of these areas effectively implemented in a strategic plan that is bold, thoughtful, and transparent that will yield the best results for the greatest number of students.

District-level Strategic Planning

History and Definition

While the literature on the use of strategic planning at the post-secondary level is robust, most of the literature at the K-12 level has been limited to the school level or a subset of district-led initiatives, such as improving services and outcomes for students with disabilities or students needing English Language Learner (ELL) services. Implicit in the recommendations provided earlier in Chapter 2 is that a synergistic plan that implements key high-impact strategies is necessary to make significant improvement in student achievement.

Strategic planning has its historical roots dating back to the 1950s when it was used by the military and soon after by large business organizations. Initially, it was perceived as a cure-all process. It was thought that a purely rational process could control the many variables that influence results. At times, strategic planning has fallen out of favor only to re-emerge in a different form because it served specific purposes. The history of its use in education dates back to the late 1980s, but saw a dramatic rise in the popularity in line with the focus on district-led reform in the 1990s (Mintzberg, 1994).

Early adopters realized that strategic planning in educational organizations took place in a more political context than it did in the business arena. Therefore, more stakeholders would have to be involved to determine if proposed changes could be accomplished, were aligned to the core beliefs of the district, and had sufficient political and community support (Bryson, 1995). O'Brien (1991) noted that strategic planning in educational organizations was similar to qualitative research in that it had to adopt a

less linear and more constructivist approach that acknowledged the context, instead of only focusing on the plan development and implementation.

Over time, the definition of strategic planning as it relates to educational organizations has changed. Cook (1988) simply saw it as concentrating resources to accomplish measurable outcomes that had been agreed upon in advance. O'Brien (1991) expanded this view to include developing strategies and plans to achieve a mission by aligning resources with opportunities and threats. More recently, Cox and Bastress (2011) defined strategic planning as “an action planning framework for achieving objectives aligned with the district’s vision for success” (p. 31). Probably the most comprehensive definition of strategic planning is presented in Broad Prize (2013) background information. It states that a district’s strategic plan:

1. Is developed using a systematic planning process that engages relevant stakeholders;
2. Serves as a guide for a district and its schools, specifying vision, mission, performance goals, objectives, and benchmarks and the policies and strategies to achieve each strategic objective; and
3. Effectively communicated, leads to understanding, support, and action, and is evaluated for effectiveness (p. 1).

Theoretical Foundation

Strategic planning is based on several theories. These include systems theory, organizational change theory, and complexity theory.

Systems theory posits that each system, in this case a school district, contains subsystems and also exists within larger systems. The subsystems include divisions, departments, and schools. Larger systems in which the district operates include the local community and the state educational agencies and legislature. In systems theory, there is a reciprocal influence within and between systems. What happens within a

system affects the entire system and can result in changes in other parts (Senge, 1990; Stoller, et al., 2006). Systems theory calls for mapping the individual parts and describing their relationships within the system. Any change in one part creates a stress on other parts. If other parts adapt to this change, the change is accepted and the overall system restabilizes. If other parts of the system do not adjust to the change, the change does not last (Scileppi, 1988).

Strategic planning begins with a vision for the future that acknowledges that a school district is a part of larger systems, while ensuring that it accounts for the interaction of the parts. Kaufman, et al. (1996) describe this as the mega level (community or society), the macro level (school district), and the micro level (school, department, individual stakeholder). They advocate that the vision address some larger community purpose (mega level) and ensure that the products and outputs at the micro and macro level are aligned and synergistic in order to accomplish the vision. It is this vertical and horizontal alignment that is critical in strategic planning in order to minimize change becoming isolated, confusing, and ultimately ineffective (Duffy, 2004).

The growth in the use of strategic planning in school districts was a result not only of a recognition that students were not prepared for the requirements of the future, but also because changes in parts of the system were not fulfilling their promise without the system as a whole being addressed in a comprehensive, systemic fashion (Marshall & Tucker, 1992).

Strategic planning also draws from the literature of organizational change theory, originally presented in Lewin's Force Field Analysis (1951) describing three stages of change: unfreezing, moving, and refreezing. The unfreezing stage is when there is a

recognition that the current state is not adequate and that a change is needed. Moving is when the change is initiated and implemented. Refreezing is when the change has become established or institutionalized.

Building upon Lewin's three stages, Lippitt, et al. (1958) delineated seven stages within the three major categories of assessment, planning, and implementation.

Pearson (2005) kept Lippitt's three stages and added evaluation as a fourth stage.

Further work by Kanter, Stein, and Jick (1992) presenting 10 stages and Kotter (1996), describing seven stages, added more specificity while still maintaining the core of Lippitt's three stages. Some of the stages within assessment they added were: 1) analyzing the organization and the need for change; 2) creating a vision, direction, and strategy; and 3) establishing a sense of urgency. Within planning, they added: 1) creating a guiding coalition and 2) lining up political support. For implementation, they included: 1) create an implementation plan and empower broad-based action, and 2) communicate the change vision by involving people and being honest. Beyond Lippitt's three stages, they added: 1) reinforcing and institutionalizing the change by anchoring the new approaches in the culture, and 2) creating both short-term and long-term gains (By, 2005).

Strategic planning includes the stages presented in change theory. In a meta-analysis of 66 books, 29 journal articles, and 28 research presentations from national conferences, Hambright and Diamantes (2004) describe eight common steps:

1. Preplanning: A) Superintendent informs the board, staff, and community on current status and future needs of the district. B) If received favorably, begin the strategic planning process. C) Create and train a planning team representing a broad base of internal and external stakeholders.
2. Develop vision and mission.

3. Determine guiding principles/core beliefs.
4. Conduct environmental scan: A) Internal and external seeing the organization as a whole within and environment. B) Conduct a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis with complete honesty. C) Conduct needs analysis by identifying the gap between what is and what is desired (vision).
5. Prioritize strategic issues using four frames: A) Logical – need, impact, and magnitude. B) Temporal – time needed and degree of urgency. C) Political – social cost and political opportunity. D) Financial – resources required and return on investment.
6. Identify strategic issues and resolutions.
7. Create goals, objectives, and strategies.
8. Delineate guidelines and organizational practices: A) Defines what to do and what not to do. B) Defines and describes the direction of the school district.

Lane, et al. (2005) further defined goals, objectives, and strategies (actions)

presented in step 7 above. Goals are:

1. Broadly stated purposes
2. Issues oriented
3. Related to issues uncovered in needs analysis (assessment)
4. Focus actions toward clearly defined purpose
5. Aligned with vision, mission, and beliefs
6. Focus on a single issue
7. Long-range
8. Few in number

Objectives should be SMART (Drucker, 1954):

1. Specific and limited to goals – interim steps toward achieving long-term goals
2. Measurable
3. Aggressive and attainable
4. Results oriented
5. Time bound

Activities (strategies) include:

1. Who, what, when, where, how many, how much, and how often
2. Connected to each objective
3. May change frequently to meet the objective

In line with the change theorists, Rutherford (2009) argues that the degree to which the initiation stage (assessment) is done well determines the level and quality of the implementation of the strategic plan and its eventual institutionalization in the school district. In her view, it is critical to pay attention to the context, capacity, and commitment toward the proposed changes. Within context, particular attention needs to be paid to various stakeholders in order to ensure buy-in. There are both relational issues, often presented as ideological differences, as well as leadership issues, which are particularly important when identifying resources and commitment to change. Reiger (1994) noted that educational leaders were often frustrated by an inclusive planning process because they were unaware of how groups and organizations process change.

Capacity, as defined by Rutherford (2009), includes understanding the proposed changes and the processes used as well as the readiness to accept change. In assessing commitment, the degree of congruence between the plan's core beliefs and goals and those of the participants must be determined. If they are not congruent, the implementation will be at the surface level, if at all. Fullan (1997) states that policies and mandates alone are insufficient in creating lasting change and are relied on too heavily in education. Instead, greater attention needs to be paid to developing the skills and understandings that nurture long-term cultural changes.

Originally, strategic planning came out of a view that the universe is orderly and controlled and, therefore, plans can be developed in a closed system where there is little interaction between systems. Simple cause/effect plans could be created with predictable results.

Systems theory, as discussed earlier, emphasized the interconnectedness of systems and subsystems. This prompted both an emphasis on involving a wide range of constituents, communicating with them regularly and honestly, and ensuring that plans, policies, procedures, and finances were transparent (Serbrenia & Sims, 2004).

More recently, complexity theory (of which chaos theory is a subset) proponents have questioned whether strategic plans that traditionally span five years are useful given the increasing complexity, technological and cultural change, globalization, and the rapid expansion of knowledge. Complexity theory sees organizations as open-ended, organic systems that are dynamic, complex, self-organizing, and embedded in multiple contexts. Since it is not possible to predict the impact this multitude of interconnected interactions will have on each other or the larger system (school district), it calls for a more fluid, nimble, and collaborative planning process based on guiding principles, relationships, and core competencies (Wheatley, M., 1994). In order for strategic planning to work within a framework of complexity theory, it must be dynamic, adaptive, build on connections, encourage systemic thinking, and recognize the interdependency of the components and the role of context on the change process (Board).

Sanders (1998) says complexity theory “describes the orderly yet complicated and unpredictable behavior of non-linear systems like the ones in which we hire and work” (p. 5). In her view, strategic thinking has two parts: insight about the present and foresight about the future. She describes her experience as an aide to a U. S. Senator, “what we thought would change almost never did, yet change was constant and often unexpected” (p. 11).

The use of maps, models, and visual images helps planners see connections, relationships, and patterns that might otherwise go unnoticed. It is important to be aware of emerging conditions, likely future scenarios, and opportunities for innovation. “The purpose of strategic thinking in the new planning paradigm is to help an organization identify, respond to, and influence changes in its environment” (Sanders, 1998, p. 146). Organizations that reflect this new planning process are called complex adaptive systems in that they adapt to change that exists at the boundary between chaos and order (Sanders, 1998).

The impact of systems theory, change theory, and complexity theory on district-led strategic planning can be summarized as follows:

1. A school district must be aware of how it fits into larger systems (the community) and subsystems (departments, schools) that interact within the district. A change in any part of the system affects all other parts. If the other parts adapt to the change, it will become part of the culture; if not, it will likely not remain, at least not as intended. Therefore, in strategic planning, strategies need to be developed at the outset to address these connections and interdependencies (systems theory).
2. The changes proposed in a strategic plan follow a series of prescribed steps within the broad phases of assessment, planning, and implementation. Doing each phase well is critical to ultimate success. Changes as a result of strategic planning will have forces supporting and opposing them. It is important in each phase to identify these, strengthening the supports and minimizing the opposition. Communication is critical in this process to identify the strength and rationale of those opposing the changes (change theory).
3. When crafting the vision for the district, it is important to be aware of the complexity of the context in which the plan is created and implemented, paying attention not just to current conditions, but also to emerging trends, shifts in paradigms, and innovation opportunities. In the implementation phase, it is important to be flexible and adaptive to new conditions, focusing on the larger core beliefs and relationships, and remaining collaborative (complexity theory).

Case Studies

Section I: Historical Case Studies (1999-2006)

The case studies that follow were conducted in medium to large size urban districts between 1999 and 2006. Two of the studies looked at only one district and one reviewed 23 districts. The others ranged from four to 11 districts in their studies. Districts were identified through a variety of means, ranging from districts showing higher gains in academic achievement than their peers to those recommended by researchers and state education agencies. They tended to be concentrated in large metropolitan areas in the northeast and west coast, as well as Texas. The only district representing the southeast was Charlotte, and no Florida districts were represented despite having six out of the 20 largest school districts in the nation.

This section will be divided into two subsections, the first one outlining the six common strategic reform initiatives that supported student achievement gains. These include:

1. Build Civic Capacity and Mobilization
2. Ensure Strong Superintendent/Board Leadership Team
3. Establish Common Vision, Mission, and Beliefs
4. Create Aligned Instructional Systems
5. Develop Data Systems for Improvement and Accountability
6. Support High Quality Teachers and Principals

The second subsection discusses five common barriers that made growth limited or not sustainable. Figure 2-1 illustrates their relationship in the strategic planning process.

Individual case study summaries can be found in Appendix D.

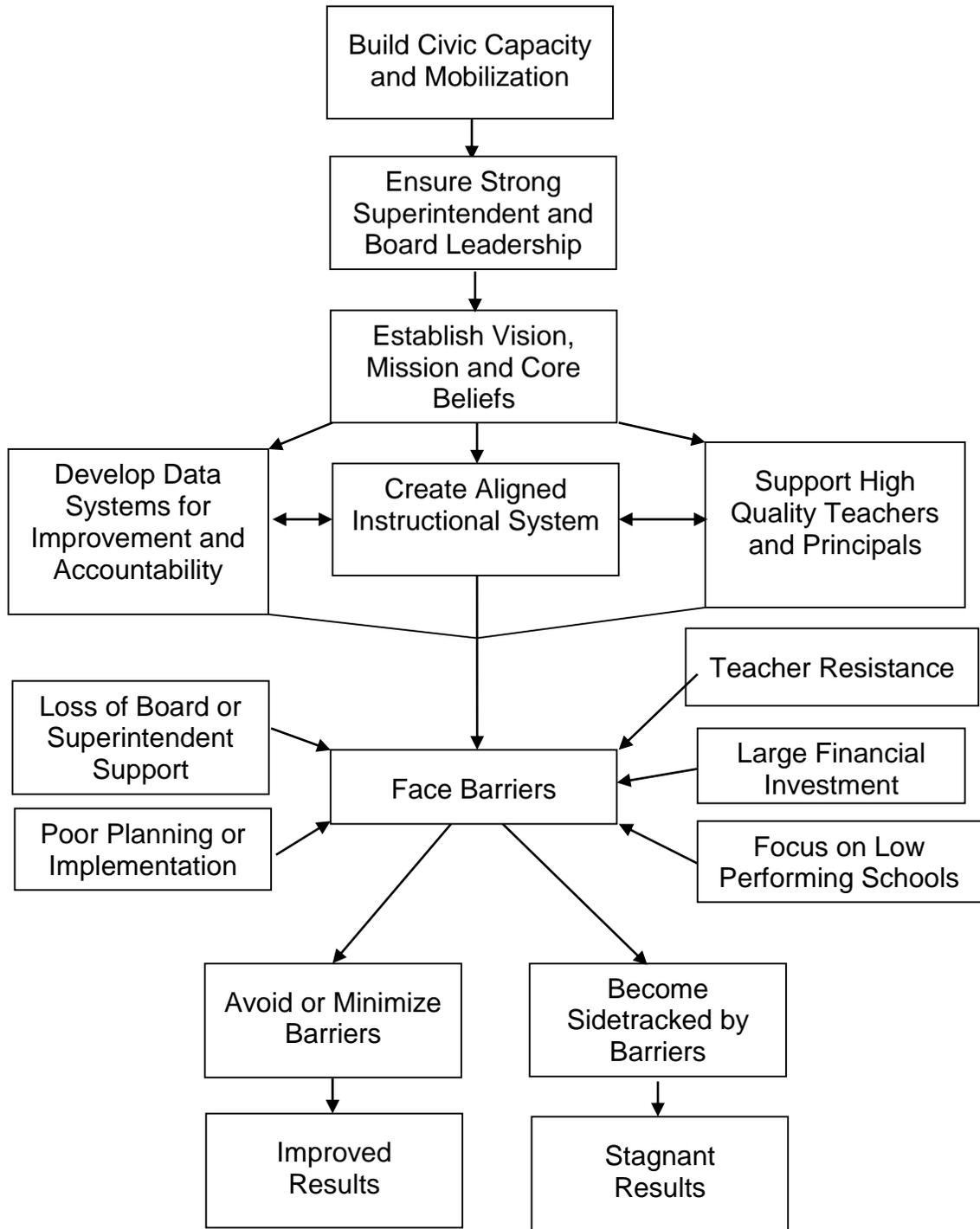


Figure 2-1. Strategic reform in historical case studies.

Supporting strategies

Build civic capacity and mobilization: School districts exist within a community and can only implement effective reform with the support of a broad range of groups such as business leaders, teachers, principals, parents, the school board, and the superintendent. Stone, et al. (2001), in a study of 11 school districts, sought to determine the “factors that enable some cities to do a better job than others to convert words to deeds and good intentions to effective actions” (p. 75). To do so, they had to assess the degree to which the district used their civic capacity, which they termed mobilization, and correlate it to the degree of implementation of the district’s systemic reforms. They found that all 11 districts had some level of civic mobilization and some were stronger than others, but no city had all of the key stakeholder groups involved. Only one city had a systemic approach to parent engagement and none of the districts cited school boards as having a significant role in shaping reform policy.

The superintendent and key community leaders were important in creating and sustaining support for reform agendas (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2001). In addition, the superintendent was crucial in creating a sense of urgency, championing support for academic achievement goals, building confidence that the goals could be realized, ensuring openness and transparency, and demonstrating strong moral and ethical leadership, both within the district and in engagement with the larger community (Ragland, Asera, & Johnson, 1999; Skrla, Scheurich, & Johnson, 2000).

One of the most successful efforts in mobilizing civic capacity was documented by Cuban and Usban (2003) in their study of the Boston Public Schools after Mayor Manino appointed Tom Payzant as the superintendent in 1995. The replacement of the elected school committee by a mayor-appointed system was due to wide-spread

community dissatisfaction with racial strife and poor student performance. Payzant had the support of the mayor (his de facto boss), the business community, and the teachers' union. The appointed school committee focused on setting policy, leaving the daily management of the district to the superintendent.

Confidence was restored in the upward trajectory of the school district and community-wide efforts in support of the district increased. Business and Annenburg Foundation funds supported the creation of the Boston Plan for Excellence, which supported a community-wide reform agenda. The city and school district cooperated in providing after-school programs to health, recreation, and social services with school serving as an arm of the city.

Ensure strong superintendent/board leadership team: In order to create and implement a strategic planning process, there must be agreement on the major reform strategies and an understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the superintendent and the school board. The school board should set policy supporting improved academic achievement and leave the day-to-day operation of the school district to the superintendent (Snipes, et al., 2002). The superintendent should provide leadership in creating a sense of urgency and implementing district-wide initiatives contained in the strategic plan (Skrla, et al., 2000). Throughout the strategic planning process, it is important to develop a high level of trust between the superintendent, the school board, and the community (Ragland, et al., 1999).

Establish common vision, beliefs, and commitments: The strategic planning process for any district must begin with an agreement among key stakeholders on the vision, beliefs, and commitments. To quote the old aphorism, "if you don't know where

you're going, any road will do." At its heart, district-led reform must include a vision of increased achievement for all students, improve instruction, provide a safe and supportive environment, and ensure parents and the community are committed to long-term support of reforms (Togneri & Anderson, 2003).

This vision is built on a belief that all students need to and can learn at high levels, especially poor and minority students whose performance has lagged their peers (Thompson, 2003; Cawelti & Protheroe, 2001; Ragland, et al., 1999; Skrla, et al., 2000). The vision and belief are supported by a commitment to a no excuses mentality and do whatever it takes every day until all students achieve (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2001; Ragland, et al., 1999; Skrla, et al., 2000).

Aligned instructional systems: One of the most important strategies in district-led reform over the last decade is the creation and use of an aligned instructional system (AIS). AIS is the alignment of standards, curriculum, assessments, instruction, and professional development. Performance standards delineate what students must be able to know and do and at what level of quality. States have created these within core academic areas of literacy and mathematics and some have expanded the effort to numerous other content areas. The adoption of the new State Common Core Standards by most states will create a more common expectation across states. Within AIS, the standards are then aligned with curriculum and assessments. Curriculum is what you teach in order for students to meet the standards and often include guides and materials. It is typically determined at the district level. Assessments are used to determine the degree to which students meet the performance standard. Assessments

are developed at the state, district, school, and classroom level (Thompson, 2003; Hill, et al., 2000; Cawelti & Protheroe, 2001; Skrla, et al., 2000).

Next, instruction that is aligned to the standards, curriculum, and assessments is conducted. While probably the least tightly coupled of all of the AIS components, teachers are expected to teach the district curriculum (Snipes, Doolittle, & Herlihy, 2000) and to use strategies that are research-based (Togneri & Anderson, 2003).

In order to enable teachers to teach at a high level, a comprehensive professional development plan must be implemented to increase their knowledge, skills, and use of appropriate research-based strategies. The professional development should be long-term, continuous, focused on content, and connected to the daily experience of teachers (Massell & Goertz, 2002; Stein & Damico, 2002). In order to create lasting change in implementing new instructional strategies, instructional coaches, who understand both high quality instruction and how to assist adult learners, are used to support teachers (Togneri & Anderson, 2003; Cuban & Usdan, 2003). Hill, et al. (2000) also noted that a number of districts in his study used outside vendors to build professional development capacity that was turned over to district staff over time.

Develop data systems for improvement and accountability: In addition to the advent of the AIS, the capacity of school districts to generate, analyze, organize, and communicate data has fundamentally changed strategic planning. The requirements of state and federal accountability systems have provided strong impetus to use data more effectively. This is particularly true in assisting low performing students and schools (Skrla, et al., 2000).

Data is used at the teacher, team, and school level to identify needs and to plan and implement instructional strategies for their students (Cawalti, et al., 2001; Snipes, et al., 2002). Measuring goals and targets at the district, department, and school level requires extensive data analysis (Ragland, et al., 1999) to hold all staff accountable for results (Cawalti, et al., 2001). As a part of a continuous improvement process within a strategic plan, real-time formative data allows for better decision-making throughout the organization (Togneri & Anderson, 2003; Massell & Goertz, 2002). Finally, data is critical in keeping the public informed through increased transparency, ease of access, and clear explanations (Ragland, et al., 1999).

Support high quality teachers and principals: The recruitment, development, and support of high quality teachers and principals are critical to the success of any strategic plan. No amount of work in the previously discussed areas will have positive impact without the human capital to execute and inform the work. Hill, et al. (2000) noted that districts in their study sought out teachers from new sources. Several studies (Togneri & Anderson, 2003; Massell and Goertz, 2002) discussed the importance of instructional coaches in supporting teachers grappling with using data and research-based instructional strategies. In addition to the instructional coaches, the use of school-based collaboration between teachers in professional learning communities (PLCs) provided additional support and opportunity for development (Togneri & Anderson, 2003).

The role of principals and other school-based administrators had to change to focus more on instructional discussions, observation, and reflective feedback. The observation process moved from purely evaluative to a process of continuous

improvement with the goal of everyone improving through collaboration (Togneri & Anderson, 2003); Cuban & Usban, 2003).

Common barriers

While all 12 of the studies focused on supporting strategies in implementing district-led reform, only five also covered the common barriers.

Teacher resistance: According to Hill, et al. (2000), teacher resistance is the most powerful barrier to the implementation of strategic initiatives. Their opposition comes from a lack of willingness to change, lack of confidence in the superintendent and other senior leaders, or too many non-aligned competing initiatives.

In addition, teachers often experienced extreme stress that came from new expectations, especially if the changes were perceived as too top-down from an administration more focused on directing than supporting their efforts (Snipes, et al., 2002). This often resulted in dissident teachers organizing to vote out board members who supported the reforms, resulting in the scuttling of the reforms and/or the firing of the superintendent.

Loss of superintendent or board support: According to Stone, et al. (2000), the most serious problem in executing reform is when opponents of reform dilute the support of the board. Sometimes this is a result of the board never truly understanding the reform agenda. "A board's inability to comprehend the dimensions of the reforms it is supposed to oversee is fatal to an initiative that must be carried out over time (as all must) or encounters unexpected challenges (as all do)" (Hill, et al., 2000, p. 40). Many boards are more focused on minor operational issues and constituent concerns than focusing on student achievement. Hill, et al. (2000) noted that if boards focused on more strategic issues they may attract higher quality board members.

Whether a superintendent leaves under pressure due to a backlash toward reforms implemented or leaves on a positive note, there is a danger of the reform agenda becoming sidetracked. Most superintendents bring their own plans, based primarily on what worked in their prior districts. Unless there is strong succession planning on the part of the board to ensure a new superintendent agrees to the vision, mission, core beliefs, and goals of the district, there can be a major change in direction. While the new superintendent may bring different key staff and modify actions and initiatives, these will not be as disruptive if the core of the strategic direction remains the same (Snipes, et al., 2002).

Poor planning or implementation: In most school districts, even those that are generally making progress in improving student achievement and closing achievement gaps, there is a significant difference between the planned reforms and the real impact due to poor implementation. These are due in part to “delays, half-measures, and competing initiatives” (Hill, et al., 2000, p. 28). In the critical area of high-quality professional development, which as noted earlier is a strong supportive strategy for district reform, districts were not very adept at implementation. Professional development was short in duration, not coordinated, not focused on the most important instructional practices, and provided few opportunities to interact with colleagues (Stein & D’Amico, 2002).

Large financial investment: As discussed previously, appropriate use of technology to generate, store, analyze, and present data was noted as an important component of district-wide strategic planning. Districts had to build or buy data warehouses that integrated financial, human resource, and student information to chart

progress and begin to conduct return on investment (ROI) research. These systems not only called for substantial initial investment in hardware and software, but also in recruiting or developing talented staff to make such systems useful in real time. There also had to be a commitment to provide professional development to all staff to make data informed decisions, which was an additional cost (Snipes, et al., 2002). Often districts were not able to support the various investments needed to make the reforms effective, especially if the district lost funds (Hill, et al., 2002).

Focus on low performing schools and students: While admirable and necessary for districts to focus on improving academic performance of low performing schools and students, there was some resistance to do so. In some instances, this was due to a new requirement that was outside of the current skill set of the staff, primarily teachers and principals. At other times, it was about the balance of resources allocated to low performing rather than high performing students (Snipes, et al., 2002; Shipps, 2003).

Section II: In-depth Case Studies of San Diego and Duval County (FL) (1998-2005)

Context

From 1998 until 2005, two large diverse urban school districts traversed similar paths and were studied in-depth to glean best practices for other districts and highlight which pitfalls to avoid. *San Diego City Schools*, edited by Hightower, Knapp, Marsh, and McLaughlin (2002), documented changes in the San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD), led by Alan Bersin, between 1998 and 2002. A second series of studies (Hess, 2005) extended the time period into 2005. At the same time (1998-2005), Jonathan Supovitz studied the Duval County Public Schools (DCPS) located in Jacksonville, Florida and chronicled its reform efforts, led by General John Fryer, in *The*

Case for District Based Reform: Leading, Building, and Sustaining School Improvement (2006).

What made a comparison of these two districts so compelling is that both superintendents were hired to create significant change and came from fields other than education. Alan Bersin was a former federal district attorney, and John Fryer was a retired two-star Air Force General. They had both excelled in their prior careers and brought extensive leadership and planning skills to their new task. They brought a sense of urgency to make their respective school districts more efficient, effective, and responsive to the needs of students and their families (Hightower, 2002; Hess, 2005; Supovitz, 2006).

In many ways, the districts were similar in that they had both urban and suburban areas served by the district. Both had a high percent of free/reduced lunch students and racial diversity, with DCPS having a higher percent of African-American students and SDUSD a higher percent of Hispanic students. Both districts had large achievement gaps based on racial and economic factors, a number of low performing schools with novice or extremely veteran teachers ready to retire, fragmented curriculum and instruction, widely varying instructional and leadership competency, and, in many places, a culture of complacency and low expectations. San Diego had experienced a teacher strike in 1996, and Duval County was experiencing the first wave of heavy state testing and accountability with schools being graded A-F. In both cases, the business community had become frustrated with stagnant and unacceptably low student achievement and was supporting major changes with the advent of these two non-

traditional, first-time superintendents (Hightower, et al., 2002; Hess, 2005; Supovitz, 2006).

There were some differences in the political landscapes Bersin and Fryer experienced upon entering their respective districts. Bersin was appointed with a 3-2 split vote with the business community's views represented by the majority (three) and the teachers' union, San Diego Education Association (SDEA), represented by the two "no" votes. In contrast, John Fryer was appointed on a 7-0 vote in a community less polarized around the issue of business vs. teachers' union and more polarized racially (Hightower, et al., 2002; Supovitz, 2006).

Theory of action and first steps

At the outset, Bersin structured a unique senior leadership structure appointing Anthony Alvarado as Chancellor of Instruction, with Bersin being responsible for operations, school board interface, and community engagement. Alvarado instituted many of the same instructional practices that had been effective in his prior district, New York City District 2, where he had been superintendent. His theory of action was to describe what good teaching looked like, then to systematically train, coach, and support teachers in demonstrating "best practices" (Hess, 2005).

Bersin and Alvarado quickly aligned policy, organizational structures, and resources to support a learning organization. Resources were focused on low performing schools, with \$62 million being spent in 2000-01 and approximately \$96 million in 2001-02. In reorganizing the district office, the guiding mantra was that there were only two types of employees, "those who teach, and those who support learning" (Hightower, et al., 2002, p. 83). Area Superintendents were changed to Instructional Leaders supervising 25 schools and began implementing intensive research-based

literacy strategies and classroom walk-through protocols. Numerous nationally-known consultants were hired at significant costs to help construct and guide the work. Thirteen principals were demoted and replaced by candidates who could provide stronger instructional oversight and support, and changes in district staff were immediate and far reaching (Hightower, et al., 2002). Bersin described his strategy: “There is no other way to jumpstart systemic reform. You don’t announce it. You’ve got to jolt the system. If people don’t understand you’re serious about change, the bureaucracy will own you” (Cuban & Usdan, 2003).

Much like Bersin, Fryer began with a vision, theory of action, and a strategic plan to implement lasting change. All district activity was organized around the vision of college readiness for all students by building the capacity and commitment of teachers and principals with effective support from the district staff. Similar to San Diego, Fryer aligned standards, curriculum, assessments, professional development, and the use of data. This work was organized through a strategic plan with measurable formative and summative targets and frequent monitoring using data. Also similar to San Diego, Fryer imported the outside expertise of Judy Cotting and Mark Tucker who had developed America’s Choice, a Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) model. Fryer implemented key elements of the model district-wide, including using the structure, frameworks, and design tasks of America’s Choice, as well as training principals and instructional coaches to support the work (Supovitz, 2006).

In contrast to Bersin and Alvarado, instead of implementing the reform effort district-wide all at once, Fryer rolled out the plan over four years, beginning with 17 volunteer schools the first year, to 51 volunteers the second year, to 64 the third year,

and, finally, the remaining 100 schools the fourth year. Not only did this phased roll-out with volunteer schools allow the district to ensure a high level of implementation, it also allowed early adopters to forge ahead and resisters time to look at the reforms before implementing them themselves. Fryer used a combination of top-down clear direction, while genuinely valuing bottom-up teacher and principal feedback to improve the implementation. There was a greater emphasis on influencing and convincing than directing and requiring. Also in contrast to Bersin, Fryer retained the majority of senior leadership and principals in the district, at least for the first year. He believed in giving leaders time to learn, adopt, and implement change while still holding them accountable for results (Supovitz, 2006).

These differences could have two possible explanations. The first is the difference in leadership styles and change theories between the two leadership groups. Another explanation is that Alvarado had implemented his strategies as a superintendent in another, albeit smaller, district and had confidence they would work. Fryer was taking a reform designed for individual schools and implementing it in a large, diverse district. Finally, as earlier discussed, Bersin began with tenuous political support that could easily change with the next school board election. He had to show results quickly in order to provide a rationale for continuing the reforms. In contrast, while there were grumblings about the impact of Fryer's reforms, he enjoyed a strong majority of support on the board and a collaborative relationship with the reform-minded Duval Teachers United (DTU), the local teachers' union.

Strategic action plans

Both San Diego and Duval County outlined their reform efforts in a planning document outlining purpose, goals, major initiatives, and new roles and relationships.

San Diego's Blueprint for Success laid out the extensive professional development agenda, particularly for teachers and principals, which was designed to create a direct impact on classroom practice. In addition, significant resources were targeted toward lower performing schools and students, particularly in the areas of literacy and mathematics. Phase I of the Blueprint for Success called for a non-incremental approach to "do it fast," "do it deep," and "take no prisoners" (Hannaway & Stanislawski, 2005, p. 55). Building on common language, philosophy, and instructional practice of Phase I, Bersin sought to institutionalize the efforts in 2003 when Alvarado left. Phase II included renaming some initiatives and providing more school-based decision making on budget (Hannaway & Stanislawski, 2005).

Principals were seen as the key agents of change. They received extensive training, collaborated by conducting walk-throughs of classrooms and giving each other feedback, and participated in study groups (Schnur & Gerson, 2005). The second key group, school-based instructional coaches, were trained together to provide modeling and coaching to teachers. They were initially perceived as administrative "spies." While novice teachers appreciated their support, veteran teachers thought the role lacked clarification and should work directly with struggling students (Hightower, et al., 2005).

Duval County's strategic action plan, the Framework for Implementation of Standards in DCPS, outlined five goals, which Fryer called his "High Five." They were academic performance, safe schools, high performance management, learning communities, and accountability.

Supovitz (2006) described the DCPS approach as a blend of gardening and engineering. Gardening was convincing staff that changes were needed and the

benefits in implementing the strategies learned in professional development institutes. The engineering side was building the knowledge, skills, and competencies through engagement with instructional coaches, feedback from administrators, and collaborative conversations in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). At the school level, DCPS used a self-analysis tool called the Implementation Rubric that helped them benchmark areas of growth and those still needing significant work. In the same way, a complete and unique system of district-level implementation analysis, called Snapshot, was designed to give the district a systematic and honest view of the level of implementation of a key area such as literacy, mathematics, and safety nets (Supovitz, 2006).

Barriers

Both school districts faced significant but different barriers. In San Diego, the initial conflict with the union persisted as SDEA challenged the district over who selected the instructional coaches, the number of meetings for professional development, and differentiated pay for teaching in low performing schools. Bersin also had to contend with a board that was “polarized and dysfunctional” (Usdan, 2005, p. 12). Power struggles over whether the business community or SDEA had more influence got in the way of discussing Bersin’s agenda on its merits. Detractors of Bersin and Alvarado cited their abrasive, down your throat, take it or leave it approach. Even some who agreed with their reform agenda were troubled by their methodology and attitude. On the other side, supporters described them as visionary, passionate, focused on low performing schools and students, and adept at bringing in additional funds to support reforms. Complaints from principals and teachers undermined community support for Bersin, who was terminated when a school board election tilted support toward the SDEA positions. Usdan (2005) observed that the long-term

sustainability of Bersin's reforms was questionable because they were not yet in the "DNA of the system" (p. 25).

In DCPS, there were different issues that Fryer had to confront. As described earlier, Fryer used a phased process of rolling out his reform agenda. While there were many benefits of this approach described earlier, there was a perception that schools that were early adopters of the America's Choice model were favored over late adopters, who were perceived as being less forward thinking and less courageous. School board support also became more tenuous as they questioned the need for on-going support from America's Choice and the cost associated with it (Supovitz, 2006).

As previously discussed, Fryer had early on aligned the instructional system making it more consistent and coherent. However, he inherited a literacy program that allowed elementary schools to choose from one of three very different reading programs. Not only did this create confusion when conducting district-wide literacy institutes, the coaching and monitoring of reading instruction became very school specific. Direct Instruction had received strong support from some African-American leaders, especially clergy, and had formal support from an interdenominational group called ICARE. Of the three reading programs, it was farthest from the balanced literacy approach espoused by America's Choice. After some very public encounters at ICARE and school board meetings, Fryer said schools using Direct Instruction could continue if they balanced the explicit phonics-based approach with stronger comprehension strategies.

Another confrontation, even less associated with the reform agenda, was when Fryer recommended that the school board contract out student transportation in an

open bid process within five zones. The old system, which had been in place for decades, was to directly negotiate with a consortium representing 110 small to medium sized contractors. Not only did Fryer see the old system as not complying with the purchasing code as confirmed by legal counsel, but there were also about \$3 million in savings that could be generated and invested in professional development for teachers and principals.

What exacerbated the conflict was that a number of the contractors were African-American, including the daughter of one of the board members, and had fleets that were too small to compete in the new five-zone proposal. In fact, with the exception of one local contractor, only national companies were large enough to compete. While Fryer eventually secured board support, the process cost him significant political capital in a city that was already divided by race and income (Supovitz, 2006).

Supovitz (2006) summarized his findings of the tenure of Fryer by crediting him with making significant headway in four of his High Five goals. The only exception was in creating learning communities where Supovitz found a lack of consistent understanding or refined practice in actualizing the intent of this goal (Supovitz, 2006).

Summary

Both SDUSD and DCPS faced similar issues in similar districts at the same time, 1998-2005. They developed robust plans based on a common theory of action: invest in improving the knowledge and skills of teachers, principals, and district staff around teaching and learning. That, in turn, will improve instructional practice which will lead to improved student achievement, especially for low performing students and schools. Both districts were led by non-traditional superintendents who had distinguished themselves in their prior careers and brought strong leadership skills and courage to

their new calling. Both redirected funds from prior uses to provide extensive professional development provided by national experts. Both Bersin and Fryer faced resistance to their reforms and questions about the cost of contracting with outside providers.

They differed in the pace of implementation, with Bersin going immediately district-wide and Fryer phasing in his reforms over four years. There were also differences in their approach to change management, with Bersin advocating “take no prisoners” and Fryer intentionally balancing both requiring and convincing. They also faced different barriers with Bersin’s on-going conflict with the teachers’ union and a split board and Fryer dealing with outside pressure groups and the fallout over improving efficiency in transportation costs to invest in professional development.

Both districts made academic progress in elementary schools, less so in middle schools, and less still in high schools. Even though they had long tenures compared to most urban superintendents, their work was not completed and the degree to which their reforms were deeply rooted was mixed, especially in the case of San Diego.

Together they illustrate the challenge of taking reform to scale over an extended period of time to the degree that the culture of the district is transformed, teaching and learning is significantly improved, and students, especially those who did not perform well in the past, are achieving success. See Figure 2-2 for a visual representation of the similarities between the two districts.

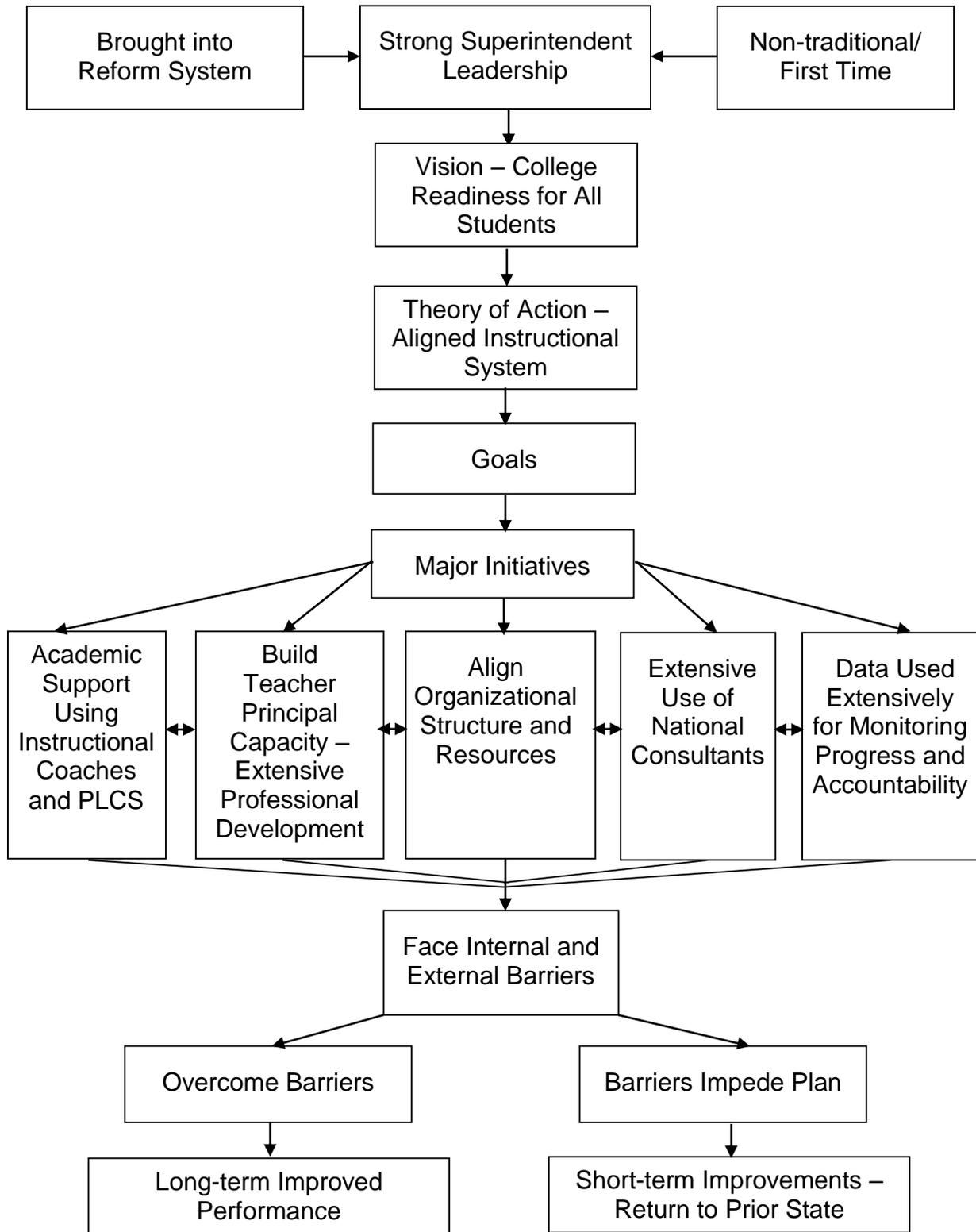


Figure 2-2. Strategic planning in San Diego and Duval County, FL.

Section III: Recent National and International Studies (2010-2011)

In the fall of 2011, the Council of Great City Schools (CGCS), a member organization composed of 67 of the largest city school districts in America, teamed up with the American Institute of Research (AIR), a highly respected national research organization, to identify common factors in three school districts that were performing well or improving performance rapidly on NAEP, compared to similar districts. The result was a report titled *Pieces of the Puzzle: Factors in the Improvement of Urban School Districts on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)*. To date, it is the most comprehensive study of improving urban school districts in America.

At about the same time (2010), Mourshed, Chijoke, and Barber produced a report titled *How the World's Most Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better* for McKinsey & Company, a world-wide business consulting group. It identified 20 school districts world-wide that had achieved significant and sustained gains in student achievement based on national and international assessments. Their conclusions not only focused on common factors, but also highlighted differences based on their starting points in their improvement efforts.

There were a number of common factors used by higher performing school districts, both nationally and internationally, including:

1. Strong stable leadership, especially the superintendent, school board, and senior curriculum staff who share a common vision that sustains change.
2. A clear, well-communicated approach to teaching and learning that is uniformly implemented.
3. Well-defined professional development that sets the direction, builds skills, and provides coaching.
4. Systematic monitoring plan is used to determine level of implementation and how to deploy support.

5. Regular use of data to gauge student progress, modify practice, and target resources.
6. The factors did not include governance, choice, power of unions, funding models, or alignment of district standards with NAEP or international tests.

The relationship of the factors is displayed in Figure 2-3.

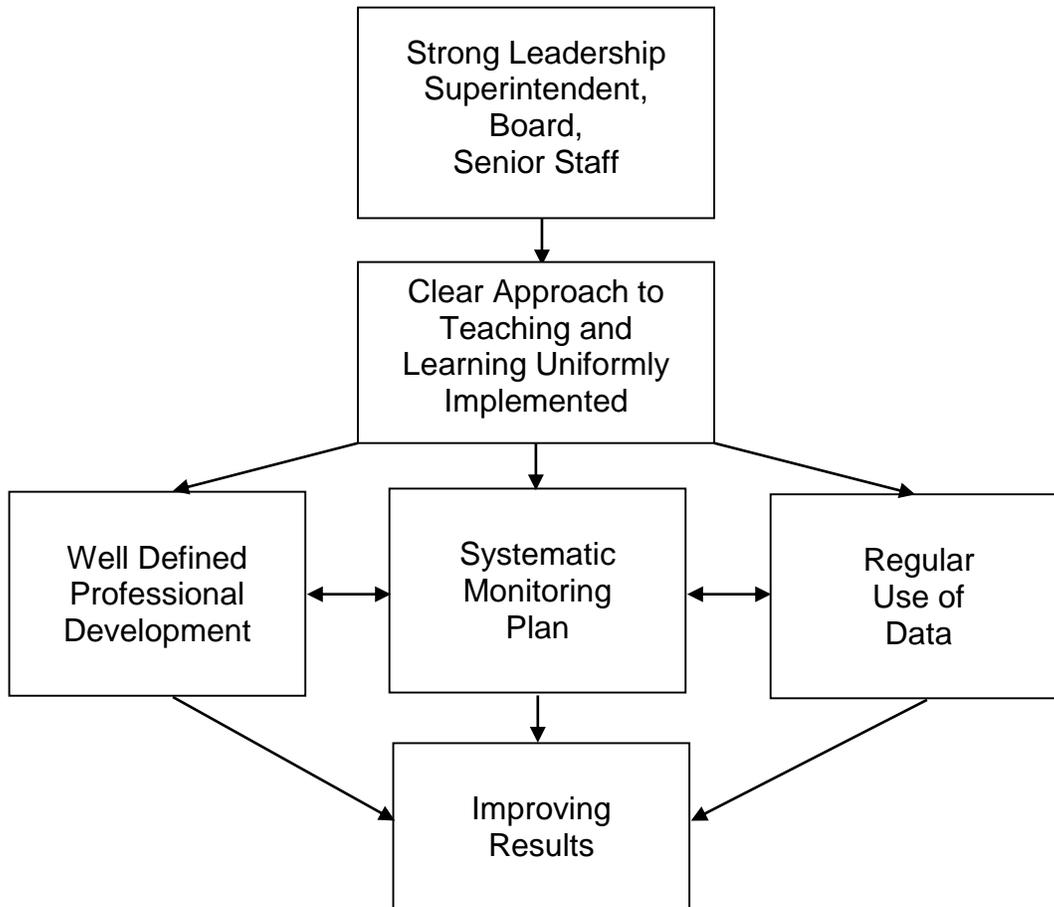


Figure 2-3. Common factors in high performing districts in national and international studies.

Additionally, the CGCS/AIR study also identified the common factor of a strong strategic plan with system-wide goals that are measurable and used to hold staff accountable.

The McKinsey report added three other factors: align policy and law to support the improvement; the context of a system determines how (sequence, timing, roll out) a

plan is done, not what is done; and that there are performance stages that call for different actions. Districts that are moving from poor to fair or fair to good used a more district-directed focus on data gathering, organization, finance, and teaching methods. A district moving from good to great focused more on the teaching profession, such as certification, practices, and career paths. The McKinsey report also made the observation that any school district can make significant gains in six years regardless of where they start.

Section IV: The Broad Prize for Urban Education Case Studies (2006-2012)

The Broad Prize for Urban Education has been recognizing the most improved public school districts in the United States since 2003. Comparing school districts with others in their state and, where possible, other districts nationally, Broad uses a complex and comprehensive data analysis to identify finalists for the prize. Data elements include academic performance, graduation rates, college readiness, and other factors. To qualify as a participating district, the student population must be at least 37,500 with at least 40% of students from minority racial groups and 40% on free/reduced lunch.

Districts that are selected as finalists are visited by a team of experts that reviews district documents, interviews a variety of stakeholders, and conducts targeted site visits. The quantitative and qualitative information are reviewed by a panel of experts that makes the final selection. For the purposes of this study, the exemplary practices of the districts selected between 2006 and 2012 are presented. They include Boston, New York City, Brownsville (TX), Aldine (TX), Gwinette County (GA), Charlotte-Mecklenburg, and Miami-Dade. These exemplary practices are organized into four categories:

strategic planning, curriculum and instruction, high quality teachers and leaders, and budget alignment.

Strategic planning

While all seven districts had well-developed strategic plans, some districts excelled in certain elements of the strategic planning process (The Broad Prize for Urban Education, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012):

1. Create a well-articulated vision and mission that establishes high expectations for all students (Brownsville, Gwinette, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, and Miami-Dade);
2. Align district goals and targets with district department goals and school improvement plans (Boston, New York, Brownsville, Aldine, Gwinette);
3. Implement an on-going continuous improvement process; using data to monitor progress at district, department, and school levels; and hold all staff accountable for results (New York, Brownsville, Aldine, Gwinette, and Miami-Dade);
4. Provide additional focus and assistance to lower performing schools (Boston, New York, Charlotte, Miami-Dade);
5. Use extensive engagement of families and the community in developing and implementing the plan (Boston, New York, Brownsville, Aldine, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, and Miami-Dade); and
6. Superintendent and school board work collaboratively to align decisions with vision, mission, and core beliefs to improve student achievement (Gwinette and Miami-Dade).

Curriculum and instruction

In order for strategic plans to be actionable, a district must connect vision and goals to specific structures and processes in curriculum and instruction. Seven elements emerged from the research (The Broad Prize for Urban Education, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012):

1. A tightly coupled system of grade and course level standard, with curriculum and pacing guides, coupled to model lesson plans (Boston, New York, Brownsville, and Aldine);

2. Use of data from frequent formative and summative assessments to identify student learning gaps and inform school-wide decisions (Boston, New York, Brownsville, Aldine, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, and Miami-Dade);
3. Provide extensive professional development in the use of data and research-based instructional strategies and provide opportunities for collaboration in professional learning communities (PLCs) and study groups (Boston, New York, Brownsville, Aldine, and Gwinette);
4. Support regular use of best practices in classrooms by providing instructional coaches, especially in literacy and mathematics (Boston, New York, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, and Miami-Dade);
5. Conduct school-wide curriculum and instruction reviews with principals, their supervisors, and district content experts (Boston, New York, Brownsville, and Miami-Dade);
6. Implement a tiered approach to intervention to assist struggling students (Boston, New York, Brownsville, and Aldine), and
7. Provide some level of school flexibility in selecting appropriate instructional approaches in order to adapt to unique needs and create a greater sense of ownership (New York, Brownsville, Aldine, and Charlotte-Mecklenburg).

High quality teachers and leaders

There is no category more important to improving outcomes for students than ensuring that every classroom has a high-quality teacher and every school is led by an effective principal with support from a competent and responsive district staff. Two key elements emerged as being most significant in this category (The Broad Prize for Urban Education, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011):

1. Improve the quality, efficiency, and timing of hiring and placing teachers, especially in the lower performing schools (Boston, Aldine, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, and Miami-Dade).
2. Improve the preparation of principals and district staff to support teaching and learning (Boston, New York, Brownsville, Aldine, and Charlotte-Mecklenburg).

Budget alignment

While it may seem somewhat obvious that there needs to be an alignment between the various plans and funding, districts sometimes struggle with actualizing this

connection given the myriad of sources and required uses. The following districts excelled in at least one of the three key elements in this category (The Broad Prize for Urban Education, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012):

1. Consolidate and align various funds to connect directly with district strategic plan goals and activities as well as SIP (New York, Aldine, and Gwinette).
2. Use a weighted student funding (WSF) formula to implement school-based budgeting (New York, Brownsville, and Aldine).
3. Increase fiscal stability, reserves, and bond rating while focusing on strategic goals (Brownsville and Miami-Dade).

A visual depiction (Figure 2-4) of the strategic planning process outlined in Section IV shows how these various components interact.

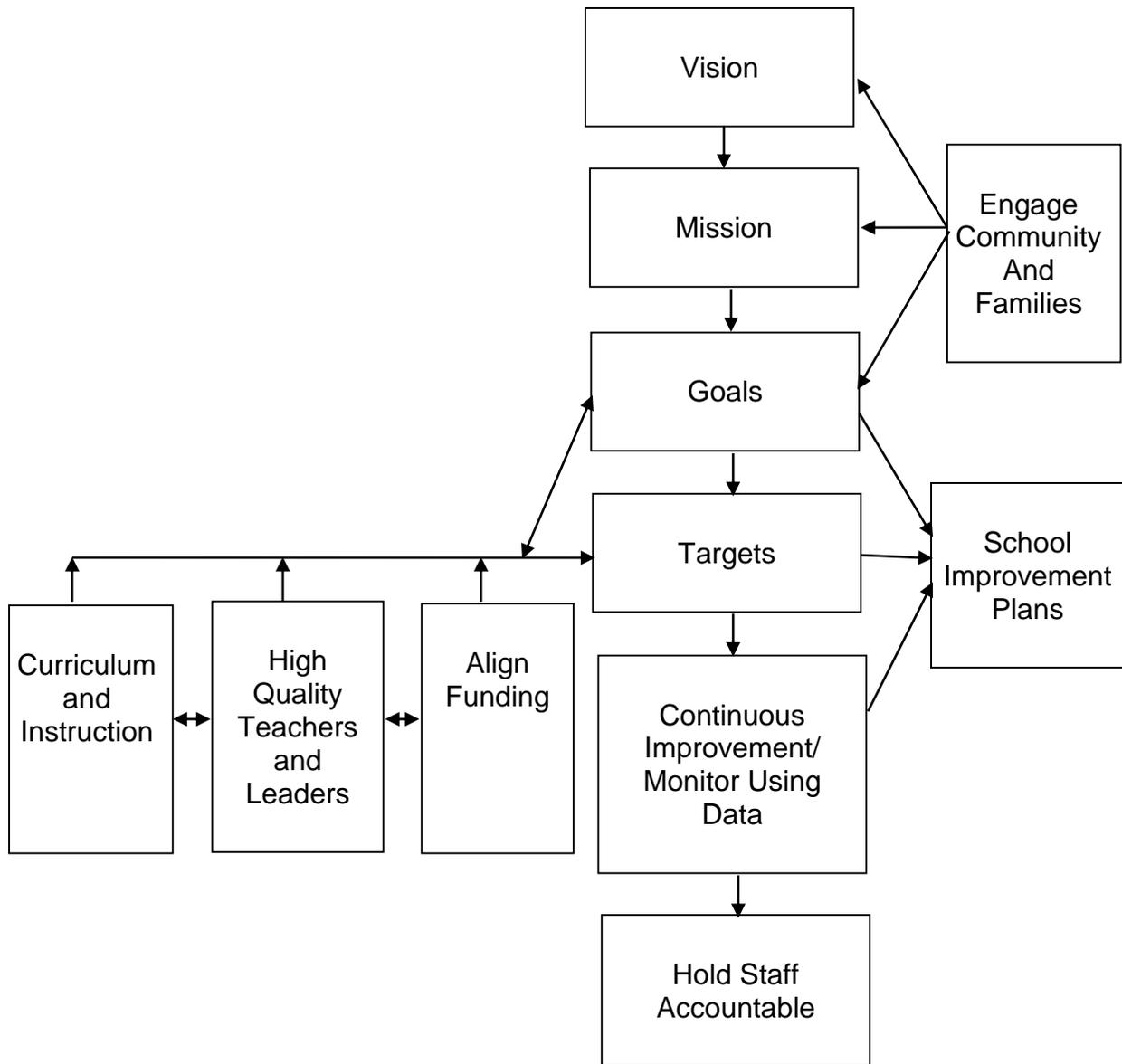


Figure 2-4. Strategic planning process from district winners of the Broad Prize for Urban Education (2006-2012).

Section V: Recent Doctoral Dissertation Studies (2008-2012)

The following section summarizes nine case studies conducted from 2008-12 as a part of a doctoral dissertation. With the exception of one study, the findings are limited to one school district, limiting any ability to generalize any findings. However, these were chosen because of their emphasis on the superintendent’s leadership in implementing district-wide reforms. Studies #24-34 are not included on the summary

chart (Table 2-2) because the focus of these studies was more narrow in scope.

Synthesizing the nine studies revealed six common strategies used by the

superintendents in the studies:

1. Create a cohesive strategic plan focused on a common vision, supported by a theory of action; tightly coupling of standards, curriculum, and assessment; and delineating degree of flexibility in other areas (Trujillo, 2008; Garcia, 2009; Blanco, 2009; Gifford, 2009; Fisher, 2010; Bealor, 2010; and Hagland, 2009).
2. Develop a strong data-driven system to determine the effectiveness of programs and hold staff accountable for results (Trujillo, 2008; Garcia, 2009; Gifford, 2009; Danielian, 2009; Umekubo, 2012; Bealor, 2010; Hagland, 2009).
3. Build the capacity of staff to understand what good instruction looks like and how to reflect it in practice in addition to developing learning communities to increase collaboration (Johnson, 2008; Garcia, 2009; Blanco, 2009; Gifford, 2009; Bravo, 2011).
4. Build a strong linkage between district staff and school leadership by developing trusting relationships (Johnson, 2008; Fisher, 2010; Bravo, 2011; Umekubo, 2012).
5. Align and organize resources to implement the strategic plan (Garcia, 2009; Bealor, 2010; Hagland, 2009).
6. Ensure there is effective public engagement and transparency (Garcia, 2009; Bealor, 2010).

Figure 2-5 illustrates how the components of strategic planning identified in Section V relates to each other.

Summary of Case Studies

While a few of the studies represented in this review focused on a single district, most identified common initiatives or practices used in multiple districts. These strategies were synthesized into a comprehensive list to determine the degree of commonality in the case studies #1-23 (#24-34 were not included). (See Table 2-2.) While there were a number of strategies with one or two citations, a consistent pattern emerged, particularly when similar strategies were combined.

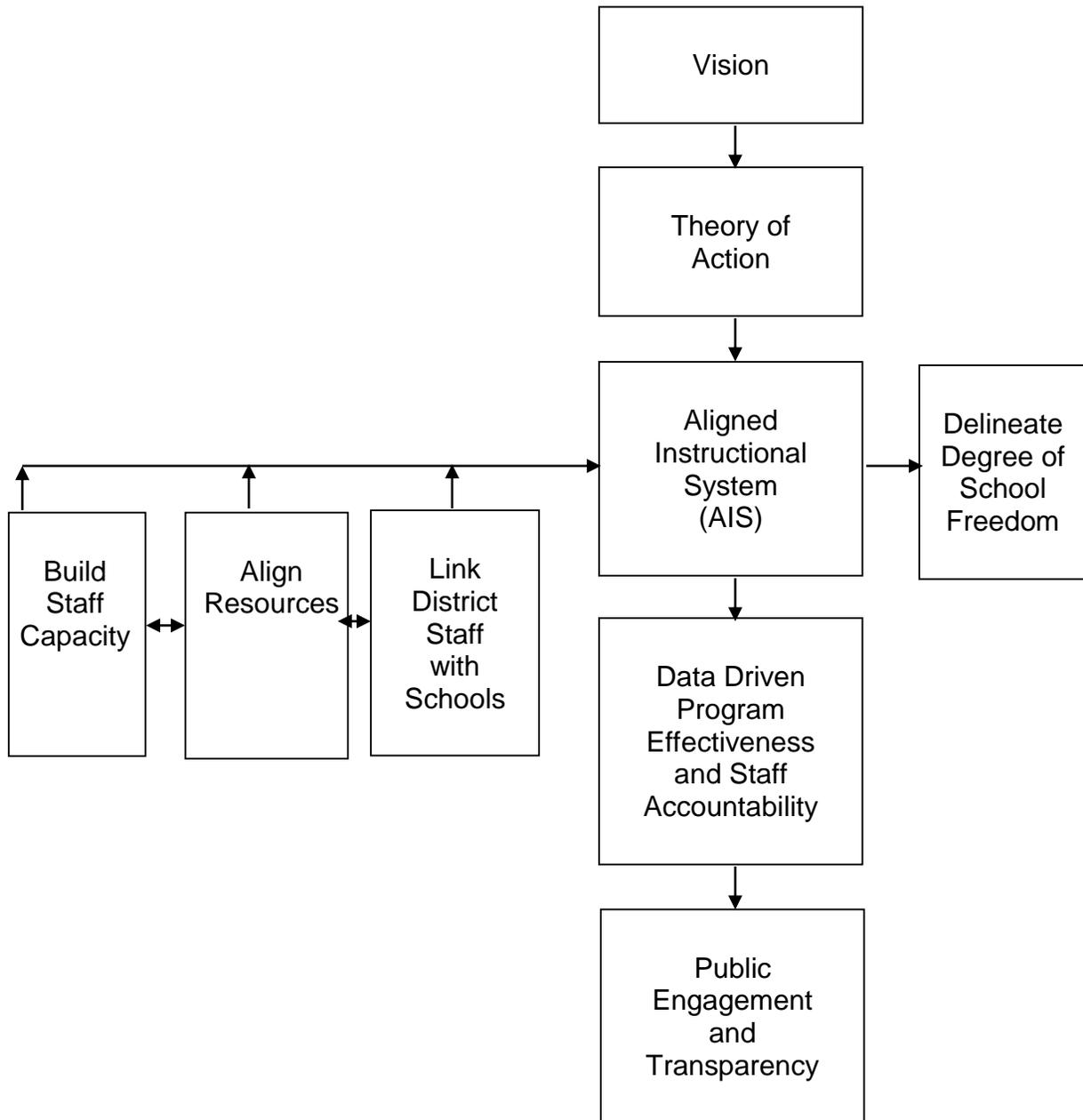


Figure 2-5. Strategic planning components identified in recent doctoral dissertations.

Table 2-2. Summary of case study strategies

Strategy in Evidence	Study Number																						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23
Build Civic Capacity and Trust	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓					✓					✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
Vision/Beliefs--All Students/No Excuses Sense of Urgency		✓		✓	✓	✓		✓					✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Communication and Respect		✓												✓					✓	✓	✓		✓
Stable Organization							✓								✓		✓		✓	✓	✓		
Board/Superintendent Roles Defined							✓										✓				✓		✓
District/School Partnership							✓						✓	✓					✓	✓			
Strong Superintendent and Senior Leadership			✓		✓	✓					✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓
Aligned Standards, Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessments		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓					✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Common Core Reading and Math				✓	✓		✓					✓	✓					✓	✓	✓			✓
Use of Comprehensive Data to Inform Instruction		✓			✓		✓		✓					✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Accountability Systems with Specific School Targets		✓	✓	✓	✓			✓		✓	✓			✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Comprehensive District Reform Strategy							✓						✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Extensive Professional Development		✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
Creation of Professional Learning Communities				✓					✓												✓		✓
Principal as Instructional Leader								✓				✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Use of Instructional Coaches								✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓		✓			✓		✓	✓
Use of Whole School Design			✓											✓									
Allocate Resources to Support Improvement Plan		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓				✓	✓	✓				✓			✓	✓
Use School-Based Budgeting			✓	✓									✓	✓				✓			✓		
Provide Outside Resources							✓					✓	✓				✓						✓
Allow Schools to Decide on Hiring			✓																				
Focus on Hiring High Quality Teachers			✓											✓			✓			✓		✓	✓

Table 2-2. Continued

Strategy in Evidence	Study Number																							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	
Use Multiple Programs for Problems							✓																	✓
Focus Assistance on Low Performing Schools				✓					✓				✓		✓			✓					✓	✓
Reconstitute Low Performing Schools			✓								✓							✓				✓	✓	
Modify Union Rules			✓															✓						
Align evaluation of teachers and principals with the reforms																✓								✓
School-wide instructional implementation reviews														✓			✓	✓	✓					✓

Based on the summation of findings in this review, high performing districts:

1. Build civic capacity and trust.
2. Share a common vision and beliefs that all students can learn at high levels, have a sense of urgency, and adopt a 'no excuses' attitude.
3. Have a strong superintendent and senior staff to lead the reform effort.
4. Have an aligned instructional system including common performance standards, curriculum, materials, recommended instructional methodology, and assessments. This system is built over time beginning with elementary reading and mathematics, then branching out to all subjects and all grades.
5. Provide an extensive professional development program tied to the curriculum, using instructional coaches, and creating professional learning communities at each school.
6. Create and use a comprehensive data management system to identify students' instructional strengths and needs based on the standards and common assessments with the goal to differentiate instruction, particularly for low-performing students.
7. Create an accountability system that holds schools and district staff responsible for specific improvement targets based on realistic stretch goals, with positive and negative consequences.
8. Allocate resources based on need and aligned with key district-wide initiatives and pursue additional external resources.
9. Provide additional assistance to low-performing schools and, as a last resort, reconstitute them in order to create a highly dedicated professional teaching staff.
10. Provide as much school-based decision making in budgeting and hiring staff as possible.

These strategies represent different but connected district-wide initiatives with support in the research. Using McAdam's (2006) constructs of various theories of action, the elements of the predominant three theories—Managed Instruction, Performance/Empowerment, and Managed Performance/Empowerment—are represented in this list.

CHAPTER 3 METHODS

In Chapter 2, a meta-analysis of 23 case studies yielded a list of 10 high-yield strategies, or drivers, that have been found to be used in large urban school districts with improved academic performance (Table 2-2). What is often missing is how these drivers work in concert and how local context impacts the implementation of these drivers through a strategic planning process. Only two of the studies cited, San Diego and Duval County, delved into this more in-depth question that could provide insight for superintendents and others leading school district reform.

A qualitative analysis approach using case study methodology, specifically interviews, for data collection and a grounded theory approach and cross-case analysis for data analysis best match the research questions in this study.

The study will address four research questions:

1. How were the strategic plans created, what were the major components, and how were they monitored?
2. How were the districts' academic, financial, and human resources plans aligned and implemented in the plan?
3. How did internal and external forces advance, modify, or inhibit the plans?
4. What advice would superintendents give to other superintendents embarking on a strategic planning process?

Case Study Methodology for Data Collection

Case study methodology is used to describe a unique situation with unique circumstances in order to understand how and why actions were taken (Starke, 1995). They try to "illuminate a decision or set of decisions; why they were taken, how they were implemented, and with what results" (Schramm, 1971, p. 12).

When multiple situations (districts) are analyzed together using cross-case analysis (also known as comparative case methodology), analytic generalizations can be made. According to Yin (2003), an analytic generalization is not applied to some defined population that has been sampled, but instead to a theory of the phenomenon being studied; a theory that may have much wider applicability than the particular case(s) studied. While using multiple districts increases the level of confidence of any generalizations using a replication logic, they cannot be generalized to a population or a universe as you would when using a sampling logic.

Replication logic attempts to collect data from different sources in the hope that external parameters will eventually have no influence and, therefore, broad generalizations can be made. Sampling logic, on the other hand, tries to eliminate every external parameter that could alter the results of the experiment, which is an impossibility when conducting case study research.

Case study is an appropriate research strategy when 1) the primary question is how or why, 2) events cannot be controlled by the researcher, and 3) the focus is recent events. It also involves more variables than data, relies on multiple sources of information, and uses theoretical propositions to guide the collections of data (Yin, 2003). Descriptively, in the cross-case analysis, similarities and differences will be specified.

The theoretical proposition in this study is that effective strategic planning brings together the key elements and drivers in a school district in order to:

1. Bring coherence and focus.
2. Connect a detailed plan with vision to results and accountability.

3. Align major systems of academic programs, financial prioritization, human capital development, and public perception.
4. Maximize positive impact on student achievement.
5. Respond to requirements of federal and state accountability, as well as local needs.

In order to determine how the strategic planning process impacted the above areas, a semi-structured interview format was selected to be used with superintendents who were serving, or recently retired, as superintendents in large urban districts in Florida.

The Interview

Interviewing is one of the most powerful ways to understand people. It has become the modern day version of storytelling in that it conveys the what and how of people's lives. It has become so pervasive that it is often taken for granted that it can be done well by anyone (Fontana & Frey, 2003). The assumption is that the interview is an accurate or true picture that can be produced given the right conditions (Schostak, 2006).

However, there is always an element of ambiguity regardless of how carefully the questions are crafted, asked, or reported. Interviews are not neutral tools for collecting data but are interactions between people resulting in a conversation within a context (Fontana & Frey, 2003). They are interactions with others in their own language on their own terms (Kirk & Miller, 1986).

Interviews can range from highly structured, where questions are asked using the same exact wording of the questions, to more open-ended encounters, where the voices of the subjects are recorded with minimal influence from the researcher. These match with the two ends of the spectrum in qualitative research.

Highly structured interviews represent the older, more classical positivist approach where there emerges only one truth from the data. While recognizing that the interviewer impacts the result of the interview, it seeks to limit such impact by maintaining a professional distance. Structured interviews lend themselves to greater reliability because they can more easily be replicated. Open-ended questions meant to elicit values, feelings, and thoughts of the interviewee fall in the post-modern camp, which in its most extreme expression posits that everything is contextually based; that it is impossible to keep the interviewer neutral, and therefore no common generalizations can be made (Kirk & Miller, 1986; Fontana & Frey, 2003).

The approach for this research was to use a semi-structured interview format. Specific questions were asked to ensure the interviewer has spoken to each area of focus. However, a more casual conversational approach was intentionally chosen to elicit more in-depth, honest answers and because, in most cases, I had an existing relationship with the interviewees as a colleague. Often in answering a question, a later question was answered. Since the purpose of the study is to determine how strategic planning pulls together the various drivers of school reform from the superintendents' perspective, this semi-structured approach was effective. Schostak (2006) quotes an interviewer that reflects this approach:

The interview transformed from its expected course of question followed by answer into 'something more like a discussion.' To my colleague this seemed 'better' than other interviews carried out more formally and stilted. The spontaneity seemed 'honest,' not 'suspicious' (p. 50).

While a less formal approach may reduce the reliability, that is the ability to replicate the process, it resulted in more valid responses. Since objectivity is the

simultaneous balancing of as much reliability and validity as possible (Kirk & Miller, 1986), the semi-structured interview was appropriate.

The semi-structured interview adhered to ethical protocols that are both in the literature (Schostak, 2006) and required by The University of Florida Institutional Review Board (IRB). These included:

1. Anonymity – to the degree possible, subjects' responses will not be identifiable.
2. Confidentiality – some information cannot be shared even anonymously.
3. Negotiation of Access – only pertinent parties, such as the dissertation committee, would have access to field notes and transcripts.
4. Right to Say No – recognition that interviewee may withhold all or part of the information in response to a question.
5. Independence – there is no external veto whether to include findings beyond that of the researcher.
6. Representation – all views will be given a fair hearing when reporting the data.

Data Analysis Using Grounded Theory and Cross-Case Analysis

The classical foundation for grounded theory using a constant comparative method was outlined by Strauss and Cobin in 1967 and modified over time (Strauss & Cobin, 1997). The purpose was to create a systematic and structured approach to qualitative research analysis and to negate the criticisms by quantitative researchers that qualitative research lacked a scientific basis.

In grounded theory, the themes are not prescribed in advance, but emerge in the process of constantly comparing data to themes. When the process can no longer yield any different, more in-depth themes, the generalizations (theories) are said to be grounded.

Strauss and Cobin's grounded theory consisted of three phases: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Open coding establishes initial categories and sub-categories (properties). The properties describe the range along a continuum of responses in the text (transcribed interview) around each category.

In axial coding, the second phase, one of the most important core categories is selected by the researcher to develop a coding paradigm which is a flow chart representation or diagram. It includes causal conditions for the selected core category, the context and intervening conditions that informed the strategies used and the resulting consequences.

The final phase, selective coding, called for presenting a theory about the various categories in the axial coding model. While this systematic model did provide a consistent methodology of analyzing qualitative data, it was challenged as being overly prescriptive for some forms of qualitative research (Creswell, 2005).

Glaser (1992) advocated a less structured approach to arrive at a theory, using the constant comparative approach, comparing incident to incident, incident to category, and category to category. The focus of the coding process is to identify the connections. The Glaser model, known as the Emerging Model, presents a series of propositions and hypotheses at the end.

A third approach to grounded theory is the Constructivist, which focuses on reporting the process the interviewees are experiencing and typically uses a more open-ended question interview to let subjects tell their story (Charmaz, 2000). It ends with questions and thoughts rather than diagrams (in Systematic) or theories (in Emerging) (Creswell, 2005).

Cross-case analysis, also known as comparative case method or analysis, comes from the case study research. All of the processes used in a single case study apply to each of those in the multiple-case study, but another dimension is added to the analysis. In coding, not only is the researcher identifying incident to incident, incident to category, and category to category connections but is also doing so across cases (Schwandt, 2001). While this makes the analysis more complex, it yields greater confidence (within limitations discussed later) in any theories that emerge. Since this study is limited to interviews, it provides a form of triangulation (Schostak, 1990) that increases validity by having several contexts to compare to identify consistent patterns. It also provides a range of responses leading to a continuum of approaches to similar issues. Therefore, using a cross-case method, validity is improved and both similar and different approaches can be identified.

Procedures

Grounded Theory

This research study will use the Emerging Model using a tagging system to identify emerging themes focused on the central question: How do superintendents in urban school districts use strategic planning to improve student performance? In the analysis, processes, actions, and consequences will be identified. Beyond that, underlying concepts and assumptions, often expressed as metaphors, will be explored. Finally, the context of each district will be viewed to determine how relationships and social conflicts were managed, what problem-solving approaches were used, and which cultural contradictions emerged (Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

Sources of themes that are useful as beginning points to inform the coding process may include: the literature review, the characteristics of what is being studied,

common sense, and the researchers' values, experiences, and theoretical orientation (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). These will be used in the data analysis process.

Selection of Districts and Superintendents

Since I have intentionally narrowed the scope of my research to large urban school districts, I used the qualifying demographics used in Broad Prize for Urban School Districts. These include at least 37,500 students in the district, at least 40% of the students identified as a racial minority, and at least 40% of the students qualifying for free/reduced lunch. The district also has to be categorized as an urban area by the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) (Broad, 2003).

Only large urban districts in Florida were used for this study for several reasons. Using one state narrows some of the contextual spread associated with variations in state funding, requirements, and accountability. It also allows for less background information having to be shared by the interviewer, since I served as superintendent in a large urban district in Florida during the same time period (2007-12). It can certainly be argued that, during these five years, Florida had some of the fewest financial resources and most top-down prescriptive accountability systems in the country, creating huge strains on the strategic planning process.

Having been a peer also allowed for an instant trust and rapport to be established creating a conversation rather than an interrogation atmosphere. Superintendents, who are in the public eye, are understandably reluctant to be completely forthcoming with someone with whom they are not familiar. The peer relationship also made it possible to secure participation. Very few researchers would be able to schedule individual 1½- hour interviews with nine superintendents in person over a two-week period. Every superintendent contacted readily agreed to be

interviewed. Finally, there are the practical considerations of time and cost, which were reasonable when the scope was limited to Florida superintendents.

The other criterion, besides being a large urban Florida school district, was that the superintendent served at least three years between the years 2007 and 2012. Of the nine superintendents interviewed, four had recently retired and had the perspective of someone who had implemented strategic planning over a number of years. Selecting these years also helped me understand the language and culture of the superintendents (Fontana & Frey, 2003), having served as a peer with them during these years. Recency of experience was important because of how quickly the public education landscape can change. Finally, since the purpose of this research is to add to the growing understanding on how to improve urban school districts, and few recent studies used multiple school districts, the hope is that the findings and conclusions will have impact beyond the narrow audience reading this dissertation.

The selection criteria yielded nine school districts and superintendents representing 1.45 million students, which is 54% of Florida's students.

Determining the Questions

Beginning with the background literature and my own experience, an original list of 23 questions were generated. These were combined, eliminated, or modified into 10 proposed questions. Three experts reviewed the 10 questions, suggested revisions, and the final nine questions (Appendix A) were completed.

Assisting in this editing was Dr. Bernard Oliver, Professor at University of Florida, and the chair of my dissertation committee. Dr. Oliver has extensive experience as a senior district-level administrator, in addition to guiding numerous doctoral students with their dissertations. He has also provided in-depth technical assistance to six urban high

schools in three urban Florida school districts. Next was Dr. Jonathan Supovitz, professor at the University of Pennsylvania in the educational doctorate program. Dr. Supovitz was the lead investigator in the Duval County study (Case #14 in the Literature Review). He has specialized in researching the process and outcomes of large urban district reform. Finally, Mr. John J-H Kim, Chief Executive Officer of the District Management Council with former experience at McKinsey and Company, assisted in editing the questions. Mr. Kim and his staff have led districts through the strategic planning process with special emphasis on aligning human capital decisions and financial planning with academic goals. I am indebted to their wise council in assisting; however, the responsibilities for the final version are mine alone.

In addition to the nine questions that were developed, a parallel set of “listen fors” were developed. These were not a part of the standard questions asked of all participants, but were available to me for follow-up, probing, and fuller explanations when an answer was brief or I sensed there was more to share. This “listen for” format follows one used by AdvancEd (formerly SACS/CASI) in their questioning of senior district staff going through a district accreditation process. These are attached (Appendix B).

Arranging the Interviews

Each of the identified nine superintendents was contacted by phone to explain globally what the study was about, discuss the general range of questions, and to secure their willingness to participate. Following the approval from the UFIRB, interviews were scheduled the last two weeks of February 2013. Each participant was then sent a consent form (Appendix C) and the list of questions (Appendix A). For the five current superintendents, the interviews were scheduled one-on-one in their offices

at the district administration building. Three of the retired superintendents were scheduled in their homes and one was at a local restaurant near his home.

Conducting the Interviews

For each interview, I positioned myself either across from or adjacent to the participant at a comfortable 3'-5' distance at a table. I began by thanking them again for their time and securing their signature on the consent form which had been sent to them in advance. Next, I reiterated the purpose of the study was to determine how strategic planning was used to increase student achievement. Also repeated was the promise that, to the degree possible, no remarks would be attributed to them personally and that the audio recording being made would only be heard by me and a transcriber.

My goal was to make the interview a conversation that was focused around the topic. I had told the superintendents in advance that I was listening to them and not sharing my own experience. For the most part, my goal was achieved. Several times there was a lead-in from the interviewee, such as "You probably had to deal with that situation in your school district." On one occasion, I did share briefly what I had done but realized what I was doing and moved on with the interview.

The assumptions were confirmed that my prior collegial relationship with the superintendents created immediate trust and rapport, that they knew I understood much of the context in which they constructed and implemented their plans, and that they could be honest and direct, knowing that I would honor my commitment regarding anonymity. This was particularly true when the participants discussed their relationships with the school boards in their districts. At one point, one superintendent stopped and said, "You did say this was anonymous, didn't you?" and heard my confirmation before proceeding with their answer.

As superintendents were answering, I was taking notes as well as recording, using a small digital recording device. Interviews lasted about 1-1.5 hours, which is what I had asked for when arranging the sessions. Respondents seemed relaxed, focused on responding to the questions, and eager to share their experiences. The one exception to this was one respondent who seemed tired and somewhat pre-occupied because he had another appointment following the interview.

There were several interruptions or exceptions to the protocol. One current superintendent was interrupted briefly by an emergency, dealt with it within 1-2 minutes, and the interview continued without further interruption. One former superintendent asked if their spouse could sit in and listen since it was in their home and I agreed. The only problem that arose was when, on two occasions, the spouse interjected a reminder to the interviewee. I simply refocused on the participant and continued. Another interview in a home was interrupted twice briefly to introduce me to family members who were coming through. Finally, while not being interrupted, the interview in the restaurant was hard to maintain focus with the background noise of the other patrons. While I had expected fewer interruptions in the interviews with retired superintendents than with current ones, the opposite was true.

Analyzing the Data

Field Notes and Initial Categories

As described earlier, notes were taken during the interviews. The notes included content (what the interviewer did), context (the challenges and opportunities unique to their situation), and the process used (how they brought together the parts into a synergistic whole). Field notes were edited and added to by listening to the recorded interviews a second time. During this process, I was thinking of the three main

categories that I would use to create results Chapter 4 in the dissertation. One option included what (content), where (context), and how (process). Another option was to describe similarities, differences, and why these were present. A third option was to focus more around the big blocks of strategic planning framed in the questions, that is creating the plan (including alignment of academic goals with human and financial resources and accountability), executing the plan (including obstacles and conflicts), and monitoring and modifying the plan (including lessons learned and recommendations for future superintendents). The tentative option selected was the last one in that it both seemed to be the most comprehensive and aligned more closely with the interview questions and responses.

Transcribing and Coding

The fifteen hours of audio tape were transcribed by an experienced executive assistant creating a Microsoft Word document. It was made clear to them that no content was to be shared with anyone but me. Coding was done using a tagging system based on a draft outline, then was modified through the constant comparative method described earlier. What emerged from an initial outline for Chapter 4 was modified as I compared the main ideas and quotes from the interviews (data) to the themes of categories. Results in Chapter 4 were presented in four thematic areas: 1) the purpose of strategic planning, 2) the process of strategic planning, 3) how the academic, fiscal, and human capital plans were aligned in the strategic plan, and 4) pitfalls, possibilities, and advice. Within these four areas, topics and subtopics were consolidated and expanded several times to better reflect the response in the interviews.

Coding involved going back through the transcripts (data) and labeling (coding) each idea or quote with a letter/number combination aligned with a particular theme and

subtheme. Then the responses from the nine interviews were organized within this theme/subtheme outline to write that section. Particular attention was paid to similarities and difference among the responses.

Attributing Ideas and Quotes

As discussed previously, participants were promised that ideas and quotes they expressed would be anonymous to the degree possible. Therefore, there is no mention of the name or district of the superintendent when discussing ideas or quotes.

Designating superintendents by number (e.g., #1-9) was also avoided to limit the ability to attribute all quotes by that superintendent if a reader could determine that one quote came from them. This led to introductory language such as “one superintendent said,” or “another superintendent shared.”

There was also an intentional use of the masculine gender to limit possibility of identifying the individual superintendent. While males were in the majority, the interviewees also included a female. While these devices certainly limited the possibility of attribution, providing the context of the quote may allow a person with local knowledge to determine the identity of that individual. My effort was to maintain anonymity as much as possible while still remaining true to the thoughts and feelings that were expressed.

CHAPTER 4 RESULTS

As discussed previously in Chapter 3, the Results of this study came from an analysis of interviews with nine Florida superintendents who served at least three years between 2007 and 2012. Their districts qualified as large urban school districts using the Broad Prize for Urban Education criteria. In order to safeguard the identity of respondents, no name, numbering, or district identifications were used. Also, while there were both male and female superintendents, the masculine gender was used, again to limit the possibility of attribution.

At times, “a superintendent,” “another superintendent,” or simply “superintendents” is used when presenting an idea, example, or quote. These all come from the nine superintendents who were interviewed and is used in lieu of “respondent,” “interviewee,” or other similar terminology. While superintendents in Florida can be appointed or elected, all of the nine superintendents in this study are appointed. Constitutionally, they have broad powers and responsibilities and are viewed as the chief executive officer of the organization.

“School board” or “board” as used in the Results (Chapter 4) denote the local school board of that district unless otherwise identified. School boards in Florida are elected either in geographic areas, at large from the entire district (county), or a combination of the two. Florida school districts have between five and nine board members who serve four-year terms. They are responsible for overall governance by setting the direction for the district in collaboration with the superintendent (strategic plan), ensuring sound financial processes and decisions, including approving the budget and major contracts. They also develop and approve policies governing student

promotion and discipline, human resource transactions, operations, student assignment, transportation, and a number of other areas.

Purpose of Strategic Planning

Create Clarity, Focus, Alignment, and Transparency Centered on Student Achievement

It was somewhat surprising that superintendents emphasized the importance of understanding the purpose of strategic planning since no question specifically asked about purpose. They saw the strategic plan as a covenant between the superintendent and school board and the community. It creates a clear focus that communicates priorities, demonstrates effective alignment with resources, and transparency for accountable results. As one superintendent told a constituent, “not only do I promise to do this [strategic plan], I want you to check up on me.”

The strategic plan is also a moral document, demonstrating how the vision, mission, and beliefs of the district, such as producing excellence and equity, are actualized in the decisions made by the school district. It says, “This is who we are and what we believe and you will see it in our choices.”

One superintendent described prioritizing resources based on the plan in this way:

For us the value of the strategic plan is being able to ask those tough questions. So, the community would say, ‘Okay, we understand. These are tough calls, tough decisions, but that’s their bible. That’s what they told us they were going to do. They’re going to fund everything that connects to student achievement.’ If it does not have a connection, we abandon that function and defund that entity or that role.

An effective plan also communicates a sense of urgency around improving outcomes for students, especially for those who have not performed well in the past. It says, “We are all in this together.” As the public school system goes, so goes the

community. If young people are prepared for 21st Century challenges, then we all benefit.

Every superintendent described how important it is to communicate that a strategic plan is much more than a document, it is a vital process. Quoting Dwight Eisenhower, one superintendent said, “Plans are nothing, planning is everything.” An effective plan moves the district from compliance and lists of programs to a dynamic, “change adept” organization reflecting a quote from Bill Gates, cited by a superintendent, “The compliant company is a dead company. Success today requires agility and the drive to constantly rethink, reinvigorate, react, and reinvent.”

Students’ needs, aspirations, success, preparation, and well-being are at the heart of strategic planning. It recognizes that, while students are required to attend school, they are volunteers when it comes to being motivated to accomplish particular tasks. As one superintendent said, “Anyone in the educational process will do best if they’re in a situation where they are pursuing their talent and their interest.”

While it may seem obvious that strategic plans are narrowly focused on student achievement, often the document is so comprehensive it lacks focus, and is more about the needs of adults and political considerations than about students. As one superintendent stated, “strategic plans are cumbersome, they tackle too many goals and objectives, and more often than not achieve few of them. It is something that is discussed, printed, then shelved, unfortunately.” Another colleague advised, “Keep it simple and focused – something people can remember – it doesn’t have to be a book.”

Another superintendent described this process of narrowing the focus as identifying the “non-negotiables, the big rocks, the heavy lifts” and ensuring these are

accomplished. Another superintendent echoed, “it is important to keep the main thing the main thing and the main thing is student achievement.” Two of his colleagues echoed his sentiments stating that if you asked anyone in the system what their focus is, they would say it is student achievement. Another superintendent described the strategic plan as being similar to a rowing team working together toward winning the race, “so you bring them a plan. . .aligning the district around the plan, so everyone knows the plan. Everyone knows these things are non-negotiables and everyone is rowing in the same direction.” He further observed, “We should constantly be looking for ways to improve upon what we’re doing and constantly means all of us.”

Clarify Roles, Ownership, and Ensure Accountability

School board and superintendent

In implementing an effective strategic planning process, no area is more important than clarifying and following the governing role of the school board and the management role of the superintendent. As one superintendent described it, “It all starts with the superintendent and the board.” While most would affirm that they know their roles, it is not until the board/superintendent team outline how the roles are operationalized that they realize there are different ideas of what “governance” and “management” mean to them.

One superintendent described the change in the school boards’ understanding of their role with board turnover. For over ten years, only one of his board members had changed, then four were changed in one election. They went from a more “corporate board” perception of their role – vision, resources, support, and accountability – to wanting to “take back the reigns from the superintendent” in day-to-day matters.

The strategic planning process often provides the vehicle to form a common understanding about roles and responsibilities. In three districts that used outside facilitators, the superintendents reflected back over the discussions and realized that building the board/superintendent relationship was as important as the plan itself. One described it this way,

To me there was not a one and a two. It was like a one comprehensively. You know, maybe in my mind, it was really the working relationship of the superintendent and the board using the strategic plan as the vehicle...to gain common ground.

Once a plan is created, it has to be implemented by defining who does what, when, and how. Often superintendents described having to remind school board members of the different roles. A superintendent reflected that,

It was important, too, at that point, to reassert, if needed clarifying, the district's roles and responsibilities in a very respectful way. And I think we did that and that was actually, from my perspective, the most helpful piece of the discussion.

Besides clarifying roles and responsibilities, the strategic planning process created a sense of joint ownership by the school board and superintendent. Instead of it being his [the superintendent's] plan, it was now our plan. This is not surprising, since up until about 2007, strategic plans in the nine districts in this study were solely developed by the superintendent. Board members could now tell the public that this is our plan; these are our goals and targets. As one superintendent described it,

The board now had a role beyond trying to run the district and manage the minutia. The board does policy, the superintendent runs the district. The superintendent can tell the board, 'this is why I'm here, to make you look good.'

Roles and responsibilities of central office and school staff

One of the major impacts of effectively implementing a strategic plan is the change in culture required by the district staff. It requires moving from compliance to performance, from activity to outcomes, from blame to owning the results, from complacency to urgency, from directing to serving, and from divisional silos to cross-divisional project teams. Whether the superintendent was hired from outside (4 districts) or hired from within (5 districts), ensuring this change of culture is the most important factor in successful plan implementation, once the board/superintendent relationship is successfully established.

Probably the biggest change for district staff was being held accountable for outcomes that affected their evaluation, retention, and promotion or demotion. Since the advent of school grades in 2003 in Florida, schools and superintendents had been held accountable for outcomes, but this had not necessarily permeated the district. One superintendent described this change, "Accountability scares people. It forces status quo managers to push some of their subordinates that they happen to like or have more [political] clout than them." He further described the danger of a business as usual culture in the central office, "I always had to stay cognizant of the fact that the bureaucracy will take over if you're trying to reform." Another superintendent noted, "What gets measured gets done. And when you tie it to people's jobs, it gets done faster."

During the time period studied (2007-12), state funding for education in Florida fell approximately 25% in inflation adjusted dollars. Superintendents were forced to make drastic cuts in central office staff and some school-based ancillary services. They were forced to eliminate staff and functions not adding value to the outcomes in the

strategic plan. Suddenly, mid-level managers saw they could no longer protect nice, loyal staff if they weren't contributing to the effectiveness of the organization and its goals.

A superintendent described this process as balancing the art and science of management.

We had to eliminate some long-standing positions and staff to create capacity for reaching our goals. We tried to minimize push-back on changes by helping staff to fall into other positions or have time to plan their exit or move. The science of management is making the cuts and establishing the structure of the organization. The art of management is the marketing, the salesmanship. . .that's what you pay the chief executive to do.

Another way of describing the balance between organizational and individual needs was to be aware of the timing of decisions and its impact on personnel. It needs to "be done in the right way, otherwise you spend more time repairing trust."

Staff have to understand why these changes are taking place. As one superintendent described it, "You have to have a strategy on how to capture the hearts and minds of subordinates."

To be successful, everyone had to constantly be looking for ways to improve performance in schools. A superintendent described this new relationship.

You have to bring your staff along with the monitoring piece. . .you're moving from a compliance district staff to an action-oriented out-come measured staff. [They have to] really believe that a high-performing district contributes greatly to the performance of schools. Those two things aren't separate. So if we're not high performing at the district level, then we're capping the success rate that these schools can have.

In addition to working more collaboratively with schools, strategic planning, when effectively implemented, requires breaking down the divisional silos of the organization to accomplish the goals. Seven of the superintendents described how they used cross-

disciplinary project charters or teams to organize and accomplish the work. These involved staff with specific skill sets and clear responsibilities. Regular, usually weekly or bi-weekly, progress monitoring with the superintendent identified any problems that were quickly resolved.

Several superintendents noted that it was not difficult for cabinet-level staff to recognize their interdependency on other divisions to meet their targets. However, mid-level managers found it more difficult to break the turf mentality and support joint ownership. A specific example of this was described by a superintendent:

One of the specific action goals was to increase the ELL (English Language Learners) reading scores by blank, and we'd quantify the percent. And then the ELL team had to talk to the Title I team. Why? Because most of the kids in ELL were also on free or reduced lunch. So, the Title I director and the ELL director had to work together. . .and all of a sudden these people had to. . .share responsibility.

Improve Public Perception and Support

There is no question that one of the biggest challenges for urban school districts is turning around a negative public perception and effectively engaging the community's support. This requires greater honesty in admitting where there are shortfalls but also building confidence that a cohesive, dynamic, transparent plan is being implemented that will positively impact results in areas that are important to the community. One superintendent said it this way:

We started to get more community buy-in. Transparency became our mantra. We placed goals, objectives, targets, and the title of the person responsible on the Web so the community could track us.

Data systems and dashboards not only helped the board, superintendent and senior staff to track progress, but also to keep the public informed.

While most of the funding for Florida schools is equalized by a combination of state and local funds, districts are allowed to sponsor referendums for capital needs and, on a limited time basis, operating costs. Six of the nine school districts held bond issue notes during the 2007-12 time period. The perception of the district, particularly in the areas of academic growth and organizational efficiency, was the key to success in securing the public's support in a climate of "no new taxes."

Several districts described how they used the school board to get the community to understand the progress being made by the district with meager resources. Public presentations by board members began with the progress on the district's goals using data, charts, and graphs. Then they presented the specifics on the budget and encouraged participants to contact their legislators to improve funding. The board members received positive feedback for their knowledge and focus. Their message was clear, "we've been doing well with meager resources – help us lobby the legislature. . . . I'm fighting on your behalf, help me fight Tallahassee for the sake of our children."

Another superintendent emphasized keeping public presentations simple and easily understood in order to effectively improve public perception. Presenting too many details couched in educational jargon can be counterproductive. It is also important that your strategic plan is effectively implemented and showing results. The public is more concerned about the big outcomes and the superintendent/board relationship than the minutia:

The outside world does not necessarily need to know what your strategic plan is [the details]. Your strategic plan is an organizational document that orients your work. The outside world ought to see the results of that work. If you have a good plan and good implementation, then the outcomes are positive. If you have a disconnected plan, then the outside world will see that manifested in lackluster performance and disconnected action

between the board and superintendent, which is usually the most visible thing.

Figure 4-1 describes the purpose of strategic planning.

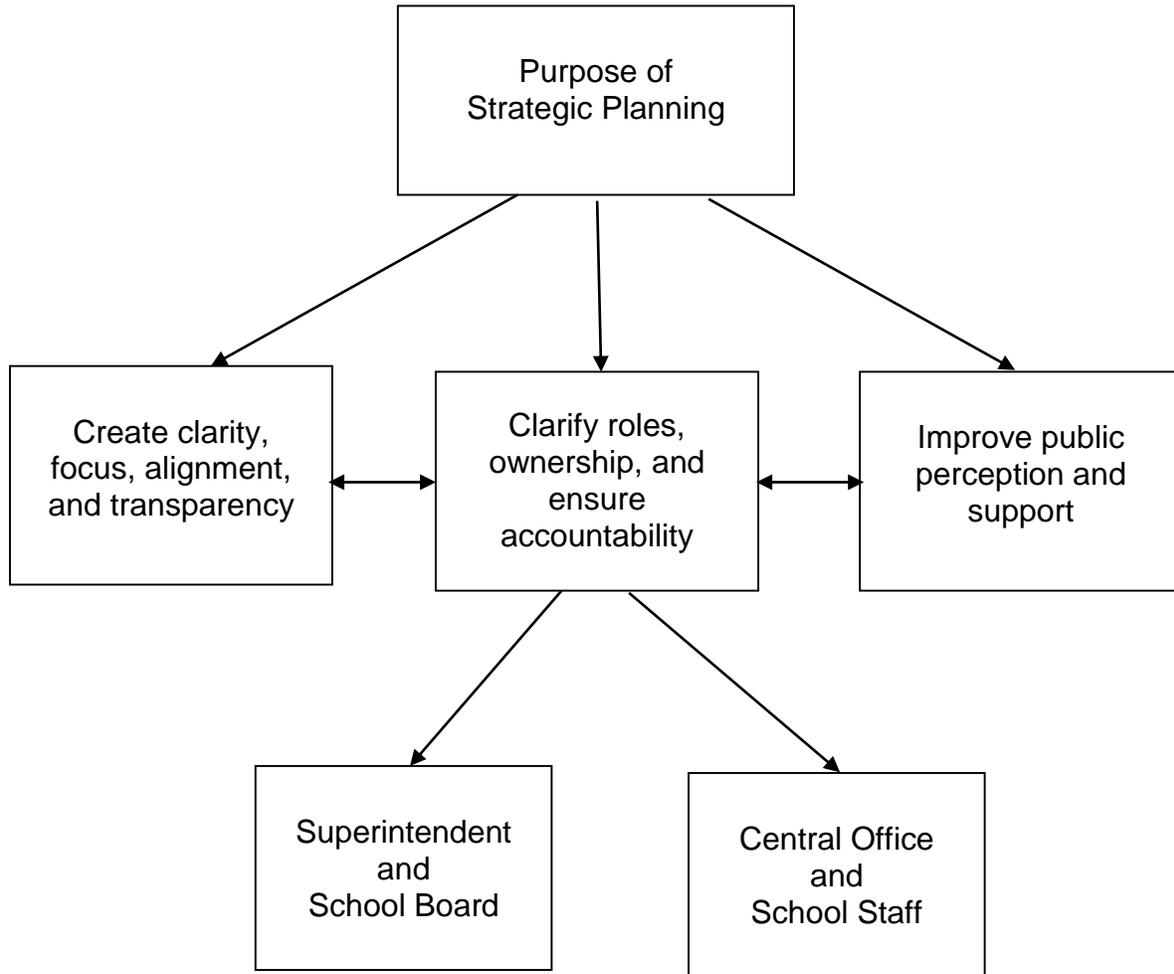


Figure 4-1. Purpose of strategic planning

Process of Strategic Planning

Agree on Process to be Used with Responsibilities and Timelines (Superintendent and Board)

The first step in creating a strategic plan is determining a process to be used. It is important that the superintendent and board jointly agree on this process. A number of decisions need to be made. Who will be involved and at what point? Obviously the superintendent and the school board will, but should it also include some of the superintendent's senior staff? Should representatives from principals, teachers, parents, students, and businesses be there at the beginning or brought in at a later time for input? What type of larger community engagement should be conducted, when, and how? Should there be a facilitator or not? What is the start to finish timeline with benchmark milestones along the way? Is there an existing plan, and should that be used as a beginning point or should you start from scratch? Should you consult other school districts' plans as a guide? How much training will the superintendent and board need to effectively lead the process based on their knowledge and experience? What is the level of trust, collaboration, and communication of board members with each other and with the superintendent? What level of detail should the board be involved in from a policy and governance role versus the superintendent who is their chief executive and only employee? Each of these should be discussed openly and decided upon before the process begins.

The earlier a strategic planning process can be completed after the appointment of a new superintendent, or when a majority of the board changes, the better. Even if it is to reconfirm a plan that was in existence and believed to be a good plan, it is an

important process to ensure everyone is operating from the same game plan, knowing there will be disagreements along the way regarding how to implement the plan.

Of the nine school districts in this study, three used a professional consultant that was paid by the district or by external funds. They represent three of the five largest districts in this study by student enrollment. It is also interesting to note that these are the three superintendents who spoke about the positive relationships and role clarity with the school board that resulted from the strategic planning process. In addition to these three, another district used a professional polling service to provide statistically reliable feedback to the superintendent and board from the community regarding what goals were a priority.

However, two of the superintendents who did not use consultants felt strongly that they were not needed and the superintendent and board could shepherd their own process. What was not as clear was whether this was a general view for all districts, or just represented the board/superintendent team and the community in their district.

All of the districts had some type of engagement process with the community, but there were wide variations as to when, who, and what these interactions entailed. On one end of the spectrum was the district mentioned earlier that had professionally surveyed the community before the process began. On the other end of the spectrum was a district where the superintendent did the bulk of the work. It was then discussed, modified, and approved by the board, then shared with the staff and community.

Most districts were somewhere in between where the superintendent (sometimes accompanied by several senior staff members) and the board developed the vision, mission, core beliefs, and goals. Then, there was an intentional effort to receive input

from key stakeholders such as principals, teachers, unions, parent organizations, students, businesses, government, civil rights organizations, and other key stakeholders. Many of these constituent groups continued past the creation of the strategic plan to provide for two-way communication with the superintendent. In addition, they held public meetings presenting their work to date and asking for feedback.

Six superintendents cautioned about going to the community too early with open-ended questions regarding the direction of the district, like, “What do you think we ought to be about?” One superintendent cautioned, “That’s why you get dozens of goals and objectives and metrics galore.” Another was more blunt, “I vetted it but I’m not going out with a blank sheet of paper. You know, that’s ludicrous to me.” While most of the input created minor modifications, one district added a new goal related to student and staff proficiency using electronic tools for learning.

For the most part, prior district strategic plans were viewed as too comprehensive and detailed, in an effort to catalog the efforts of every division, department, and employee. They also were perceived as “documents on a shelf” and did not truly drive the work of the district. One superintendent characterized the use of the older plan, “We learned what we could from the old plan, then we tore it up and started over.”

While every superintendent spoke about using “best practices” or research-based strategies when designing strategies and action plans, only one superintendent spoke about an intentional process of reviewing other strategic plans of high-performing districts and countries at the beginning of their process. He described it this way:

So we stole everything that was good to be implemented in our plan, modifying slightly to adapt to our community. . . .we kept referring to the

best practice of others; if it was not copyrighted, we adopted it as our own. And we packaged it, rebranded it, and it became part of [our district's] culture.

Using the Current Status, Develop the Vision, Mission, Core Beliefs, Goals and Targets (Superintendent and Board)

All superintendents began with an assessment of the current status in order to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT). One superintendent reiterated the need for an honest self-assessment, "Knowledge of our deficiencies that are not acceptable and a willingness to own results are two great factors in successful strategic planning." For the three districts that used a facilitator, these conversations took place in an honest and open way with the superintendent and the board. While noticed as a public meeting as required under Florida's broad sunshine law, few if any in the community chose to come. They were able to have genuine in-depth discussions regarding their purpose (mission), their view of what was possible for their district (vision), what they valued highly (core beliefs), and what were the priorities they wanted to accomplish (goals and objectives).

One superintendent described how valuable this process was as board members "hounded and challenged" each other to create a cohesive team plan. Another superintendent described it this way:

For the purpose of the plan development, we needed to have a meeting of the minds, and not treat this as my turf vs. your turf. This is the collective arrival at the best approach, the framework, and the journey of the system.

In the districts that did not use a facilitator, the superintendent met with each individual board member either before or after some initial staff work, then shared the summary of the discussions for the full board to review and revise. One of these superintendents used board and principal teams to develop mental models of what their

core beliefs would look like operationally. In other words, “If we truly believed this [a certain core belief], we would see this [the effect] in our schools, district, and community.”

In keeping with the narrow focus recommended earlier, districts developed between one goal (with four supporting goals) and five goals. The only two exceptions were one district that was still finalizing their goals (they anticipate four) and another district that went directly to a list of priority objectives around the mission of creating equity and excellence for every student. With those exceptions, districts developed objectives for each goal and measurable targets for each objective.

The goals centered around academic improvement, safety and positive culture, efficient use of resources, developing human capital, and community and family engagement. Academic targets included improved graduation rates, improved Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test (FCAT) scores, increased number of “A” rated schools and decreased number of “F” rated schools, increased participation and success in the college-level course work, increased number of students with a career certification, as well as others. Safety and positive culture were measured by improved student attendance, reduction in conduct referrals and suspensions, and improved climate surveys completed by students, parents, and faculty. Efficient use of resources was based on the percent of budget spent on schools vs. district costs, reduced cost of transportation, energy use and other operational areas, positive audits, high credit ratings, and the maintenance of sufficient reserves. Human capital development centered on recruitment of teachers in hard-to-staff areas, opening the school year fully staffed and fully certified, improving the teacher and administrator evaluation process,

placing higher performing teachers in lower performing schools, retaining a higher percentage of teachers, and increasing the knowledge and skills of all staff. In some cases, professional development, which has been historically challenging in evaluating outcomes, was placed in human resources while most districts included it in academic services.

Community and family engagement was the most difficult area in which to develop meaningful outcome targets. Some used participation levels in parent/teacher organizations, school advisory committees, or parent academies. Others used responses to surveys or degree of usage of district information such as Web site hits or publication distribution. These tended to measure process or activities opposed to an outcome, but they were measurable.

The decision on how much of a stretch target should be established hinged on three issues. One was whether the targets were aspirational or firm evaluation targets. Aspirational targets are designed to push staff out of their comfort zone and to rethink their work. Even if the target is not reached, but results improved significantly, the improvement is celebrated. Then you continue to work to achieve the aspirational target. While designed to be “stretch” targets, one superintendent clarified that they are still attainable. His concern was setting the bar too low, “I stay up at night worrying whether we’ve undercut ourselves and we could have done a lot better.”

The other approach is to view the targets as firm evaluation expectations where improving but not reaching the growth expectation is perceived negatively when evaluating the superintendent and staff. None of the districts had this rigid approach.

A second decision point in establishing targets was determining how much different goals and targets needed to improve. One superintendent described how they used a 2-3% yearly growth rate except in those areas where significant improvement was needed, such as black male graduation rate, which might be set at 5-10% growth per year.

A third challenge in establishing targets was the constant changes in the assessments, school grading, and accountability consequences at the state level during this time period (2007-12). In a particular year, every district in the state might improve significantly in one of the four content areas on FCAT (reading, math, science, and writing), while at other times most districts saw no growth or losses in one or more FCAT-tested areas. It helped to view targets, therefore, as progress over multiple years where these year-to-year changes are minimized.

In some districts, there was significant discussion between the superintendent and school board in establishing the targets, while other districts left that process up to the superintendent with the board ultimately approving them. One superintendent described the board moving along this continuum: “The board initially wanted to set the strategic plan metrics but eventually tasked the superintendent to develop them. They realized they had very competent staff. They said, ‘We trust you – go out and do it.’”

Strategic Level Review and Modification (Superintendent and Board)

Each district established formative reviews of the overall plan that were presented to the board by the superintendent and staff. Generally, these were done quarterly or at the end of the semester. Some districts supplied a written report to the board, while others set aside workshop time to discuss progress and learn about mid-course corrections. At the end of the school year, the superintendent presented

summative results that were thoroughly discussed in a board workshop. Generally, a document was prepared that was shared with the community and was sometimes accompanied by a State of the School System address either at a board meeting or in a public venue. The purpose of this review was two-fold.

First, the superintendent and board would discuss the need to add, delete, or modify the objectives and/or targets. Since the goals were intended to last five years, they were not changed unless it was time for a five-year review. Reasons for changing objectives or targets could range from a new concern in the community, a new requirement from the state, realizing a better metric to track progress, or having accomplished an objective earlier than anticipated.

Targets were modified more frequently than objectives. For instance, during this time period, the state of Florida went from a Florida-defined graduation rate, to the National Governor's Association (NGA) rate, to the proposed federal rate. Since these are calculated differently and became more rigorous, it was important to note these changes in the strategic plan. Most districts chose to include all three graduation rates to show progress and how graduation rates differ.

Another example is the transition to Version 2.0 of the FCAT and the use of end-of-course exams for some high school courses. These were totally different tests and metrics, making comparisons across years extremely difficult. One district's solution was to benchmark their standing relative to other districts in the state. For example, if they were 15th out of 67 districts in the state in reading proficiency, their target may indicate moving up to 12th place or higher. Other districts continued with specific targets and made cross comparisons where possible. How to communicate these changes to

the board and staff was difficult enough, but trying to make these changes clear to the public at large was nearly impossible. A frequent question from districts was, “How do we explain to a parent that their child’s school made academic progress but their school grade fell?”

In addition to modifying the objectives and targets in the annual review, the board also uses the progress (or lack thereof) on the strategic plan as a part of the evaluation of the superintendent. Districts varied on how prescriptive this process was with the board analyzing which targets were met and which weren’t. One district used 10 specific targets for the evaluation, where others viewed it as more of an overall trend based on all of the targets. It was recognized and communicated to the entire organization that the targets would benchmark the success not only of the superintendent and the district, but also would be used to determine the effectiveness of divisions, departments, schools, and their leaders.

Operational Level Planning and Review (Superintendent and Staff)

Once the general structure of the plan is completed, the superintendent and his staff determine the initiatives and actions necessary to implement the plan. This includes determining the organizational structure, assigning responsibilities, allocating resources, providing support, monitoring, and evaluating the entire organization (Figure 4-2). Beyond fulfilling state law and general board policy, it is the responsibility of the superintendent to ensure these operational level responsibilities are accomplished. One superintendent described this responsibility:

Don’t underestimate what you and your staff already know. While you get input from the board and other stakeholders, they are depending on you [the superintendent] to create and execute the specifics.

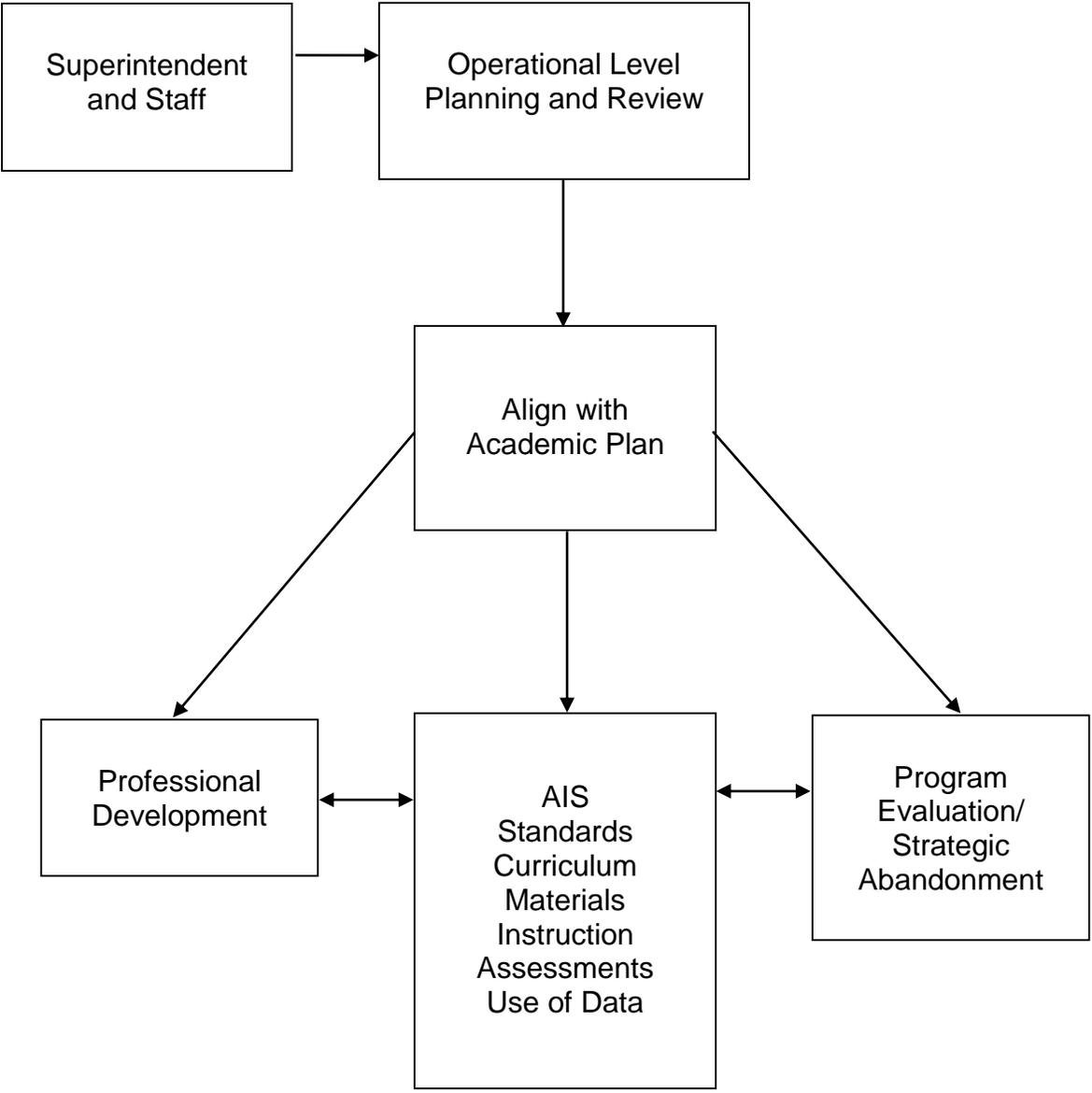


Figure 4-2. Operational level planning and review

Various goals, objectives, and targets became the responsibility of members of the superintendent’s cabinet in each district with each cabinet member assigning responsibilities, resources, monitoring process, and accountability whether that was in district office or at a school. School Improvement Plans (SIP) aligned with the district’s strategic plan such that, if each school reached their target, the district overall would reach its target. Departments and schools currently performing significantly low in one

or more areas were expected to show higher growth than higher performing units. A later section will cover variable resources and support based on need.

While the traditional organizational structure was used for a number of objectives, all of the districts had moved to varying levels of implementation of project teams or charters. These were established to implement new or critical initiatives, actions, or strategies that required cross-divisional collaboration to be successful.

There was resistance, at first, from middle level managers who were comfortable with their expertise within their “niche” in the organization. They now found they were accountable for results that depended on staff in another department. Project management training was conducted with some staff becoming experts at setting up data monitoring, workflow, and reporting processes in order to reduce the amount of time required on managing the projects.

Project charter updates were provided more frequently (weekly or bi-weekly) than other parts of the strategic plan which were generally on a monthly or quarterly reporting cycle to the superintendent.

As reported previously, district staff being accountable for outcomes rather than completing activities made many of them uncomfortable and anxious. One superintendent described how he pushed staff to move beyond thinking about why they could not reach a stretch target to how they could. The issue often revolved around human capital issues, ensuring personnel with the “right will and the right skill” were in key areas of need.

One example provided by a superintendent revolved around holding academic services and area superintendents responsible for significant gains in reading

performance. They complained that principals still did not have enough in-depth knowledge on how to lead an excellent reading initiative, so they wanted to lower the expected growth target. Instead, the superintendent challenged them to work together to address the deficiency and keep the stretch target.

Mid-course corrections were necessary to ensure the initiatives and actions designed by the administrative staff were accomplishing the objectives in the strategic plan. When they weren't, corrections needed to be made. While all superintendents spoke about the use of real-time data to inform this process, there appeared to be a different level of structure and sophistication in designing and implementing a monitoring system. One superintendent described this challenge:

I find that the biggest problem. . . in school districts, large or small, isn't the fact that they can't write or identify the needed goals for their strategic plans; it's their inability to daily and weekly monitor the progress.

This same superintendent gave an example from his district:

We have specific action plans for our predominantly African-American high poverty schools that are measureable, so that I know every day where we are and where we're not. And that's how you move them. You just don't move them by hoping that we get better year to year.

Another superintendent described how monitoring and modification of plans happened in real time with lower performing schools. There were monthly meetings with the principal and staff representing all major district departments. The principals were expected to respond to the latest round of formative assessments, providing solutions for areas not showing significant improvement. One principal from a small school had only two 3rd grade classrooms. The academic coaches and he had worked with one of the teachers, but it was obvious the needed improvement could not be made soon, if at all. He asked for a strong replacement and the superintendent agreed:

This is a meeting on Friday afternoon. I told the principal, 'Monday morning you will have a new teacher.' And it is my responsibility as superintendent to have HR move heaven and earth to remove that teacher, take on the union over the weekend, and find a great teacher to go there.

Weekly one-hour meetings with four groups of district staff is how another superintendent monitored progress on the strategic plan. Using Gant charts with key data points, meetings were held with the cabinet, area superintendents who supervised principals, human resources, and budget. This superintendent also emphasized being in schools every day to get an on-the-ground view regarding how their plan was being executed.

Regardless of the structure and the system used to monitor the plan, the purpose was to get valid feedback that indicated where progress was being made, where it was not, and to quickly address the issues. This process also confirmed the sense of urgency in making progress for the benefit of students and that each part of the district has to be highly effective to accomplish the goals. What was communicated was a balance between significance, "Your work is important," and accountability, "I'm counting on you to get this done right and collaborate with your colleagues to resolve any road blocks to success."

Implement a Communication Plan for Internal and External Stakeholders

Internal stakeholders, for the purpose of this study, is defined as employees of the school district. The size of the district staffs in this study ranged from approximately 5,000 to 45,000. Creating and implementing a plan to ensure your own employees are informed regarding the strategic plan is no small feat in an organization that large. Superintendents in this study used presentations, open meetings, focus groups, Web sites, e-mail, social media, and print publications to increase the knowledge of the staff,

not only regarding the contents of the plan, but how their work contributed to the success.

Several superintendents emphasized how important it was to constantly talk about the goals. As one put it, “I constantly put them [the goals] in front of people, because they’re easy to understand, and. . .the work we do falls into those goals very well.”

Another superintendent described walking through schools or district offices and expecting staff to know the goals. He would ask, “Now remind me, which of our goals does that relate to?” He also recalled a situation where a clerical staff member saw him coming toward her. She looked flustered and jumped out of her seat, “I know them [the goals]. I just forgot them. Let me get the chart; it’s right here.” In job interviews, candidates were expected not just to know the goals, they were expected to be able to articulate how they applied to the position they were seeking.

Internal stakeholders were important in the communication process not only because of the need to focus everyone’s efforts toward common goals, but also because they are the most trusted source of information by the larger community. If teachers, administrators, and support staff seem excited, energized, and can articulate where the school district is heading, it goes a long way toward building community understanding and support. If, on the other hand, there is a prevailing culture of negativity and “this too shall pass” attitude conveyed by the employees, no amount of effort will be able to overcome a negative perception with external stakeholders.

Keeping the goals and progress being made constantly in front of the public was the most important strategy to ensure external stakeholders were aware and engaged.

The purpose was not to expect the general public to know details of the plan, but instead to know a few critical ideas. Superintendents wanted the community to have a positive feeling about the leadership (superintendent and board), direction, efficient operation, and progress of the district. Parents and other caregivers wanted to know that their child was safe and accepted, known as an individual, and their welfare and success was the number one concern of the school.

As discussed earlier, superintendents reported starting every public meeting with a brief (5-10 minute) update on the strategic plan. Whether the purpose of the meeting was a general update and a request for input, or for a more focused reason, everything discussed was related to the plan. For instance, when budget presentations were made, the priorities for funding were those activities that would contribute toward success of the goals. Those that did not were minimized or not funded. When the meeting was about closing or consolidating schools, the discussion was focused on the increased resources for the success of students if resources were used more efficiently. While focusing the meetings around the strategic plan did not eliminate conflict or criticism, it did communicate that the district had a plan, was using that plan to make decisions, and was transparent in their approach.

Another area of focus during the five years of this study was the effort on the part of these nine school districts to increase transparency in the community. As discussed previously, providing information on the strategic plan in easily understood language, including the use of graphs, charts, and visuals, became paramount in changing a negative public image. More sophisticated Web sites that were easy to navigate was a

main source of information. But districts also increased their ability to use social media to get their message out and answer questions in an honest and prompt manner.

During this time period (2007-12), the main-line print media was going through a major transformation by reducing staff and moving to an online format. Coinciding with this decline, there was an increase in bloggers writing about school district issues without the minimal scrutiny for fairness and accuracy that newspapers, for the most part, attempted to uphold. This created both an opportunity to go directly to the public with the districts message, but also increased the following of individuals and groups with a specific agenda that was often at odds with the direction of the district. Districts in this study varied widely in how they capitalized on this shift and the importance they gave bloggers and social media.

One district that made extensive efforts to benefit from this shift used external professional polling services on a regular basis that was paid through a separate non-profit foundation. The results were used to provide scientific data regarding decisions made or anticipated as the district implemented its strategic plan. It also could be used to refute some of the inaccurate information presented on blogs and other sources.

Another example that was not as successful was where parents from a particular high school created a blog criticizing the increasingly district-directed academic program led by the superintendent and a senior staff member. The superintendent attributed this effort, along with a dramatic change in board membership, to his contract not being continued.

Each of the steps in the process of strategic planning are important. How they interact is depicted in Figure 4-3.

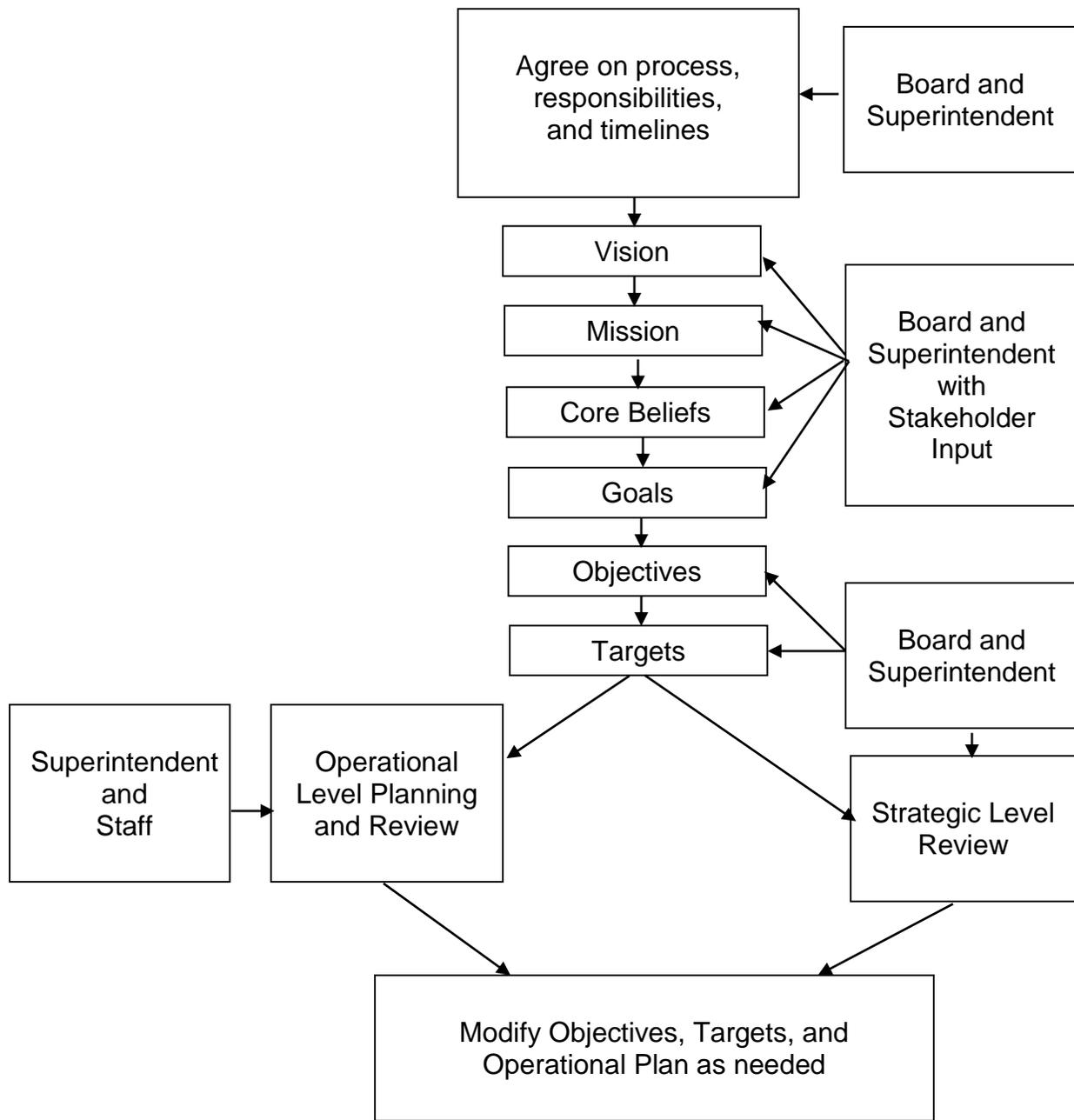


Figure 4-3. Process of strategic planning

Alignment of Academic, Fiscal, and Human Resource Priorities with Strategic Plan

Academic Alignment

Standards, curriculum, materials, instruction, assessments, and use of data

Some of the most important decisions for a school district are to determine how the curriculum and assessments are aligned to the standards, and how materials and instruction are aligned to the curriculum and assessments. For over a decade, standards have been set at the state level in Florida, beginning with the Sunshine State Standards, then the Next Generation Sunshine State Standards, and finally moving to the Common Core State Standards over the next two years. Along with the standards, high stakes testing was used to determine proficiency of individual students, grade schools from A-F based on a formula and, most recently, tie half of the teachers' and school-based administrators' evaluations to student learning gains on these high stakes tests.

While concerned whether schools were making adequate yearly progress (AYP) under the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requirement, school boards, superintendents, and others in the district became laser-focused on school and, more recently, district grades. These were front page news, and districts that were not moving forward or had schools that were not moving forward, faced state sanctions and interventions. Superintendents kept or lost their jobs based on the districts' progress on the state accountability system, first titled simply A+ and, more recently, Differentiated Accountability.

During this same span of years (1999-2012), school districts began moving away from a school-based management theory of action toward a more district directed

approach chronicled in Chapter 2 of this study. Districts began setting requirements for curriculum, assessments (some of which were state required), and instructional materials, at least in the core academic areas of reading, mathematics, science, and writing. It is no coincidence that these are the same subject areas tested by FCAT. However, district-directed aligned instructional systems were also a response to lackluster poor performance, particularly with some students (articulated in the NCLB categories) and some schools. As one superintendent described, a prior district using school-based management: “I saw tremendous abuse and fragmentation of curriculum, instructional practices, staffing practices. . .many of them totally illogical. They were based around the needs of adults. . .not the instructional needs of students.”

All of the nine school districts in this study were using some basic elements of Managed Instruction and some had moved into some form of earned flexibility as outlined in the Managed/Performance Empowerment theory of action discussed in Chapter 2 of this study. Because of the need to improve lower performing schools quickly, they were generally more tightly managed regarding instructional practice and often had more frequent assessment and reflection discussions with district supervisors and state monitors. Higher performing schools were given more freedom and not as closely supervised as long as progress was demonstrated.

Even within the aligned system, several districts had a waiver process where schools could request to use different materials or programs than the district had prescribed. One superintendent described his philosophy on flexibility this way: “I believe in flexibility in schools. I just think that the principal or instructional leaders of

that school site should be able to justify the flexibility [based on research and best practice].”

While curriculum, core instructional materials, and formative and summative assessments were set at the district level, there was significant input by teachers and principals working collaboratively with district academic services staff to create, select, or modify them. Most districts also used some form of pacing guide where units of instruction were expected to be taught during a defined timeline followed by a district-created formative assessment.

Over this five-year period studied, the districts became more sophisticated at collecting this formative information into data warehouses where it could be viewed in many different ways through query functions. For instance, a teacher could determine quickly not only how her overall classroom performed on a particular item, but also certain subgroups such as ELL or special education students. This ability to understand and use data was critical to lesson planning and instructional practice and to implement differentiated instruction.

While there was some pushback from teachers regarding instructional alignment, especially pacing guides, the districts attempted to maintain a balance between a top down and bottom up process with feedback from teachers and schools in a collaborative environment. One superintendent described this balance in his district: “We were creating a school system, not a system of schools. We sought a balance between district-led and school-based input, particularly from principals.”

He went on to describe this process as, “mutually accountable and jointly supported.” Another superintendent described the climate they had established to be

open to good ideas, regardless of their sources, but to pay particular attention to the voice of practitioners: “We should be constantly looking for ways to improve upon what we’re doing, and constantly means all of us.”

The area given most school-based flexibility was in the area of instructional practice. However, even in this arena, there was a tension between using research-based instructional practices that were advocated within professional development activities and reinforced with feedback from classroom observations and, on the other hand, encouraging teachers to use their creativity, individuality, and professional judgment in instructional decisions. One superintendent observed that instructional practice became more non-negotiable as accountability expectations increased and how it was met with resistance:

It had resistance at all levels but, you know, we were flying so high in terms of student achievement, nobody could argue with me. I never felt about it as being regimented, . . .because I just felt it was what we had to do to be successful.

He went on to share that eventually the push to improve student performance to even higher levels led to teacher complaints which fed parent complaints. The parents created a campaign to move away from district-directed change through social media sites and by backing like-minded school board candidates. Eventually, the acrimony caught the attention of the media and the superintendent’s contract was bought out.

Professional development

School districts in this study were very intentional in aligning professional development with the academic program and the overall strategic plan. While there were growth opportunities for district staff in moving to a results and student-focused

organization, the bulk of the professional development was focused on principals, assistant principals, instructional coaches, and teachers.

School leader training began with improving leadership skills, understanding the use of data, and understanding what quality teaching looked like. This later topic was a major undertaking as principals and assistant principals were trained to use new research-based classroom observation and evaluation systems beginning no later than the 2011-12 school year. Once these core competencies were developed, professional development for school leaders became more focused on content specific curriculum areas that were state tested: reading, mathematics, science, and writing. Principals also were led through sessions on understanding the new research-based evaluation system that would be used for their evaluation in the 2012-13 school year. School-specific data was used to assist principals and assistant principals with issues that were unique to the leadership of their school.

Data at the district and school level was also used extensively to determine professional development needs of teachers. Teachers were expected to increase their skills and knowledge in understanding and using data, using best general and content-specific practices in instructional planning and delivery, differentiating instruction, understanding the new Common Core State Standards, engaging students' interest and effort, ensuring a safe, supportive classroom environment, and using technology for instruction and monitoring.

The list seems daunting. As one superintendent described it,

For teachers we trained, trained, trained. We recognized many teachers did not have a great depth of knowledge on how to teach students certain content, so we used summers, weekends, during the day, online, and learning team meetings.

While continuing to use some face-to-face training, districts moved to a more school-based collaboration using professional learning communities and instructional coaches. As with any new practice, teachers had to learn how to work together to identify areas of weakness in student achievement and share strategies they had found to be successful. Additionally, teachers moving into a coaching role had to understand how to be a good coach and address the needs of adult learners.

While all teachers received extensive training during this five-year time period, there was an additional focus on lower performing schools and their unique needs. In several districts, teachers and principals had 2-3 weeks of additional time to increase their knowledge and skills over the summer to provide better support for their students.

In the same way teachers were being asked to better differentiate instruction for students, especially for those who were struggling, principals and district staff were becoming more adept at matching the needs of individual teachers with specific professional development. With the advent of the new teacher evaluation systems and improved administrator observation and feedback skills, superintendents had more confidence regarding areas identified as weaknesses in teacher evaluations. These specific areas could then be tied to a menu of options to increase competency and the completion could all be tracked in an online management system. The higher level of confidence in teacher evaluations was limited to the qualitative or observation half that had been updated based on current research and much less so on the 50% coming from student test score gains as required by state statute and Race to the Top.

One district that was a year ahead of the other districts in this study tied at least two and often three different interventions to each discreet element on the evaluation.

These included face-to-face training, online classes with other teachers, a self-study program with specific requirements, or an action-research project with colleagues. Teachers were expected to own their professional growth. As one superintendent put it, “Every day get better. Be a constant learner. Professional growth is expected.” This level of specificity also created results in a data base needed to be able to evaluate the outcomes of various professional development activities, an area that has traditionally been difficult to measure.

Program evaluation and strategic abandonment

School districts have historically been more adept at adding new activities or programs to address perceived problems than they have been at eliminating less effective interventions. Programs have advocates that range from board members, district staff, teachers, principals, and parents to non-profit or other connected individuals. Also, some programs work well in some schools because of excellent implementation and poorly in others where implementation is weak. Until recently, valid and reliable data on the outcomes of various programs has been difficult to determine, especially when multiple programs are used with a particular school, classroom, or student. Determining which program contributed what amount to the growth that was observed was a frequent question.

Two changes have taken place to reverse this piling on of initiatives. The first is the increased technical tools and professional knowledge that the nine districts invested in over the five years in this study. Sophisticated data warehouses have been developed that merge financial, human resources, and student outcome data that were previously stored in separate systems with limited ability to combine and analyze the data. What was once a laborious task, allowing only two to three complete program

evaluations a year, has now become more streamlined. The districts in this study also invested in hiring researchers who could apply statistical models current to the field and write research reports that had credibility and were not influenced by program advocates.

The second change is the insistence on the part of superintendents that the focus be on results with activities and actions changing as needed to accomplish the goals. Strategic planning required a narrowing of scope and focus in order to accomplish the most important outcomes and be willing to let the “nice to have but unnecessary” programs be eliminated. The extreme budget shortfalls created by the Great Recession also meant that some initiatives and actions would have to be eliminated. The only question was whether that process would be based on dependable data focusing on strategic goals or by which activity had the strongest political support.

One superintendent described this process of strategic abandonment as an intentional effort: “We made sure that the resources drove academic programs – and that we were getting cost efficiencies for what we were attempting to plan.” As a result, the district shut down a number of programs and reduced staff that were popular but not producing student achievement gains, for example, using teacher assistants. On the other hand, after a significant capital investment was made, no additional funds were allocated to schools to implement career academies. The superintendent could cite data on per student costs compared to improved graduation rates, career certifications, and other positive outcomes for students as the reason for increasing the number of career academy programs and number of students participating.

Another superintendent described the process of modifying or eliminating strategies that are not adding value to outcomes. At times, either the board or someone in the community would ask why they originally advocated a certain strategy but were now changing it. His response was:

It was our best thinking at the time, but now we know more. . .the greatest ideas we ever had as a staff, typically are in the 2nd or 3rd generation of thoughts. And so. . .if it's not working, I say dismount that horse.

As discussed earlier, the majority of districts developed highly capable research capacity in their districts to provide independent reports on all major and new programs. Describing a research report on the effectiveness of a program he had championed, one superintendent modeled the requirement of following of the data, even if what he advocated did not work:

The researchers are very independent minded, very objective. They are totally empowered with doing the research, coming up with conclusions, and publishing them. And my agreement is, once produced, I cannot bury it. Once produced, I send it to the board. . .it's public. And it takes a bit of getting used to because we are committed to our own failures. But I think it makes us stronger, actually. The wins by far outweigh the losses.

Fiscal Alignment

As discussed previously, superintendents saw the strategic plan as the guiding force when allocating resources. The decline in revenue provided to Florida school districts from 2007-12 was dramatic, especially given the lower prior per-student funding compared to other states. Since Florida has no personal income tax and, therefore, relies on state sales taxes and local property taxes for school funding, school districts in Florida were impacted more than other states. During the Great Recession, tourism, which provides substantial sales tax dollars, dropped dramatically. During the decade preceding this time period, property values had increased substantially in many

communities. The state funding formula that equalizes state and local funding became more dependent on local property taxes. When the housing market crashed, overall school revenue fell. As discussed previously, over four years state funding in real dollars fell 25%.

Exacerbating the low and declining revenue was the implementation of Florida's Class Size Amendment (CSA). The constitutional amendment, which barely passed with 53% support, was implemented in three phases, first being met at the overall district level, then the school level, and by the time this study period began in 2007, was required at the classroom level. It required no more than 18 students in academic classes in grades K-3, 22 students in grades 4-8, and 25 students in grades 9-12. If a single class in the entire district exceeded this number, the district had its state funds reduced as a penalty.

The CSA limited the flexibility of school districts to place funding where it was most needed, supporting lower performing students and schools. It also required draconian cuts in every area of the district other than academic teachers. Superintendents in this study all began with reducing operating costs in utilities, particularly electrical consumption, consolidating bus routes, reducing clerical and other district support staff, slashing travel, and postponing traditional refresh cycles on everything from buses to computers and printers.

A second round of reductions forced losses in school support personnel such as counselors, media specialists, and assistant principals. The number of non-core academic teachers in art, music, physical education, technology, and career education was also reduced. Some districts reduced the number of periods of instruction from

eight to seven or seven to six, thus narrowing the curriculum by reducing electives. This was particularly true for students not reaching proficiency in reading or math who were required to “double block” these classes. Transportation that supported access to magnet and other choice schools also faced significant cuts placing some districts in jeopardy of violating the spirit, if not the letter, of their desegregation post-unitary status agreements.

While the first round of reductions were painful, the second round, that more dramatically impacted students, were gut wrenching for superintendents and school boards. Constituents from each of the areas reduced advocated for the cuts to be made from some other area, but were usually not specific as to where beyond a generic “cut downtown administration.” As one superintendent observed, “If we didn’t have our strategic plan to guide us, we would never have survived.”

At budget presentations by the superintendent and staff to the board, employees, and the general community, the discussion began with the strategic plan. The priorities in the plan drove what was funded. In several districts, they strove to protect arts, academics, and athletics as outlined in their plans. In most districts, there was a priority placed on higher support and funding for lower performing schools, not only because it was required by the state, but because it was the right thing to do as outlined in the districts’ vision, mission, and core beliefs. Districts also continued to provide higher funding amounts to schools to address the needs of ELL and special education students. One superintendent shared a conversation he had with a parent regarding higher funding for a lower performing school: “Think of it as two patients who are sick.

One has a cold and one is bleeding out and will soon die. I have to meet the needs of both of them, but they have different needs.”

Another district grouped schools into three tiers, with schools with a higher number of challenges receiving greater funding. The superintendent emphasized that funding is equitable, not equal, and is based on need. Not only was the budget prioritization intentional with operating funds, but also with state and federal funds, to the degree allowed by law.

The timing of the update of the strategic plan has to be done in conjunction with the preparation of the budget. As initiatives and actions are added, increased, decreased, or eliminated, they have budget implications. Since the tentative budget in Florida school districts has to be approved by the school board at the end of June to start a new fiscal year July 1st, there is a back and forth process between strategic planning and budget preparation completed in a short time period. While most districts begin these discussions at the administrative level in January or February and with the board in March or April, it is not until late April that funding is finally known and not until June that most of the summative assessments are available. Therefore, having good leading indicators and experienced senior staff to predict funding and results are critical. One superintendent described how the sessions with the board led with the update on the progress of the strategic plan and available funding. Then he presented how available funds aligned with each goal, objective, and strategy.

Human Resource Alignment

Since the majority of funds, over 80% in the budgets of these nine districts, are allocated to salaries and benefits of staff, the human resource plan must be closely tied to the academic, financial, and overall strategic plan. In determining what a district

wants to accomplish with limited resources, decisions about which positions are funded and how they fit together in an organizational structure; who to recruit and how they are placed; how they are evaluated, promoted, demoted, compensated, and recognized; and how long-term capacity and succession planning are implemented are all critical to the success of the organization. As one superintendent emphasized,

Everything we do is about human capital. . .the extent that we're successful is the extent to which human capital is successful. . .so I put them [Human Resources] at the center of our district. If they don't recruit. . .the very best in the world, then I hold them responsible.

Once decisions are made regarding staffing which positions for which purpose, the way they are organized must also be guided by the strategic plan and the budget process. With huge district staff reductions, departments and divisions were consolidated and personnel took on more responsibilities. Several districts had intentional processes, not only to reduce ineffective programs as discussed earlier, but also to reduce unnecessary and outdated activities in the organization. Again, the criteria was, "How does this activity contribute to attaining our strategic goals?"

Decisions surrounding reorganization were very district specific based on perceived issues and available talent. For instance, one district had aligned their academic services division by K-5, 6-8, and 9-12 grade level units. The superintendent decided to change to a K-12 reading, K-12 mathematics, etc., to increase articulation across grade levels.

Another district went from a grade level school supervision model to a geographic area model with K-12 grade responsibilities. Another district moved to a combined academic support and school supervision combined in one division broken into K-5 and 6-12 grade level groups. Two school districts dissolved their district-wide

professional development department and placed the responsibility in academic services. Another dissolved their communications department with the superintendent taking on that responsibility. What is important in this discussion is not what is the right way to organize staff in a large school district, but that it be done with intentionality, balancing goals, funding, and talent. Superintendents were able to articulate how they balanced these three factors in making these organizational changes.

Recruiting the right people, placing them in the right places at the right time, and retaining them is the second area of human resource planning that must be aligned to the strategic plan. Again, based on the varying needs of the district as outlined in their strategic plans, districts focused on hiring specific individuals. One district had a priority to ensure every staff member had a high level of knowledge and skills in the use of technology. While training for existing staff was provided, a major criterion for hiring new staff was to already have these skills.

Another district was having a difficult time recruiting minority teachers because adjacent districts were perceived as having better amenities for young adults. They created a long-term plan to guarantee minority students graduating from their high schools a teaching job if they obtained the necessary degree and credentials.

A third district had an issue with when new hires were offered a job in order to reach their strategic plan goal of a certified, qualified teacher being placed in every classroom on the first day of school. A process analysis and adjustment moved up the date of job offers to new hires by two months.

As has been discussed earlier, identifying and placing the most qualified teachers in the highest need classrooms was a priority for the majority of the districts in

this study. Using a combination of financial and other incentives, creating a team of teachers that go together to a school, and ensuring that principals with a blend of high expectations and high support led that school, improved the level of quality of the teaching staffs and the performance of the students.

In addition to hiring the right people and placing them in the right positions at the right time, retaining them is also an important part of a district strategic plan. National statistics place the average loss of teachers in urban districts at 30% during the first three years. Several districts had specific goals, targets, and strategies to increase retention, particularly of higher performing new teachers. One district was able to fund, through grants, mentor teachers (with a 12:1 ratio) who worked with new teachers during their first two years. This intense level of support had increased their retention from 75% to 92% in the first three years. New principals also had a coach assigned to them, outside of the supervision structure, to increase their leadership skills.

The evaluation, promotion (or demotion), compensation, and recognition processes must be effectively implemented in order to determine strengths and weaknesses, reward success, and foster professional growth. As discussed previously, Florida school districts were required to develop and implement new teacher evaluation systems by 2012-13 and new principal/assistant principal evaluations by 2013-14. This required extensive training with principals and assistant principals, not only to understand how to use the instruments as designed, but also how to make the process be about continuous improvement, honest feedback, and targeted support as much as it is used to determine reappointment or salary enhancements. There has always been a degree of distrust of some principals by some teachers, wondering whether a good

evaluation was dependent on who took on extra responsibilities, had a closer relationship with the principal, or simply did not express concerns in a critical way. The superintendents in this study believed that the new systems increased the objectivity and consistency that will, over time, reduce the type of concerns expressed above. They did not have as much confidence regarding the 50% of the evaluation coming from student test score gains, which was required in state statute. The lack of reliable assessments for many content areas and grade levels, the inconsistency from district to district, and the high weight these tests had on the overall evaluation were concerns shared by all of the superintendents in this study.

Two school districts were especially proud of the breadth and depth of their implementation of the new teacher evaluation, one using significant funding from national foundations to hire nationally recognized consultants and the other ensuring principals received 700 hours of training on its use. Both districts had external experts conduct studies to compare how multiple supervisors perceived the same lesson using the new instrument. They also spent significant time improving the skills of principals in conducting pre- and post-conferencing sessions with teachers. The report from both superintendents was that, while the process was very time consuming, teachers reported receiving much more specific feedback and had a plan to improve identified weaknesses.

For principals and district staff, the focus on results, as well as observed research-based leadership qualities, increased their confidence in the fairness of their evaluations. While creating anxiety as expressed earlier, once they understood the new outcome orientation, they had confidence to focus their efforts on these accountable

targets. “You get ahead on what you do, not who you are or how long you’ve been here” is how one of the superintendents phrased it. Two superintendents emphasized that decisions about promotion, demotion, or placement of principals was based on data. “Principals understood that data was key – if you got an F, you got moved; got 2 D’s, got moved – not a personal thing.” The other superintendent echoed this sentiment, “Results drive personnel decisions – who to keep, who to move, the type of professional development needed. I replaced 64% of our principals over my first. . . .years.” Another superintendent saw it somewhat differently. If a school’s performance dropped, “rather than hammering the school [and principal], the district collaborated with the school to make improvements.”

As discussed earlier, the nine school districts in this study spent significant time, effort, and resources between 2007 and 2012 building the capacity of teachers, principals, and district staff to meet rapidly increasing demands for student performance gains with reduced funding. Doing more with less required a strategic use of technology and associated training to provide front line staff with actionable data, increasing both the quality and speed of useful information. It also required honest conversations, and a far greater ability to collaborate within schools, within the district staff, and between schools and the district. Again, the districts in this study focused on these issues using the strategic planning process to increase co-ownership for results and a flexibility regarding which initiatives and actions to support. One of the districts in the study emphasized building the capacity of teachers to function as leaders of students, seeing students as volunteers, and engaging them in owning their learning. This same district sought to increase the content knowledge of teachers through professional

development, but also encouraged teachers to obtain Master's degrees in their content area (as opposed to educational leadership). During the five years of this study, the district increased from 400 to 1,100 the number of teachers having advanced degrees in their content area.

All of the superintendents in this study discussed the need to develop a deep bench of current and future leaders in key district positions, as well as principal and assistant principal positions. One superintendent discussed the challenge of determining how much the district would develop the skill set of current employees as opposed to looking outside the district to fill key roles. Another shared honestly that they had not paid enough attention to the large number of principals who would be retiring soon and belatedly put appropriate systems in place to identify and prepare a larger number of school-based leaders to fill their places.

Pitfalls, Possibilities, and Advice

Relationship with the School Board

No relationship is more important to the effective creation and implementation of the strategic plan than the one between the superintendent and the school board. As discussed earlier, it is critical that there be a shared vision, mission, and core beliefs actualized through goals and targets. This agreement is not a one-time event of creating a plan. Planning involves execution, monitoring, accountability, communication, and transparency. All of the superintendents had that type of agreement with their boards at some point, usually early in their tenures. Some still enjoyed that support, some had lost it and either resigned or were terminated, others were in limbo depending on the next election. Some had retired and were concerned about continuity of the strategic plan with a new superintendent, particularly if they came from outside of the district.

Another area of critical importance is the agreement of the superintendent and board on their roles and responsibilities. While most would agree that the board's role is governance and the superintendent's is management, there is a wide variation in how that gets translated into daily action. Several superintendents provided examples of school board members attempting to micro-manage the district. The common theme where problems arise with board members is when wanting to please everyone becomes more important than increasing student achievement. Sometimes they may be running for another office, so they become hypercritical to receive media coverage. At other times, it means advocating for jobs for friends and family or contracts for firms they either think are good or may be contributing to their campaigns. In one case, after the superintendent left, board members were determining which students should be moved from one teacher to another and which should be placed on school athletic teams or chosen as the captain. These are all administrative decisions and, in some cases, are against the board's own policies or state statute.

While inappropriate board actions created distractions, superintendents still maintained focus on the strategic plan:

Success has many parents, failures are orphans. . .so you wouldn't need a plan if everything is great. . . so there's always a bit of a struggle, I think, with different entities you need to deal with that can be reduced down to the issue of ownership. I wouldn't say they are necessarily impediments, but sometimes noise. . .the two entities that can derail the plan are the school board and the union. The board can actually be a powerful force in deviating from its own plan.

He went on to say, "It's an art form to tell board members that what they want is not aligned with the strategic plan."

Sometimes conflicts develop between superintendents and board members over leadership style. One superintendent was terminated because some new board

members thought he was too autocratic and not sensitive to the impact of his decisions on students and teachers, even though results on the strategic plan had been laudable. He quipped, “Superintendents never get fired for student achievement – up or down. They get fired because of their relationship with the board.” As an example of the comments that went back and forth during this conflict was the superintendent’s statement, “Do you want stressed out kids [who are successful] or do you want happy morons?”

On the other end of the spectrum, another superintendent was concerned that he was perceived as not being decisive enough compared to the previous superintendent. He was concerned that his collaborative style was not appreciated and that an upcoming election could change his board support from mostly positive to mostly negative based on this style issue.

These public squabbles between the superintendent and board members tend to undermine the confidence of the community in their ability to successfully improve outcomes for students. To help reduce such exchanges, one board/superintendent team agreed that there would be no “got yas” where either the superintendent or board were blindsided by an unexpected criticism in the media, at a workshop, or in a meeting. If there was a conflict (which will inevitably arise), there was a discussion in advance and a commitment to “disagree agreeably.”

As discussed previously, when the board/superintendent team is cooperating and playing their appropriate roles, the superintendent can focus on executing the strategic plan and board members can build support with the community. One superintendent who enjoyed such a positive relationship described how board members built

relationships with city and county governments, business groups, non-profits, and parent advocacy groups. They could share the mutual credit for the district's progress as outlined in the strategic plan and enlist the assistance of these groups to improve even further. Such positive connections and perceptions were critical to the success of referendums that many districts in this study attempted during this time period.

Relationship with Unions

No area of this study had a wider range of opinions than the relationship of the superintendent and the board with the unions. Of the six who expressed an opinion, two superintendents felt that their relationship was so negative, that the union was a major impediment in implementing their strategic plan. Two others had a professional working relationship with the unions but were also cognizant that sometimes they had different goals. One superintendent described how an extended history of collaboration with the union had changed to a more traditional bargaining stance during the five years of this study. Finally, one district had maintained a collaborative relationship over an extended period of time before and after the time period of this study.

So what is the context? First it is important to understand Florida's collective bargaining laws. While technically a right-to-work state like the rest of the south, the union has sole representation of teachers and other unionized employees regarding wages, benefits, and working conditions. Employees do not have to belong to the union, but are represented by them regardless of their membership. Historically, districts had step increases built into salary scales that tended to favor teachers with extended longevity. During these five years (2007-12), all of the districts in this study either removed the automatic feature of step increases or made them dependent on the district's ability to fund them.

Relationships that had been strained before became openly antagonistic as superintendents and boards either offered no financial increase or offered one-time non-recurring bonuses to address the financial shortfalls discussed earlier. During this same time, staff layoffs and limiting the increases in the cost of insurance premiums were also a part of the overall equation to limit total human capital costs. Many of these decisions required negotiation with the unions.

In addition to the wages, benefits, and working condition negotiations, school districts and unions also had to agree on a new evaluation system that requires Florida Department of Education approval but also had to decide whether to apply for Race to the Top funding. At times, even when the union was prepared to move forward on these two issues, they were used as bargaining chips to secure more favorable wage and benefit proposals.

Two superintendents described the demands of the unions as “totally unrealistic.” One cited the example of a year where districts lost 2% of their revenue per student and the teachers’ union was demanding a 5% raise. What had been a contentious process limited to negotiation time became yearlong as unions “nitpicked” every expenditure, such as professional conferences for senior staff. Pressure on board members also increased, causing splits on some boards over whether to honor the union’s position or the recommendation of the superintendent. Time for professional development and learning communities also raised conflict as to what should be paid extra and how much. There were also disagreements over how much of allocated planning time should be at the discretion of the individual teacher versus being required to meet with their grade-level or subject area team to review data and collaboratively plan lessons.

While recognizing the necessity to work collaboratively with unions, several superintendents described their different roles:

The unions exist to protect the workers. . .so every move you make in terms of improvements has to be filtered through how it impacts the employee. The superintendent's role is – how is this going to impact students. And in there, somewhere, there'll be a connection.

The challenge, then, is to move forward with implementing the strategic plan, especially as the district pushes for better efficiency. As one superintendent described it:

It is not necessarily in their [the union's] best interest for you to follow your strategic plan. So let's start with efficiency. To create efficiency, organizational stability, and effectiveness, you have to root out waste. But in dealing with it, you're going to have confrontations with the union because their job is not to create an efficient system. Their job is to protect membership and to protect the union itself. . . . The interesting thing is you're [the superintendent] stuck in the middle, because who does the union try to influence? Board members. . .board members depend on the unions for re-election. And between these two elements, there's that strategic plan for the system. And you try to navigate it, creating a balance which sometimes can be tough to manage.

Even districts that had managed to work collaboratively in the past found relationship with unions strained. Because of the limited salary increases, union leaders were criticized as being weak by veteran teachers that made up their boards. One district switched from collaboration to confrontation because of this pressure. The superintendent described how the union previously had a seat at the table in major decisions beyond what was legally required and that relationship was now fractured.

Through all of this turmoil, one district managed to maintain a collaborative relationship, leading the way for other districts in the new teacher evaluation system and on moving forward with Race to the Top implementation. The union is a part of every major decision and the superintendent meets regularly with building representatives to

determine which major problems need to be addressed. The superintendent expressed the relationship as a give and take process:

I have the support of the teacher's union. But we don't agree on everything. . .we know how to disagree. We disagree in a productive way. . .we just figured out how to get along; I've got to give up [something], they've got to give up [something].

Relationship with the Community

The community can be a strong force to further the strategic plan or be an impediment. Comprised of business leaders, parents, non-profit organizations, and city and county governments, the community was largely seen as a positive contributor to change by the superintendents in this study. While led by the school system, the job of improving outcomes for students cannot be done alone, it's "everybody's business." Superintendents cited a wide range of contributions ranging from serving on advisory committees, being mentors and tutors for students, planning for out-of-school activities, coordinating social services with schools, and helping homeless students.

While it took substantial time for the board and the superintendent to engage the community, they felt it was worthwhile because it resulted in improved perception and support. All of the districts that successfully passed a referendum had built a message of success on strategic plan goals and presented a common message from the board, superintendent, teachers, and parents.

One superintendent described how the positive experience of students and parents had built sufficient support to head off an effort to move him out at the beginning of his tenure. He went on to describe how the consolidation of two schools with a new facility was positively received due to support from key members of the community.

Two other superintendents described how the support of key business leaders was used to assist the superintendent when the school board was wavering on making some tough decisions that were essential to further progress. Using a review process by a high-powered business council, one was able to say to the board, “This is the superintendent’s recommendation, fully endorsed by the business council.” He went on to say that using business support “safeguards and sustains the course as far as implementation of the strategic plan.” Another superintendent described going to a key business leader’s home to enlist their support on an issue. He said,

And I just tell them, ‘Hey, you know this is what’s happening. It’s okay, because I don’t need this job. It’s not about me. But if you want me to be here and be consistent with the work that’s being done, that you’ve told me you like, . . .you’ve got to help me out here [with a board member].

While technically vendors, several districts described how their willingness to work with textbook publishers, professional development providers, and technology companies to pilot various products and services had benefited the district with significant in-kind support. The support ranged from paying for instructional division staff who would be on-going trainers, to helping develop a technology plan, to pursuing grant funds together based on their joint experience.

Relationship with the State

As described earlier, Florida is one of the most top-down driven states in setting funding, standards, assessments, instructional materials, and accountability with consequences. Some positive aspects of the systematic approach is a more consistent funding process where “property rich” counties that can generate more per pupil funding from property taxes receive lower state funding than “property poor” where the reverse is true. The result is a consistent per pupil funding modified by student need, cost of

living and other factors. The result is, as one superintendent put it, “We’re all the same, we’re all poor.”

Another benefit is a consistent system (across districts) of standards and assessments so everyone is using the same “measuring rod.” Instead of adjusting the state system when NCLB was passed in 2002, Florida kept its requirements for proficiency at a high level. This first round of accountability, termed A+, established school grades with financial rewards for “A” schools and improving schools, and sanctions and heavy oversight for those who were not. Later this system was modified to a Differentiated Accountability model that was eventually approved for a waiver for NCLB by the U. S. Department of Education.

During the five years of this study, there was a close relationship between the legislature, the State Board of Education (SBOE) appointed by the governor, and the FLDOE led by a commissioner appointed by the SBOE. While this alignment maintained a consistent message, there was often a deaf ear to superintendents who had to understand and respond to these policies, procedures, assessments, and accountability systems that frequently changed, thereby bringing a great deal of chaos to any long-term planning process.

One superintendent expressed the frustration with the legislature:

Some of this legislation is productive. . .some of it is not productive. And we know as practitioners in the field what’s going to hurt students and what’s going to help students to success. And they don’t know that if they listen to us, they can make good laws. But if they don’t, then there’s problems.

The relationship of superintendents with the school board, unions, the community, and the state created both pitfalls and possibilities in effectively implementing the strategic plan. Someone on the outside, particularly coming from a

business background, might shake their head and say, “How do you get anything done with so many competing forces at play?” The nine superintendents in this study, with varying degrees of success, navigated these difficult waters and stayed focused on implementing their plans. They credited this singular focus on their plans with providing a rudder to keep the district on a positive course despite trying circumstances.

Advice to Other Superintendents

Throughout this dissertation, from the background literature in Chapter 2 to the results chronicled in Chapter 4, the voice of superintendents has been featured to provide insight, context, and wisdom to the strategic planning process. The last question in the interview was open-ended, “What advice would you give to a superintendent embarking on a strategic planning process?”

The most frequent response to this question was start with the board/superintendent relationship. “Be sure you’re together on vision, mission, and beliefs – beliefs matter,” is how one superintendent began. Another described it as getting “governance right,” while another advised to “lock down your political support” with the board. Concerned that superintendents might succumb to undue pressure, a third was more blunt,

If I became superintendent again, I wouldn’t change my expectations. I would make sure the board knows up front what I’m going to do, what I expect, and that I intend to be the boss because you can’t rule by committee.

The second most frequent recommendation is to understand your community and district context and your relationship to it. If you are new to your community, “get to know the people, the challenges, and the history” before beginning the strategic planning process, advised one superintendent. Doing so will improve the plan and will

also build credibility. He went on to emphasize how important it was to understand the realities of challenges faced by teachers and principals. Another recommended getting significant input from teachers, principals, the community (including business leaders), advisory committees, and the union. Be attuned to the issues in the community, cautioned a veteran superintendent. “Always have someone with their antenna up for what’s going on in the political world outside of schools. . .know how to speak their language and go to them. . .especially the business leaders.”

Finally, a superintendent emphasized knowing where your students are and where the adults in the school district are and who you can impact:

One set of data is brought to you by the students. They show up every year and they bring their talents, their fears, their aspirations, their dreams, their deficiencies, their lack of readiness for learning. . .poverty, disability, ELL, they bring it all, that’s your data on that side. . .and you have no control over that by the way. What you have control over – leadership effectiveness, teacher effectiveness, support systems, and partnerships – maximize your influence over these.

The third area of advice is how to engage district staff in recognizing the importance of the strategic planning process and their role in its implementation. One described this as being sure staff see the plan as non-negotiable, instead of “this too shall pass,” or a plan on the shelf. Ongoing monitoring, reporting, and modification of the plan not only ensures its success, but is also a constant reminder to staff that decisions are made with the plan as the North Star to guide the district. However, it is not enough to merely order staff to comply but instead to have a “plan to capture the hearts and minds” of the staff. Moving from a compliance culture to a performance culture will take true commitment to the common vision and goals.

Next, it is important to communicate the strategic plan to internal and external stakeholders. As discussed earlier, this means keeping it “simple and focused –

something people can remember” as stated by one superintendent. Keep it in front of everyone by “repeat it, repeat it, repeat it.” Be honest and transparent with everyone about progress. Tell them that “improvement will take time,” cautioned another.

Keep a balance between short-term gains in critical areas, such as improving graduation rates, with long-term goals like improving the readiness of students in early learning programs. This balance will be reflected in the curriculum, staffing, and budgeting priorities. Another added that it is important to “have a long view – strive for an extended period.” He noted that districts that had made significant gains had benefited from either long tenures of superintendents or had internal candidates replace superintendents when they retired. He saw this as critical for continuity and success and avoiding the “churning” of superintendents described in Chapter 2.

Finally, while striving for a long tenure, a superintendent has to be willing to be fired if a board moves away from a focus on improving achievement for all students.

One superintendent described this dilemma:

Everybody wants performance, everybody wants to deliver on graduation rates, lower dropout rate, and they want increased participation in advanced academics. They want good test scores. . . .The fact is they have control. They don't want to be disruptive, and unless you are able to discern between effectiveness and connection to function, you're never going to be able to implement your strategic plan.

A final word of advice on staying the course: “People don't understand what it takes to run an urban school system...to be concerned about every child. But my job is to educate all of the students. And I just think you've got to be a strong person.”

CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTHER STUDY

The problem addressed in this study is that too many students, especially students with disabilities, students needing English Language Learner services, students from low income families, and racial/ethnic minority students, are not graduating ready for college, careers, and citizenship. They are concentrated in large urban school districts that, for the most part, have not significantly improved student performance. The purpose of this study is to determine how superintendents implemented strategic planning to improve student achievement.

In order to accomplish this purpose, four major research questions were addressed:

1. How were the strategic plans created, what were the major components, and how were they monitored?
2. How were the districts' academic, financial, and human resources plans aligned and implemented in the plan?
3. How did internal and external forces advance, modify, or inhibit the plans?
4. What advice would superintendents give to other superintendents embarking on a strategic planning process?

The methodology of this study was to use a case study approach, specifically semi-structured interviewing of nine superintendents in large urban school districts in Florida. The superintendents had served at least three years during the time period of 2007-2012. Data analysis was conducted using the emerging model of grounded theory along with cross-case analysis. Results were reported in four thematic areas: 1) the purpose of strategic planning; 2) the process of strategic planning; 3) the alignment of academic, fiscal, and human resources plans; and 4) pitfalls, possibilities, and advice.

Limitations of the study centered around time, place, and interviewees. The time period of 2007-2012 was unique in that the top down approach to accountability by the state and federal departments of education increased significantly while funding dropped by 25% because of the Great Recession. The place was significant because Florida experienced the accountability increase and loss of funds more than any other state. Finally, limiting the interviewees to superintendents created an important but limited perspective regarding implementing strategic planning. Studies that were from different time periods, states other than Florida, and a broader group of stakeholders may have yielded different results.

Discussion of Findings

Many of the findings in the Results in Chapter 4 align with the Literature Review in Chapter 2 of this study. Even where they align, the issues, discussion, and examples provided a broader, richer understanding of the implementation of effective strategies discussed in Chapter 2. One might think of this as putting “meat on the bones” of prior research concerning strategic planning in large urban school districts.

In other cases, the findings in Chapter 4 expand or modify the literature described in Chapter 2. While not diametrically opposed to earlier research, they are different enough to be reported as new or unique contributions to the larger topic of district-led reform and specifically the role of strategic planning, as led by superintendents.

Supports the Existing Literature

Districts critical for success

Superintendents in this study understood how the organization and activities of the district support or inhibit the success of students and schools, especially those that are not performing well. Districts were able to marshal the resources and require accountability for results beyond what a single school could do on its own. Fullan (2002) describes the districts' role to ensure students and schools are not left behind. Districts can play a significant role in closing achievement gaps between schools. Schlechty (2001) and Supovitz (2006) discuss how only school boards and superintendents are able to create policy, leverage resources, and engage the community district-wide to improve schools. Resnick and Glennan (2002) saw the school district as the only entity that could take powerful teaching and learning to scale. In discussing the purpose of strategic planning at the district level, superintendents in this study recognized the moral commitment to the success of every student in every school and implemented strategic plans accordingly.

High leverage strategies used

At the end of Chapter 2, a summary of the findings of 23 case studies was presented in Table 2.2 and articulated in 10 key strategies used in higher performing or improving districts. The findings in Chapter 4 supported the use of all of those strategies in the strategic planning process. These strategies include:

1. Build civic capacity and trust.
2. Share a common vision and beliefs that all students can learn at high levels, have a sense of urgency, and adopt a 'no excuses' attitude.
3. Have a strong superintendent and senior staff to lead the reform effort.

4. Have an aligned instructional system including common performance standards, curriculum, materials, recommended instructional methodology, and assessments. This system is built over time beginning with elementary reading and mathematics, then branching out to all subjects and all grades.
5. Provide an extensive professional development program tied to the curriculum, using instructional coaches, and creating professional learning communities at each school.
6. Create and use a comprehensive data management system to identify students' instructional strengths and needs based on the standards and common assessments with the goal to differentiate instruction, particularly for low-performing students.
7. Create an accountability system that holds schools and district staff responsible for specific improvement targets based on realistic stretch goals, with positive and negative consequences.
8. Allocate resources based on need and aligned with key district-wide initiatives and pursue additional external resources.
9. Provide additional assistance to low-performing schools and, as a last resort, reconstitute them in order to create a highly dedicated professional teaching staff.
10. Provide as much school-based decision making in budgeting and hiring staff as possible.

Superintendent position is tenuous

In Chapter 1, where the problem statement is presented, the short, and often tumultuous, nature of superintendents' tenures is described as "churning" where each new superintendent brings their own philosophy, programs, and senior staff. At first, it seems promising and hopeful as there is a new energy and the appearance of progress (Hess, 1999). Soon conflicts arise and the superintendent, who was once touted as the miracle worker or lone ranger, becomes the scapegoat of everything wrong with the district (McLeod & Yee, 2003). Hill, et al. (2000) likens superintendent tenures to the movie *High Noon*, where Gary Cooper saves the town from the bad guys only to be asked to leave to avoid further trouble.

The superintendents in this study recognized the tenuous nature of their superintendency. On the one hand, they had to be bold, courageous, and strong to implement decisions that were often unpopular, at least with one constituency group. On the other hand, they had to work collaboratively with board members, unions, and community stakeholders to demonstrate that the school system could not do the work alone. Even superintendents who were appointed on a unanimous vote were unsure if, after having served several years, they would continue to receive support after the next school board election.

Roles of board and superintendent

In the historical case studies (Section 1) of Chapter 2, the roles and responsibilities of the superintendent and board are delineated. The school board should set policy supporting improved academic achievement and leave the day-to-day operation of the school district to the superintendent (Snipes, et al., 2002). The superintendent should provide leadership in creating a sense of urgency and implementing district-wide initiatives contained in the strategic plan (Skrla, et al., 2000). Throughout the strategic planning process, it is important to develop a high level of trust between the superintendent, the school board, and the community (Ragland, et al., 1999).

Superintendents in this study described how important it was, early in the strategic planning process, to recognize the different roles and responsibilities of the superintendent and board. While at times they had to respectfully remind board members of their role, at least there was intellectual assent to their importance. The strategic planning process supported this role delineation by clearly marking where the line was between governance (the board) and management (superintendent).

Strategic planning supports theory

In Chapter 2, the theoretical foundation of strategic planning in systems theory, change theory, and complexity theory are discussed. All three theoretical foundations were affirmed in the findings in Chapter 4.

Systems theory posits that systems, in this case the school district, exist within larger systems and have subsystems. What happens in one part of the system affects other parts (Senge, 1990; Stroller, et al., 2006). Strategic planning recognizes this interconnectedness, using vertical and horizontal alignment to minimize the possibility of change becoming isolated, confusing, and ultimately ineffective (Duffy, 2004).

Superintendents described how strategic planning takes place within a context of community expectations and is dramatically impacted by decisions at the state and federal level. They also recognized the need to horizontally align across divisions and vertically with schools in order to accomplish the vision and goals in the strategic plan.

Change theory is built on the original work of Lewin's Force Field Analysis (1951) and modified by Lippitt, et al. (1958). Lippitt described three stages of assessment, planning, and implementation. Various authors (Kantor, Stein, & Jick, 1992; Kotter, 1996; Pearson, 2005) developed more stages that fit this basic pattern. Strategic planning, as described by superintendents in this study, recognized the sequential nature of the process, moving from needs analysis to vision, mission, goals, objectives, targets, and operational plan implementation.

Complexity theory describes organizations as open ended, organic systems that are dynamic, complex, self-organizing, and imbedded in multiple contexts (Wheatley, 1994). Sanders (1998) emphasizes the need for deep insights into the present context and foresight into paradigm changes when planning strategically. Superintendents in

this study described the challenge in convincing internal and external stakeholders regarding the need to prepare young people for a world that is complex, globally connected, and changing rapidly in technology and communications. This requires a different type of preparation than has been typically provided. Superintendents were keenly aware of anticipating social and economic changes and positioning their districts nearer the leading edge of change. Superintendents also recognized how their plans, especially at the initiatives and actions level, had to be dynamic and flexible to adjust to current challenges and results.

Extends or Modifies the Literature

Strategic planning most important

While the literature review in Chapter 2 identified 10 key strategies to implement and recognized the importance of aligning and integrating these elements into a coherent plan (Hill, 1998), basing these in a strategic plan was not emphasized. Schlechty (2001) and Fullan (2002) created a list that represents many of the steps in strategic planning but did not discuss how these steps work together and in which order. The summary of the Broad Prize for Urban Education (Broad, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012) did highlight strategic planning as one of four key components of success along with curriculum and instruction, high quality teachers and leaders, and fiscal alignment. While these other three subsystems are the same ones that emerged from this study, they are only effective if aligned in a single strategic plan. Superintendents in this study discussed one primary goal, improving student achievement, and one primary process, strategic planning. It provided focus, vertical and horizontal alignment, and transparency. The strategic plan was also critical in communicating the vision, goals, and successes, both internally and externally. Without

the strategic plan, superintendents said they could not have survived the Great Recession and still made academic progress.

Board and superintendent agreement on strategic plan

There was evidence of a similarity in the Literature in Chapter 2 and the Results in Chapter 4 with regard to roles and responsibilities of the board and superintendent. However, there was not much emphasis on their agreement on the vision, mission, goals, objectives, and targets in the strategic planning process. When it was discussed in Chapter 2, it was usually identified as a negative pitfall to avoid. Hill, et al. (2000) described the demise of many reform efforts being caused by the board not understanding the reform agenda and reversing course when unexpected challenges occurred. In contrast, superintendents described a process of joint creation and ownership of the strategic plan, even though there were different roles and responsibilities for the board and superintendent.

Understanding the purpose of strategic planning supporting the theoretical propositions

The most surprising result in the interviews with superintendents was the insistence that the board and staff understood the purpose of strategic planning. While there was not a direct question regarding purpose in the interview, it was discussed so often in the responses that it emerged as one of four major themes in the results. Their responses supported the theoretical proposition (p. 83) that effective strategic planning:

1. Brings coherence and focus.
2. Connects vision to actions.
3. Aligns major systems of academic programs, financial prioritization, human capital development, and public perception.
4. Maximizes positive impact on student achievement.

5. Responds to requirements of federal and state accountability, as well as local needs.

Increases collaboration, accountability, and service orientation of district staff

Superintendents described how the strategic planning process required collaboration between departments in the central office and between departments and schools. District staff were accountable for results, not activity completion, creating a sense of urgency and anxiety previously experienced by superintendents, principals, and many teachers. Since drastic reductions in district staff were taking place during the time period of this study, central staff understood that their job depended on progress in their part of the strategic plan and the quality of service to schools. Most districts established cross-function project charters or teams to implement the most important initiatives and actions that were more closely monitored. Ownership and mutual accountability were increased as a result.

The Literature review revealed the problems with central staffs that superintendents inherit, describing them as weak (Anderson, 2003), bloated, recalcitrant (Hill et al., 2000), and bureaucracies (McLeod & Yee, 2003). Superintendents agreed that some of these negative characteristics had been the norm in their districts, but were changing due to the district-wide ownership of results in the strategic plan.

Strategic abandonment

While there was substantial support for aligning academic plans and fiscal resources in Chapter 2 (Hess, 1999; Murphy, 1992; Fuhrman, 1993; Fullan, 1993; Cawelti & Protheroe, 2001), that is, deciding what to fund, less attention was paid to what not to fund. Several case studies, notably the in-depth studies on San Diego and Duval County, as well as some of the Broad Prize analysis, did allude to prioritizing

resources and in some cases not funding prior activities. However, these were not as strong and direct as the strategic abandonment process instituted by the superintendents in this study. In part, the Great Recession and the implementation of the Florida Class Size Amendment forced a more rigorous reduction process than had ever been contemplated. As discussed previously, every activity or position was evaluated based on the contribution to results on the strategic plan. Districts in this study implemented formal periodic reviews by impartial in-house and external researchers to guide strategic abandonment decisions.

Conclusions

For urban schools, it is both the worst of times and the best of times. The worst of times because too many schools, teachers, and students are being left behind despite the renewed interest on the part of local, state, and federal education agencies and other stakeholders. The data regarding the gap between the need for educational attainment for economic self-sufficiency and the results many urban schools are producing are alarming. Words like failure, crisis, inadequate, hopeless, discouraging, broken, intractable, and pervasive are often used to describe the current condition of urban schools. There is a real sense that time is running out for public schools in America to make dramatic improvements or face the breakup of what some detractors see as an obsolete monopoly; “Unfulfilled promises, and the long record of failure in the most troubled schools fuel the perception that the task of improving public education is simply too big, too complex, and too intractable for the United States, the most powerful, wealthiest, and most technologically advanced nation in the world” (Noguera, 2003, p. xi).

Few districts have made dramatic improvement in students meeting college-ready standards, much less having done so across economic, racial, ethnic, and gender categories. While there are certainly high performing, high poverty, high minority schools, there are no high performing, high poverty, high minority large urban school districts. Urban schools are being asked to bring all students up to a level of academic attainment previously reserved for a select group of about 20% of the students. The literature is clear that few schools will be able to sustain such lofty goals over time with their own knowledge and resources. Yet, in the midst of this conundrum, it is the 'best of times' for urban schools. As Noguera (2003) argues,

Rather than being regarded as hopelessly unfixable, urban public schools, particularly those who serve poor children, must be seen for what they are: the last and most enduring remnant of the social safety net for poor children in the United States. Until a genuine, superior alternative for all children is available, public education with all of its faults and weaknesses remains the only system we have. (p. 7)

Whether it is city officials, business representatives, civic, religious, or civil rights groups, there is a growing consensus in many communities that, as the public schools go, so goes the city. Education has become the key engine to attract and retain high wage jobs in our global information based economy. While these organizations are still willing to be critical when school districts fail to be focused and effective, they are also willing to provide support for improvement. This change in civic support is critical, for without it the sustainability for positive change is impossible.

Even though urban districts are not performing at the same level as their suburban peers, urban districts have made greater gains in comparison over the last several years. Urban districts have also been more willing to question traditional

policies, procedures, and structures, opting for a more innovative, entrepreneurial, outcomes-based approach.

While still not definitive, the research regarding the policies and practices large urban school districts can implement to effect dramatic change is promising. As important as state level and school level reform are, it is only school districts that have sufficient political, social, and economic clout to bring large numbers of urban schools up to high levels of performance. The review of the literature, the case studies, and the results of this study presented here share a great deal of consistency, enough so to provide guidance to school districts committed to seeing all students reach their dreams and aspirations. Although no urban school district has arrived, there are district that have made more dramatic gains in graduation rates, college and career readiness, and academic performance while narrowing gaps based on race/ethnicity, family income, disability, and ELL status. They share common attributes and practices.

It begins with a set of beliefs that we have a moral obligation to educate all of our children to the same level we want for our own children; that all students can learn at high levels if given adequate time, instruction and support; and that school and school district actions have a significant impact. These beliefs must be shared by the school board, superintendent, senior staff, principals, teachers, and the community at large and articulated in a strategic plan beginning with a vision, mission, and theory of action. Next, goals, objectives, and targets must be developed to actualize the beliefs and theory of action with a unified set of strategies and initiatives based on the needs and assets of the school district. Then, the plan must be implemented with commitment, enthusiasm, and fidelity, building civic capacity for change, school capacity for high

quality teaching and learning in every class every day, and a system of mutual accountability.

The process used to create and implement the strategic plan is important. If there are a significant number of new board members and a new superintendent, a facilitated process is advisable because it creates an atmosphere of “we are all in this together, even though we have different roles.” After initial vision, mission, core beliefs, goals, objectives, and targets are set by the board and superintendent, it is important to receive broad feedback from internal and external stakeholders, especially teachers and principals.

Next, the superintendent and senior staff develop initiatives and actions with appropriate resources assigned to senior staff, and a monitoring and accountability system using timely and appropriate data. Semi-annual to annual updates to the board and community should include easily understood graphs and charts regarding progress and changes to be made where there is insufficient progress.

In creating the strategic plan, it is important to include and align more specific plans for academic programs, budgeting, and human resource capacity. Academic programs should be selected or discarded based on the district’s Theory of Action and on the data regarding their contribution toward reaching strategic plan goals and targets. A cost/benefit analysis reveals what choices should be made. Next the budget must reflect the priorities in the plan by funding and defunding initiatives and actions as articulated above. Finally, the human resources plan must reflect who the district needs to hire, with what skills and attributes, for which positions, on what timetable, and to

further develop the technical, relational, and leadership skills of existing staff. Again, these should reflect the priorities outlined in the strategic plan.

The relationship of the superintendent with the school board, district staff, the union, the community, and state and federal representatives is critical to successfully implementing the strategic plan to improve outcomes for students. The most important relationship is the one with the school board. There has to be a common agreement over the direction as articulated in the strategic plan. It should be jointly developed; then the superintendent is tasked with implementing the plan, while the board approves policies, adopts budgets, and holds the superintendent accountable. Most of the districts were able to maintain these roles over the five-year span of this study. Others began that way; then, as complaints about the pressure of the accountability system increased, and funding decreased, the bonds were fractured. The conversation became whether the superintendent would remain, and conflicts within the board and with the superintendent became very public. Superintendents spent significant time garnering board support for initiatives and, at times, used external business community pressure to build such support. It is interesting to note that this key relationship between the board and superintendent is not highlighted in most of the case studies in Chapter 2, the exceptions being the extended studies on San Diego and Duval County (Section II).

Unions were variously perceived as a helpful partner, a group to be dealt with respectfully while holding the line on key issues, or a totally contrarian group with only their members' interest at heart. When raises were not forthcoming because of the Great Recession, the relationship with superintendents became more confrontational and less collaborative.

Often the union lobbied school board members to side with them on contract issues, creating a school board split with some members supporting the superintendent's recommendation and others supporting the union's. The leadership styles of the superintendent and the union president, as well as the historical relationship in that district, affected how they interacted during this difficult time. It is important for superintendents and union presidents to focus on what they can agree upon rather than their differences. Each has a role and, in at least three of the districts in this study, it was demonstrated that those roles can be played in a more collaborative fashion.

District staffs were also critical to the success of the district and it was necessary to move from a compliance to a performance culture. This was accomplished by insisting that all activities, funding, and staffing connect to the strategic plan. If it could not be demonstrated that they were contributing to the plan, they were defunded and staff were moved or let go. Project charters were used to cross divisional lines for the most important initiatives. Staffs were expected to know the goals of the strategic plan and tie their goals and evaluation to the appropriate part(s) of the plan. The greater accountability tended to create fear initially, but efforts to create buy-in and celebrate successes overcame them in most districts.

A balance between top down, district-directed instructional systems must be balanced by a bottom up process that values the opinions and experiences of practitioners, especially teachers and principals. They should be represented in creating and modifying curriculum, instructional materials, professional development, and assessments.

The relationship with the community and state and federal personnel were important in framing the plan's goals and targets. While the community was not a part of the daily operations of the strategic plan, their expectation for better results were ever present. Parents and the business community were helpful and supportive as long as there was progress and the board and superintendent relationship was positive. As activities and programs had to be reduced with lower funding, they saw that the strategic plan was used to prioritize which functions were funded, even if they disagreed with the decisions. Communication in easily understood language, using multiple forms of media, kept the community aware and engaged.

Finally, superintendents gave advice to other superintendents beginning the strategic planning process. First, ensure you and the school board are together on your plan. Next, create a sense of urgency, shared responsibility, teamwork, and accountability with district staff. To the extent possible, seek a collaborative relationship with the union without "giving away the store." Keep your plan simple and focused and regularly communicate the key elements and progress to internal and external stakeholders. Pay particular attention to the input of teachers and principals because they are the frontline staff who connect with students. Be flexible in your choice of strategies but hold fast to your core values, especially in assisting students and schools that have not performed well in the past. Finally, be strong. Being an urban superintendent is one of the toughest jobs in the world, but the rewards of positively impacting so many young people makes it worthwhile.

Implications for Practice

While implications for practice have been discussed throughout this study, it is helpful to highlight some of the most concrete, specific recommendations for superintendents and others implementing a strategic planning process:

1. Create or reaffirm the district's strategic plan early in the superintendent's tenure or when there is a major change in board membership.
2. Use a facilitator, especially at the beginning of the process to guide the needs analysis and the creation of the vision, mission, and goals.
3. Communicate early and often, especially reiterating the vision, goals, and results.
4. Monitor the implementation of the plan, adjusting the initiatives and actions, staff, and resource allocations based on formative data.
5. Be rigorous in reviewing programs and initiatives based on results and abandoning those not showing a significant return on investment.
6. Require collaboration and accountability from all staff, balancing support and high expectations for results.
7. Balance district and school-level decision making through a clearly articulated Theory of Action.
8. Balance short-term and long-term goals.
9. Strive for a long tenure, but be willing to be fired for holding to core values.

Suggestions for Further Study

Recent research on large urban district reform has identified key elements that promote positive change. Hopefully, this study, and others similar in design, will provide better guidance on how to put complex systems in place using strategic planning given the history, context, challenges, and resources of a given district. However, further study is needed in the following areas:

1. Expand the study with similar questions and purpose, including perspectives from other states and a broader representation of stakeholders.
2. Add a quantitative element on student achievement correlated with the level of strategic plan implementation.

3. Investigate how to improve the relationship between the superintendent, school board, and unions.
4. Investigate how the advantage of long of superintendent tenures should be balanced with the need for new ideas and innovation.
5. Investigate how to increase civic engagement to support district plans and impact state policy.

Some of these areas may lend themselves to a more quantitative analysis with experimental and control groups as was done in the CGCS/AIR study. The record to date suggests it is just as important to look at the gestalt of various initiatives toward a unified whole as guided by strategic planning. The case study method may be limited in its scientific rigor, but it may yield more useful results as districts strive to help all students perform at high levels and reach their dreams.

APPENDIX A
QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEWEES

1. How would you describe the strategic plan for your school district including its key components?
2. Tell me about the process used to create the plan?
3. How do you monitor the effectiveness of your plan?
4. What is the connection between the major academic components (standards, curriculum, materials, instruction, professional development, and assessment) in your plan?
5. How is your plan reflected in the resource allocations in your budget?
6. How does your human resources plan tie to your strategic plan?
7. What internal and external factors were most important in advancing or inhibiting your plan's success?
8. What modifications were made to the plan during implementation and why?
9. What advice would you give a superintendent of a large diverse district prior to leading a strategic planning process?

APPENDIX B
FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS AND “LISTEN FORS”

One or more may be used as appropriate.
Number corresponds with question numbers.

1.
 - A. Is the plan based on a vision or a theory of action?
 - B. Does it contain a few high priority goals centered around student achievement?
 - C. Do goals have specific initiations, actions, or programs with timelines and persons(s) responsible for the execution?

2.
 - A. Does it represent a broad cross section of constituents: teachers, parents, administrators, school board, businesses, non-profits, unions, etc.?
 - B. Are there opportunities for the larger community to provide input on the vision and goals?
 - C. Is there a written strategy for communication and ownership of the plan?
 - D. Are there formal and informal processes to assess these?

3.
 - A. Is there a process of continuous improvement where key activities are measured for degree and quality of implementation and formative results?
 - B. Is there a process of collecting and using perceptual feedback from those implementing the plan?

4.
 - A. Is there a theory of action that describes how these elements work together?
 - B. Does the plan articulate which of these is determined at the district, zone, school, or classroom level?
 - C. What is required and what is optional?
 - D. If there is flexibility for some schools, is this “earned” or is it associated with a particular type of school?
 - E. What is the connection of the strategic plan and school improvement plans?

5.
 - A. Is there an analysis of the current budget that connects it to the costs of the most important goals?
 - B. When budget reductions are necessary, are the key goals in the plan funded first?
 - C. Is there an on-going realignment of resources based on the effectiveness of the initiatives in accomplishing the goals?
 - D. Are resources differentiated based on the needs of schools (e.g. turnaround)?

6.
 - A. How many of the district employees does this impact?
 - B. How are the superintendent and senior staff held accountable for the result?
 - C. How deep in the organization is accountability tied to the plan?

- D. To what degree do outcomes affect evaluation, compensation, and professional development plans for individuals and departments?
7.
 - A. What community state, or national factors were present – both positive and negative?
 - B. Were these forces powerful enough to cause a loss of focus?
 - C. What was the relationship of the superintendent and the school board in creating and implementing the plan?
 - D. Were the contextual issues similar to or different from other large districts during this time?
 8.
 - A. Were changes made due to data analysis and strategic abandonment or addition?
 - B. Were changes made due to political pressure?
 - C. Were changes made due to state policy or revenue changes?
 9.
 - A. What have they learned from this experience?
 - B. What would they do the same and what would they do differently?

APPENDIX C
PERMISSION LETTERS FOR INTERVIEWS

Department of Education
P.O. Box 117
University of Florida
Gainesville, FL 32611

Dear Educator:

I am a doctoral student at the University of Florida. As a part of my dissertation, I am conducting an interview, the purpose of which is to learn how effective implementation of strategic plans improves student achievement in large urban districts. I am asking you to participate in this interview because you have been identified as a highly successful superintendent who served at least two years between 2007 and 2012 in one or more large school districts in Florida. Interviewees will be asked to participate in an interview lasting no longer than 90 minutes. The schedule of the questions is enclosed with this letter. You will not have to answer any question you do not wish to answer. Your interview will be conducted by phone or at your office after I have received a copy of this signed consent form from you in the mail. With your permission, I would like to audiotape this interview. Only I will have access to the tape which I will personally transcribe using appropriate software or will have a confidential assistant do so without any personal identifiers. The tape will then be erased. Your identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law and your identity will not be revealed in the final manuscript.

There are no anticipated risks, compensation or other direct benefits to you as a participant in this interview. You are free to withdraw your consent to participate and may discontinue your participation in the interview at any time without consequence.

If you have any questions about this research protocol, please contact me at (904) 662-4226 or my dissertation chair, Dr. Bernard Oliver at (352) 273-4358. Questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant may be directed to the IRB02 office, University of Florida, Box 1122550; (352) 392-0433.

Please sign and return this copy of the enclosed letter in the envelope. A second copy is provided for your records. By signing this letter, you give me permission to report your responses anonymously in the final manuscript to be submitted to my dissertation chair as part of my dissertation.

Thank you,

Ed Pratt Dannals

I have read the procedure described above for the strategic plan interview assignment. I voluntarily agree to participate in the interview and have received a copy of this description.

Signature of Participant

Date

I would like to receive a copy of the "interview" manuscript submitted to the instructor. -
YES/NO

APPENDIX D
SUMMARIES OF CASE STUDIES

Section I: Historical Cases 1999-2006

Following are 12 case studies conducted between 1999 and 2006.

Case #1

A case study of 11 large urban districts was conducted to determine their civic capacity and the accumulation and use of their civic capacity which is civic mobilization. The purpose of the study was to determine the “factors that enable some cities to do a better job than others to convert words to deeds and good intentions to effective actions” (Stone, et al., 2001, p. 75). To do this, they assessed the “breadth, cohesion, and durability of the educational reform coalition in place” (p. 75) during the period of 1993-94 and compared it to the degree of implementation of systemic reforms. Findings included that all 11 systems had some groups (among business leaders, parents, teachers, school board, and superintendent) highly involved and no city had all groups highly involved. Highest levels of civic mobilization were in Pittsburg, Boston, and Los Angeles. In the middle were Baltimore, Houston, Detroit, and Washington, DC; lowest were Atlanta, Denver, St. Louis, and San Francisco.

Notably absent was the involvement of school boards in having a significant role in shaping reform policy. Other than hiring and firing the superintendent, the board members seemed more focused on constituent service than policy formation or management oversight. Also, while every district described the role of parents as critical, only Pittsburg had a systemic approach to parent engagement in shaping the reform agenda. The biggest differences between cities were in the level of teacher and business engagement. Comparing the 11 districts’ civic mobilization to results of an

instrument used to assess the degree of implemented reform, found a positive correlation ($r=.80$; $p<.003$) with high civic mobilization and high degree of reform implementation.

Case #2

In a second study, Thompson (2003) identified eight high-performing school districts based on the majority of students and schools meeting high standards. Using a case study approach, he identified eight critical success factors that were in evidence in at least one of the high-performing districts:

1. Standards-based Instruction – Aurora Public Schools, Colorado
2. Belief system that all students can learn at high levels (“All means all”) – Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina
3. Respectful relationships – Edmonds, Washington
4. System accountability for school success – Houston, Texas
5. Intensive professional development – District 2, New York City and San Diego, California
6. Distribution of resources focused on supporting powerful instructional practices – Plainfield, New Jersey
7. Data systems for improvement and accountability – Chula Vista, California
8. Two-way communication – Aurora Public Schools, Colorado

Case #3

The purpose of this study (Hill, et al., 2000) was to determine the impact of reform and the perception in the community regarding the reform's potential impact. Boston, Memphis, New York City District 2, San Antonio, San Francisco, and Seattle were selected for the study from nominations by knowledgeable educators and researchers, based on the initiation of an “ambitious reform plan intended to make dramatic improvements in the performance of all public schools (p. 28).” They also had strong district leadership (superintendent and top staff) as well as community support. Using interviews of representative stakeholders, review of documents pertaining to

reform, budgets, evaluations, and newspaper and journal articles, the researchers sought to explore four questions:

1. What did different constituent groups think the district reform agenda included and the degree to which the reforms had been broadly communicated?
2. How did the reforms intend to impact teaching and learning?
3. What obstacles—political, financial, and practical—were encountered?
4. Would the reform continue if the superintendent left? (p. 28)

Results indicated a significant difference between the planned reform and the real impact based on problems with implementation. While most districts implemented a few portions of their reform agenda elements well, in each city some elements were implemented poorly or not at all. The authors identified five categories of problems with full implementation based on the results of this study:

1. Loss of Superintendent and poor succession
2. Loss of support of the Board
3. Teacher resistance
4. Loss of funding
5. Delays, half-measures, and competing initiatives (p. 38)

The most serious problem is when opponents of reform mobilize and dilute the support of the Board. Sometimes this is a result of the Board never truly understanding the reform agenda. “A Board’s inability to comprehend the dimensions of the reforms it is supposed to oversee is fatal to an initiative that must be carried out over a long time (as all must) or encounters unexpected challenges (as all do)” (Hill, et al., 2000, p. 40). The Board’s lack of knowledge can come from the superintendent and business leaders providing them limited information, hoping positive results of the reform will create political support with the community and the Board. Another reason for the lack of Board understanding is that they may have avoided the difficult discussions associated with ownership of the strategic direction of the school district.

As Usdan (2005) observed, “too many boards are mired in trivial micro-management pursuits and spend time worrying whether the buns are hot in the cafeteria or whether the bus routes meet the needs of every constituent” (p. 28). If instead “school boards spent more of their time focused on student achievement and related education issues, they might begin to attract more members who have a substantive trusteeship orientation” (p. 29).

While some resistance to reform comes from parents, it is teacher opposition that is most significant. Their opposition comes from a lack of willingness to change, lack of confidence in the Superintendent, or too many non-aligned, competing initiatives. Dissident teachers (whether in a union or not) often organize to vote out Board members who support reforms leading to derailing the reforms or the firing of the Superintendent (Hill, et al., 2000). The authors determined which of 10 different reform elements that had been identified in the literature were contained in each district’s “theory of action” (p. 46) for change. While similar in some elements from previously presented lists, there are also some differences:

1. Student performance standards
2. School control of funds
3. School performance agreements with specific targets for the year aligned with resources
4. Hiring staff at the school level
5. Use of whole school designs
6. Reconstituting schools
7. Extra spending on initiatives to improve teacher skills and knowledge
8. Use of outside vendors for professional development
9. Efforts to attract teachers from new sources
10. New union or work rules

Findings included that all size districts used standards and outside experts for professional development while none of them had any significant change in union

agreements or work rules. The elements that were least developed in the six districts were the ones related to “opportunity to change” (Hill, et al., 2000, p. 51), that is, the ones allowing school freedom of action. Also noted was the tendency for districts to implement what the superintendent knew how to do based on their previous experience or where community support already existed. Only New York City District #2 had high positive effect on instruction and school performance while Memphis, San Antonio, and San Francisco had moderate results based on the author’s criteria.

Case #4

In this study (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2001), six school districts were identified by contacting state education agencies and regional educational laboratories, data on state web sites, and a review of the literature. All had succeeded in making large gains in closing the achievement gap. Four districts had a high percent of low-income students and two were large urban districts. The districts in the study were Houston; Sacramento; Brazelport, Texas; Twin Falls, Idaho; El Paso, Texas; and Barbour County, West Virginia. The researchers visited each school district and interviewed central office staff, principals, and teachers regarding the perceived changes that contributed the most to higher student achievement. They also reviewed district documents and assessment results. Findings of the study indicated a number of common reforms had been implemented in the six districts:

1. Established clear standards and measures to determine progress toward meeting the standards;
2. Adopted a “no excuses” mentality and made the concept that all students can learn a reality with staff members doing whatever it takes to make sure all students achieve;
3. Staff worked in teams to analyze data to plan and implement improvement strategies;
4. Targeted, research-based staff development was used extensively;

5. Extensive efforts were made to align curriculum with the content of high stakes test;
6. Superintendent and key community leaders were important in creating and sustaining support for reform efforts;
7. Focused resources on reform agenda;
8. Held people accountable for results and constantly refined action strategies to improve results;
9. Used a rigorous core curriculum, particularly in literacy and mathematics;
10. Implemented assistance teams to help low-performing schools; and
11. Provided opportunities for schools to determine budget at the school level.

Case #5

In a study by the Dana Center at the University of Texas, Austin, 10 medium and large school districts in Texas were studied (Ragland, Asera, & Johnson, 1999). The purpose of the study was to determine what initiatives the superintendent, the district staff, and the School Board were implementing that led to high student achievement. The districts—Amarillo, Beaumont, Brazelport, Houston, Laredo, Los Fresnos Consolidated, Mission Consolidated, Pharr-San Juan-Amarillo, Weslaco, and Ysleta Independent—were selected based on having at least a third of their schools Recognized or Exemplary on the 1997-98 Texas assessment system. Study methods included interviews with the superintendent, district staff, and principals; observations of School Board and staff meetings; and analysis of district documents and data. Findings included three important similarities in the districts:

1. A sense of urgency – the Superintendent and staff communicated a sense of urgent expectation that all students needed to reach high levels of academic success, used data to measure non-negotiable goals and targets with no excuses, developed a high level of trust between the Superintendent and the Board and with the community.
2. A sense of shared responsibility – the Superintendent championed all in the district and community supporting academic achievement goals; used challenging but realistic school improvement plans; balanced accountability and flexibility; and kept data public and transparent.

3. A sense of efficacy – provided resources, knowledge, and support; built confidence at the school and district level that the reform goals could be realized; and built a partnership with schools and district staff.

Case #6

A follow-up study conducted by the Dana Institute a year later (Skrla, Scheurich, & Johnson, 2000) involving four Texas districts (Aldine, Brazelport, San Benito, and Wichita Falls) intended to develop greater depth of understanding of findings of the 1999 study regarding the district operations that led to success. Criteria for selection was

1. over 5,000 students in the district;
2. over 1/3 of the school Recognized or Distinguished (at least 2 at this level) on the Texas assessment system;
3. low exclusion rates of LEP and special education students on the state testing; and
4. low dropout and 9th grade retention rates.

Methodology for the research used a case study method that included one or two visits to each district; over 200 interviews of superintendents, principals, teachers, parents, district staff and business leaders; shadowing of principals and district staff; and analysis of field notes. Findings included in the essential elements in reform efforts included strong incentives to change like the state accountability system; making data and assistance to low-performing schools public; strong ethical and moral leadership on district-wide initiatives, especially by the Superintendent; use of improved instructional strategies using common standards, curriculum and assessments; and perhaps most importantly, changing the belief systems to demonstrate every day that poor and minority students had the capacity to learn at high levels. They also practiced the concept of “proactive redundancy” (p. 20) using multiple strategies to produce positive change, especially in the areas of teaching and learning. The authors did not explore

how this practice supported or conflicted with earlier findings that a reduction of programmatic overload and a focus on a few key strategies was most effective.

Case #7

In this study, published by the Council of Great City Schools (Snipes, Doolittle, & Herlihy, 2002), the purpose was to determine the district role in creating and maintaining academic achievement, focusing on the context of each district, changes in disaggregated student achievement, and the policies, programs, and strategies that impacted changes in teaching and learning in the classroom. Criteria for selecting districts for the study included (1) narrowing the achievement gap while still having higher overall gains, (2) improving faster than other districts in the state, and (3) a geographically representative sample of the country. Districts in the study included Houston, Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Sacramento, and the New York City Chancellor's District.

The study was conducted using case study methodology to establish possible explanations for the four study districts' success, while comparable districts that did not have large gains were studied to eliminate possible explanations and to better understand others. The difference between the successful and unsuccessful districts went beyond merely identifying the achievement gap, with the successful districts recognizing the need to work on the lack of instructional coherence (curriculum, instruction, and professional development), and the unsuccessful districts reflecting an over-reliance on site-based management and low expectations for student performance. The authors first established the preconditions necessary for reform to be effective.

1. Stable organization over time;
2. Agreement on major reform strategies;

3. School Board united on setting policy to support student achievement and leaving the day-to-day operations to the Superintendent;
4. Ability to assess the instructional weaknesses and determine appropriate strategies to address them;
5. Ability to market the reform to the community;
6. District staff redirected to serve and support schools; and
7. Willingness to seek other financial resources.

Once the preconditions were met, the strategies shared by the successful districts included to

1. Establish specific student achievement goals with timelines;
2. Align standards, curriculum, and instruction;
3. Expect schools to implement district curriculum in every class;
4. Hold Superintendent, district staff, principals, and teachers accountable for specific targets;
5. Provide extra help for low-performing schools;
6. Use data to identify help needed at the school, class, and individual student level;
7. Start with elementary, then work on secondary grades; and
8. Use intensive reading and mathematics instruction with secondary (grades 6-12) students.

Each of these strategies was important, but it was the synergy of using them together that was essential. Rather than adding a few programs here and there, they approached their work systemically. They also differed in how they implemented the reform agenda.

The case study district leaders pursued their reform agendas with an intensity that distinguished them from many urban superintendents and school boards. They devoted many hours to building a new vision of what was possible in their schools, crafting and selling a strategy to improve student achievement, and changing the culture of their districts and schools. Once the plan was developed, the superintendents relentlessly pushed for its implementation, followed up when efforts were stalled, rewarded with increased stature and responsibility those who bought into the plan and pushed out those who opposed the approach. Much of their efforts focused on ensuring plans at the district level actually led to changes in the daily life of schools, a link that is too often not made. (Snipes, et al., 2002, p. 42)

In addition to preconditions and common reform elements, findings of the study included common barriers to overcome.

1. Schools doubted district staff could be reoriented to a service focus.
2. Demoted or fired employees attempted to get Board members to intervene on their behalf.
3. Substantial investment was required to create data mechanisms and provide principal and teacher training.
4. Experienced teachers were resistant, so model classrooms at each school were used to model more prescriptive instructional approaches.
5. Issue of reform being more district-led top down rather than local school initiated.
6. Some did not like the focus on low performing students and schools rather than those who are high performing.
7. Demands of change created stress.

Case #8

Togneri and Anderson (2003) further explored how districts could move beyond “islands of excellence” (p. 1) to improve instruction and achievement in all schools.

Their study of effective districts sought to answer five questions:

1. What created the change?
2. What strategies were used?
3. How did professional development change?
4. How did the relationships of key staff and stakeholders support or inhibit the reform efforts?
5. What kind of leadership was present to implement and sustain the change?

Their initial criteria for selecting high performing districts were that the district had to:

1. Show increased achievement in mathematics and reading for three or more years;
2. Demonstrate these improvement were across grade levels, races, and ethnicities;
3. Have a poverty rate of 25% or more free/reduced lunch students; and
4. Be known for its high quality of professional development.

Using standardized test scores from 1998-2000, the number of districts was narrowed from 50 to 14. Further criteria reduced the study to five districts:

1. Aldine, Texas
2. Chula Vista Elementary School District, California
3. Kent County, Maryland
4. Minneapolis, Minnesota
5. Providence, Rhode Island

All of the districts had grown in size, increased poverty, and increased the percentage of minority students over the last decade.

Using a case study approach, the methodology called for two visits to each district (except Providence which received one). Six data elements were collected and analyzed including interviews; focus groups; school visits; observations of meetings and professional development; various documents such as strategic plans, budgets, achievement data, and curriculum; and field notes. While all of the districts had demonstrated achievement gains in elementary mathematics and reading, only Aldine and Kent were in the top tier in their state.

Findings of the study showed seven common elements in the five school districts:

1. Acknowledged poor performance and stated a desire to change;
2. Implemented an aligned system-wide instructional plan focusing on student achievement based on common standards, curriculum, research-based instruction, professional development, and assessment, using distributed leadership and focusing resources on the plan;
3. Created a common vision that included increased achievement for all students through improved instruction in a safe and supportive environment while involving parents and the community;
4. Used data to make decisions;
5. Used extensive networks of instructional experts to support teachers in using the new strategies;
6. Changes the roles of leaders to focus more on instruction; and
7. Committed to long-term support of the reforms to ensure sustainability.

Case #9

In this case study, Massell and Goertz (2002) conducted a three-year study of 23 high performing school districts in eight states. They found that districts increased the knowledge and skills of the professionals; aligned the instruction with standards, assessment, and professional development; and used data to make decisions. Their professional development was long-term in nature with coaching support and school-based collaboration. Principals tended to support the coaching model more than teachers who tended to view the coaches as an extension of the administration. When implemented well, they found that professional learning communities were universally successful.

Case #10

In a study focused on the school district as a learning laboratory, Stein and D'Amico (2002) agreed that developing teacher skills was the most important element in school improvement. However, they found that school districts were not adept in implementing high quality professional development to support district-wide reforms. In most districts, professional development was short in duration, not coordinated, not focused on key elements of instructional practice, and provided few opportunities for collegial interactions with colleagues. To be effective, they argued that professional development must be focused on content, be continuous, and be connected to the daily experience of teachers. They cited New York City District #2 as an example of a district implementing an aligned, focused professional development program, especially in their Balanced Literacy program. District #2 was able to honor differences while still building common practice.

Case #11

In a study focused on the Chicago school system, Shipps (2003) chronicled the mayoral takeover and the appointment of a non-traditional superintendent. In 1995, a Republican legislature and governor gave Democratic Mayor Daley control of the Chicago Public Schools in response to pressure by the business community. This action recentralized much of the authority for running the schools that had been decentralized to the control of community groups in 1988. It also revoked some union protections on employment. Daley appointed Paul Vallas, a former state legislative assistant and city budget director, to run the school district using business principles. Vallas cut the size of district operations and outsourced many functions, allowing him to balance a budget that had been \$150M in debt. Vallas was able to negotiate a new four-year contract with the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), which supported his reforms until teachers were dismissed from reconstituted schools. Community groups that had major control of schools from 1988-1995 felt overlooked in the new mayor-controlled arrangement. This was particularly true of the African-American community. While short on educational expertise, Valla's executive team was very successful at media relations, capitalizing on any positive news to establish credibility for their reforms.

While overall achievement rates went up, scores of poor and minority students did not significantly change. There was great dissatisfaction regarding the impact of the new promotional criteria using Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) because it had a larger impact on low-performing students. Scores on the ITBS were also used to place schools on probation or sanction. Cut-off scores started with requiring 15% of the students to score at the national norm and eventually moved to 20%.

In the 1996-97 school year, about one-fifth (109 out of 550) of schools were sanctioned and 70 out of 550 schools were sanctioned in 1997-98. In spite of high turnover among principals and teachers, few student performance gains were made, especially at the high school level. Chicago depended almost completely on its accountability system without any systematic effort to improve the knowledge and skills of teachers and principals on how to help low-income students improve their academic performance. Shipp's assessment of the reform effort was that the "biggest shortcoming of the Chicago initiative was the lack of educational expertise in top level positions" (p. 31).

Case #12

This study of the Boston Public Schools by Cuban and Usban (2003) paralleled the same time period as the Chicago reform. In response to wide-spread dissatisfaction with the racial strife over desegregation and poor student performance, the voters replaced the elected school committee with a mayor-appointed system. In 1993, Tom Menino was elected mayor, and in 1995 Menino appointed as superintendent Tom Payzant, a nationally known educator who had been the Assistant Secretary of Education and the Superintendent in San Diego. Payzant had the support of the mayor, business community, and the teachers' union.

In contrast to the previous elected school committee that had been more concerned with helping friends, re-election, and using the office to pursue other offices, the appointed school committee focused on setting policy and not micro-managing daily operations. The appointed committee was also less susceptible to pressure from the Boston Teachers' Union (BTU) since they did not need their support for re-election. However, some complained that the appointed committee was not as sensitive to

community and neighborhood concerns as the previously elected committee. The mayor's relationship with black clergymen, along with significant efforts at community development, minimized some of the concerns.

Boston benefited from community-wide efforts to support education. Business and Annenburg Foundation funds supported the creation of the Boston Plan for Excellence. City and school cooperation extended from after-school programs to health, recreation, and social services with schools serving as an arm of the city. The main strategy for improving instruction in Boston was to increase the knowledge and skills of principals and teachers using math and literacy coaches. The efforts showed positive gains in elementary and middle schools, with fewer gains in high schools. At the time of the study, Boston Public Schools was aligning the district learning standards with the state curriculum frameworks and providing more monitoring of instructional issues in schools. According to Cuban and Usdan (2003), the main concern about Boston's reform was that it seemed to depend very heavily on Mayor Menino and Superintendent Payzant continuing in their positions.

Section II: In-depth Case Studies of San Diego and Duval County (FL) (1998-2005)

Case #13: San Diego in-depth study

An in-depth series of studies of the San Diego City Schools (SDCS) edited by Hightower, Knapp, Marsh, and McLaughlin (2002), documented changes between 1998 and 2001. A second extensive series of studies (Hess, et al., 2005) extended the time period into 2005. In 1998, on a 3-2 vote, the school board hired Alan Bersin, a former federal district attorney, as Superintendent. Bersin brought in Anthony Alvarado as Chancellor of Instruction, splitting the traditional superintendent role into management

(Bersin) and instruction (Alvarado). At the time of their entry, San Diego had experienced extensive turmoil with a recent teacher strike (1996), significant achievement gaps of 30-50 percentage points based on race and income, and a dissatisfied business community (Hess, 2005; Hightower, 2002). The district was decentralized with area superintendents being described as “autonomous, reactive, and competitive” (Hightower, 2002, p. 77) and had a fragmented curriculum and instructional system (Hess, 2005). Other problems included a culture of complacency and low expectations, little quality instruction, and numerous district and union rules that conspired to have the best teachers in higher performing schools. Lower performing schools had mostly first or second-year teachers or veterans who were waiting to retire (Oday, 2005). Bersin and Alvarado intentionally upset the system by conducting an instructional needs analysis and instituting an extensive professional development program based on Alvarado’s successful experience as superintendent in New York City District 2. Alvarado’s theory of action was that “student learning increases when interaction between students and teachers is improved” (Hightower, 2002, p. 77). Alvarado’s plan was to identify good teaching practice, then to systematically train, coach, and support this new practice (Hess, 2005). They aligned the policies, organizational structures, and resources, while dismantling the bureaucracy and changing roles and responsibilities to make the district a learning organization. It was designed to overcome the disjointed, incoherent system where district work was not focused on data and student learning. Bersin and Alvarado established that there were only two types of district employees, “those who teach, and those who support learning” (Hightower, 2002, p. 83).

Bersin described his strategy: “There was no other way to jumpstart systemic reform. You don’t announce it. You’ve got to jolt the system. If people don’t understand you’re serious about change, the bureaucracy will own you” (Cuban and Usdan, 2003, p. 81).

Alvarado followed with his explanation:

There has to be a boom in large scale reform. The boom doesn’t have to be a political boom, but it has to be an organizational boom. After you go boom, you need to adjust how you pace and organize so there becomes a regularity and that people know what to expect. (Cuban & Usdan, 2003, p. 81)

Early in their tenure, Bersin and Alvarado dissolved the area superintendent role, replacing them with highly trained principals who became Instructional Leaders (IL) of schools. The IL’s role was to lead, train, and monitor 25 principals, using the Literacy Framework, principles of learning, and classroom walk-throughs to monitor progress. They also established a literacy coach at each school whose work with the principal was crucial. As a further step, Bersin and Alvarado aligned resources to focus on low-performing students and schools, spending \$62M in 2000-01 and approximately \$96M in 2001-02. Bersin and Alvarado brought in instructional experts from New Zealand, Pittsburg, and New York City District 2, as well as known change experts Michael Fullan and Richard Elmore to provide technical assistance (Hightower, 2005). The biggest controversies were the use of Title I funds (\$19M) to support the reforms with schools having less input on the use of Title I funds and the demotion of 15 principals in 1999. For some, the demotions provoked a climate of fear rather than creating a learning community. Also criticized were the focus on elementary grades rather than secondary, the ‘top down’ nature of the reforms (Hightower, et al., 2002), and the high cost of outside consultants (Williams, 2005).

The Blueprint for Success, adopted by the School Board in March 2000, focused on providing extensive professional development of teachers and principals, intervention for low performing students by providing extra assistance, and retention for students not making sufficient progress (Hess, 2005). According to Hannaway and Stanislawski (2005), the San Diego effort differed from most urban reforms in that it was designed to have direct and immediate impact on classroom practice by taking on the “biggest stumbling block of educational reform: developing a deep productive culture in schools on a large scale” (p. 53). Phase I of the Blueprint for Success focused on the professional development of teachers and principals using a non-incremental approach of “do it fast,” reorganizing the district staff the first year; “do it deep,” using incentives, routines, and changed culture to change behavior to the classroom level; and “take no prisoners,” creating a high turnover of principals of 89% between 1999 and 2005 (Hannaway & Stanislawski, 2005, p. 55). Building on the common language, philosophy, and instructional practice of Phase I, Bersin sought to institutionalize the efforts in 2003 when Alvarado left. Phase II included renaming some initiatives (the Institute for Learning became the Instructional Improvement Office) and providing more school-based decision making on budget (Hannaway, 2005).

Throughout the change process, principals were seen as they key agents to create and sustain change (Schnur & Gerson, 2005). They moved initially from fear and compliance to a focus on mutual growth and discussion on why strategies they had learned worked and brainstorming ways to more effectively implement the changes. The Educational Leadership Development Academy was charged with the responsibility to train current and prospective principals. While generally credited with fulfilling its core

mission, some have noted a need to focus more on the process and the human side of change, as well as spending time on operational issues like master schedules or school opening procedures (Hightower, 2005; Schnur & Gerson, 2005). Most of the principals felt the training and support was beneficial for them in their role as instructional leaders. They had monthly day-long training sessions learning how to conduct classroom walk-throughs and provide effective feedback to teachers. They also voluntarily participated in study groups and visited each other's schools (Schnur & Gerson, 2005).

A second group key to the San Diego reforms was the school-based coaches. Literacy coaches were trained for each school to model and coach the district literacy program, which included a three-hour literacy block (Williams, 2005). Initially trained together once a week, they were later grouped according to knowledge and experience in the reform work. Initially, the coaches were thought of as administrative 'spies.' Newer teachers liked the support, while veteran teachers were suspicious, saying the role was not clearly defined, the coaches were gone too much, and they should work directly with students rather than teachers (Hightower, 2005). Many teachers resented what they perceived as a belief that teachers did not know what they were doing, and especially what they saw as Alvarado's "down your throat" mentality (Williams, 2005, p. 37). Teacher assistants were eliminated to pay for the literacy coaches and Bersin and Alvarado wanted to appoint them. The teachers union, San Diego Education Association (SDEA), was upset at having been left out of the decision-making process and grieved the literacy coach selection process saying the shared decision-making process at the school level should choose the coaches. They compromised with a district screening and a site-based selection (Williams, 2005).

A number of other conflicts arose between Bersin and SDEA. One was the number of meetings needed for professional development. An arbitrator eventually ruled they had to be limited in number. A second area was in teacher assignment, which Bersin wanted to make instead of the seniority system currently in place. Bersin also wanted to differentiate pay and incentives to entice teachers to work in high-poverty, low-performing schools which had a higher percent of inexperienced teachers. Having fought Bersin's appointment from the beginning, SDEA continued to argue for the primacy of the contract over the requirements of the reform (Williams, 2005).

In addition to the conflicts with SDEA, Bersin had to constantly relate to a school board that was "polarized and dysfunctional" (Usdan, 2005, p. 12). Personal conflicts between board members often got in the way of discussing Bersin's reform agenda on its merits. Board members lined up behind either the business community on one side or SDEA on the other side. Each saw the other as having too much influence on the direction of the public schools in San Diego. Bersin's and Alvarado's style, which were seen as uncompromising and abrasive, further polarized the board. The business community wanted the board to operate like a corporate board and focus on strategic policy and goals, while some on the board saw keeping their constituents pleased as their major function. Bersin supporters pointed to his ability to bring in substantial state, federal, and foundation funds; his ability to attract positive national attention to the reforms; and his focus on low-performing students and schools. They saw him as a leader with "vision, passion, commitment, and courage" (p. 20). Detractors of Bersin saw him as "dictatorial" with a "take it or leave it" mentality (p. 21). They reacted to how he presented his reforms more than what the reforms contained and thought he could

have been more effective if he had involved professional educators and the community more in the early stages of the reform. Complaints from teachers and principals hurt the implementation by undermining the support in the community. Usdan observed that the long-term sustainability was in question because the reforms were not yet in the “DNA of the system” (p. 26).

Case #14: Duval County (FL) in-depth study

Parallel to the same time period as the San Diego studies (1998-2005), an extensive study was conducted by Jonathan Supovitz and presented in *The Case for District-Based Reform* (Supovitz, 2006). Chronicling the dramatic progress Duval County made in reading, writing, mathematics, and science at the elementary level, Supovitz set out to determine the key strategies used by Superintendent John Fryer as well as how those strategies could inform the practice in other large urban districts. Unlike many other studies which began after the positive results had been achieved, Supovitz followed the “uneven process of implementation” (p.5) throughout the seven years studied.

Supovitz originally came to Duval County Public Schools (DCPS) as the principle investigator for the Center for Policy Research and Education (CPRE) which was conducting a national external evaluation of the America’s Choice comprehensive school reform (CSR) model which had been created by The National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE). Fryer, who had a strong record of leadership in the Air Force as a two-star general and as commandant of the National War College, came to the job of Superintendent without a background in K-12 education. Prior to starting as superintendent, Fryer read broadly on school reform. He was drawn to the work of Mark Tucker and Judy Cotting from NCEE and met with them to discuss the

ideas in *Standards for Our Schools* (2002). Fryer brought an ability to think strategically, learn quickly, communicate clearly, and implement a comprehensive plan for improving teaching and learning. Using the America's Choice structure, framework, and design tasks (p. 33), Fryer balanced a unifying vision of what high quality instruction looked like with some degree of local flexibility (Supovitz, 2006). The difficulty of creating this balance had been noted earlier in the work of David and Shields (2001, p. iii) studying standards based systemic reforms in seven large school districts.

Another problem with implementation of the CRS programs was that they did not have lasting impact because of their inability to change the formal educational institutions (Domanico, Finn, Invest, Kanstoroom, & Russo, 2000) or provide enough consistent support to create long-term fundamental change (Berends, et al, 2002). Understanding the need for a structured, comprehensive approach to instructional improvement, Fryer took a design (America's Choice) meant for a single school and implemented key elements district-wide. These were articulated in the five goals in the district's Framework for Implementation of Standards in Duval County Public Schools (Supovitz, p. 41). These included academic performance, safe schools, high performance management, learning communities, and accountability. While not mandating the use of the America's Choice total design, Fryer was clear that he preferred their approach. This preference without mandate philosophy became apparent when a community group advocated the use of Direct Instruction as the core reading program for all Title 1 elementary schools. Fryer allowed schools to make a choice of reading programs but made it clear that the principals were accountable for results and that the Framework would still be the guiding structure for improvement (p. 54).

Supovitz provided an in-depth analysis of the four components needed for districts to lead in improving teaching and learning:

1. A vision that communicates expectations for what teaching and learning should look like,
2. Creating commitment and building capacity to implement the vision,
3. Using data to monitor implementation and inform practice, and
4. Create a learning organization that reflects on practice to refine the vision and routes the reform in the DNA of the organization (p. 5).

Through extensive surveys and interviews, Supovitz concluded that DCPS had strong implementation of the first three components but the learning community portion of the fourth component was not very well understood or implemented.

In articulating the vision, Fryer laid out the goal of preparing all students to be college ready without the need for remediation. To reach this goal, seven key elements would be implemented:

1. High expectations for student's performance,
2. Clear standards that describe that performance,
3. A focus on student work that represents mastery of the standard,
4. Instruction focused on understanding fewer topics in-depth,
5. Use instructional time and resources more effectively,
6. Variety of types and frequency of assessments, and
7. School based professional development using a continuous improvement model in learning communities (p. 30).

To create capacity, Duval used what Supovitz described as a blend of gardening and engineering. In gardening, leaders must convince staff that the reforms are needed and the benefits that will accrue if implemented with a high degree of commitment. It requires leaders to attend to the psychological stages of concern articulated by Hall and Hord (1987) in the concerns-based adoption model (CBAM). Methods used by DCPS leaders included creating a sense of urgency, showing the elements and results in

schools similar to theirs, and encouraging visits between schools. Together they increased understanding, enthusiasm, and an openness to change (p. 78).

Leading as engineering involves equipping teachers, principals, and district staff with the knowledge and skills needed to implement the teaching strategies promoted in the innovation. A multi-layered system of professional development included direct training of teachers, support from school and district coaches, and principals who were trained how to observe new classroom instruction and provide targeted support (p. 87).

While Duval used America's Choice extensively, there was the desire from the beginning to transfer the "engineering" capacity to the district after 3 years. This was Fryer's plan from the beginning and it made sense from both a financial and long-term capacity standpoint. However, it also became a political one as more board members and others in the community questioned the need for a continuing relationship with NCEE. The issue of whether to buy professional development services and materials externally or create them internally was played out in the areas of literacy and leadership training. In both cases, a significant effort was begun internally only to change gears and purchase these from NCEE.

In analyzing DCPS' use of data, Supovitz looked at four purposes and uses:

1. To provide information to teachers and students in improve teaching and learning
2. To provide information for accountability
3. To monitor programs and decide what changes, if any, are needed
4. To support a learning organization that increases in capacity and makes better decisions across the entire district (p. 13).

At the classroom and school level, DCPS developed a number of tools for assessment and analysis, as well as training, to give a broad view of student formative and summative performance in an easily understood format. This process was

evolutionary and developmental, slowly improving both the usefulness and increasing the use of data to help individual students. This same data was used to determine which teachers, schools, and programs were making more progress for purposes of accountability and program modifications. At the macro level, DCPS developed two ways of determining progress on the key initiatives in the frameworks. The Snapshot system helped the district determine degree of implementation of key areas like literacy, mathematics, use of data, school safety, and learning communities. Trained administrators and coaches would observe and interview in a stratified random sample of schools and classrooms using rubrics that were developed by the district. The snapshot system served two purposes. It gave a current view as to the quality of implementation of key strategies district-wide and also helped build a common understanding of how to view practice among key instructional leaders at the schools and district level. Finally, DCPS developed extensive ways of collecting and displaying data on progress on the give goals, most notably a mission control room at the district office that was used internally for planning and externally with business and civic groups (Supovitz, 2006).

In addition, twice a year each school would self-assess using an Implementation Rubric that would be followed by a team review by their supervisors and content area experts. All of this data was used to determine, at a district level, where more emphasis needed to be placed to reach full implementation of the major initiatives.

While professional learning communities were not developed as fully as intended, the implementation of the other key elements discussed above had begun to turn DCPS into a learning organization with sustainability beyond any program or even

any superintendent. Since the focus of DCPS was to put the ideas and systems in place across the district, rather than depend solely on the personality and individual leadership of the superintendent, it made DCPS an example of powerful leadership that had the potential to expand and sustain its success (p. 236).

Section III: Recent National and International Organization Studies (2010-2011)

The following studies were conducted between 2006 and 2012 by highly credible national organizations.

Case #15: Council of Great City Schools/American Institute of Research (AIR)

The Council of Great City Schools (CGCS) is a member organization composed of 67 of the largest city school districts in America. Its mission is to promote the cause of urban schools through legislation, research, media relations, and networking to collaboratively address challenges in providing the best possible education for urban youth. The American Institute of Research (AIR) is one of the largest and most respected organizations conducting research in behavioral and social science. They have worked extensively with national, state, and local education organizations to identify effective policies and practices.

In Fall 2011, the Council of Great City Schools and the American Institute of Research collaborated in releasing *Pieces of the Puzzle: Factors in the Improvement of Urban School Districts on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP)*. To date, it is the most comprehensive study of improving urban school districts in America. Based on a rigorous and extensive analysis of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results for districts that are a part of the Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA) and general national NAEP results, the study concluded that the

urban districts were improving at a statistically significant ($<.05$) faster rate in 4th and 8th grade mathematics and reading than the rest of the nation (p. 21).

The study also identified which of the 11 districts that participated in the TUDA during the years 2003-09 were increasing student performance at a faster rate, and identified what they were doing that other districts that were not improving were not doing (p.17). Districts that were increasing performance were Boston and Atlanta. While Charlotte-Mecklenburg did not improve significantly, it consistently outperformed other districts after adjusting for percent of students on free/reduced lunch, from racial minorities, or identified as English Language Learners (ELL). Cleveland was used as the non-example because their student performance on TUDA either remained the same or fell during this time period (p. 26).

Several conclusions were drawn by the researchers. What did not seem to matter were governance (mayoral controlled vs. traditional school board), choice (charters, vouchers, etc.), degree of power of labor unions, funding models, or degree of alignment of district and state standards with the rigorous standards of NAEP (p. 26-27). These might be somewhat surprising since much of the policy discussion and battles often revolve around these issues. Only changes that directly impacted instruction were significant (p. 26) and these were most powerful when implemented systemically district-wide rather than one school at a time (p. 27). Improving districts “define and preserve a suite of strategies simultaneously and lock them together in a way that is seamless and mutually reinforcing” (p. 183).

Six key areas of improvement were found consistently in the three higher performing districts (Boston, Atlanta, and Charlotte) and not found in Cleveland:

1. Strong leadership (superintendent, school board, and district curriculum) that establishes a compelling vision that unifies and sustains improvements.
2. System-wide goals that are measurable and are used to hold staff accountable.
3. A clear, well-communicated approach to teaching and learning that is uniformly implemented across the district.
4. A well-defined plan of professional development that sets direction, builds skills, and provides coaching support in priority areas.
5. A systematic monitoring plan that determines the degree to which district initiatives are supported and implemented to determine how to deploy support.
6. Regularly uses data and assessment of student progress to gauge student progress, modify practice, and target resources (p. 26).

While each district had its own history and context in implementing reforms, they shared the ability to assess their current status honestly, to identify capacity to address them, and when to change approaches or actions (p. 29). They had strong strategic plans effectively implemented by “stable, long-standing energetic leadership teams and these leaders’ vision for improvement” (p. 184). These determined whether student achievement was continually improving or stalled.

Case #16: Mourshed, M., Chijoke, C., & Barber, M.: *How the world’s most improved school systems keep getting better* (2010). Executive summary.

This study, written by Mourshed, Chijoke, and Barber for the McKinsey & Company, a world-wide business consulting group, identified 20 school systems that had achieved significant and sustained gains in student achievement based on national and international assessments. These school systems represented a wide variety of starting points from which to make progress.

Based on over 200 interviews covering over 600 interventions, eight reform elements were identified that can be replicated as systems “move from poor to fair to good to great to excellent” (p. 2):

1. Regardless where it starts, any system can make significant gains in six years or less.
2. Focus on improving how instruction is delivered and less on structure and resources.
3. Different performance stages (poor to excellent) require a unique set of interventions (e.g.)
 - a. Fair to good focused on data gathering, organization, finances, and teaching methods.
 - b. Good to great focused on the teaching profession like certification, practices, and career paths.
4. The context of a system determines more how (sequence, timing, roll out) an intervention is done than what is done.
5. Six interventions occur at every performance stage
 - a. Improve instructional skills of teachers and managerial skills of principals
 - b. Assessing students
 - c. Improving data systems
 - d. Align policy and law to support improvements
 - e. Modify standards and curriculum
 - f. Align evaluation and compensation of teachers and principals with the reforms
6. Systems beginning at poor or fair need a more top down approach to instruction while those starting from good or great decentralize these decisions in exchange for mutual accountability with collaborative practice.
7. Leaders take advantage of a crisis to accelerate the reforms.
8. Leadership continuity is critical with longer tenures and effective succession planning (p. 3-4).

Section IV: The Broad Prize for Urban Education Case Studies (2006-2012)

The Broad Prize for Urban Education has been recognizing the most improved public school districts in the United States since 2003. Comparing school districts with others in their state and, where possible, other districts nationally, Broad uses a complex and comprehensive data analysis to identify finalists for the prize. Data elements include academic performance, graduation rates, college readiness, and other factors. To qualify as a participating district, the student population must be at least 37,500 with at least 40% of students from minority racial groups and 40% on free/reduced lunch.

Districts that are selected as finalists are visited by a team of experts that reviews district documents, interviews a variety of stakeholders, and conducts targeted site visits. The quantitative and qualitative information are reviewed by a panel of experts that makes the final selection. For the purposes of this study, the exemplary practices of the districts selected between 2006 and 2012 are presented.

Case #17: Boston, 2006

Curriculum and academic goals

The district focused on moving students to proficiency on high standards and eliminating achievement gaps. A tightly coupled system of grade and course level performance standards, pacing guides, formative and summative assessments, school-wide curriculum/instruction implementation reviews, and alignment of district goals and targets with school improvement plans was implemented (p. 3).

Staff selection, leadership, and capacity building

Boston improved quality, efficiency, and timing of hiring teachers along with stronger support system for new teachers have improved the breadth and depth of the instructional talent pool. Principals were prepared through a series of development opportunities including year-long residencies, targeted professional development, and a stronger connection with the Deputy Superintendents (p. 4).

Instructional programs, practices, and arrangements

Instructional programs were selected and implemented using a district-wide model that engaged teachers in reflective practice study groups with coaching support. Focus areas were a more inclusive special education model, a more aligned English as a Second Language (ESL) program, high school academies, pre-k, and smaller learning

communities. The district also mandated extensive time for language arts and mathematics in K-5 with double blocking in these subjects in grades 6 and 9 (p. 5).

Monitoring: Compilation, analysis, and use of data

An electronic system was used district-wide to collect, analyze, and interpret data, with easy to use tools linking student demographics and performance (grades and district and state assessments results) to state standards and graduation status.

Teachers used this system to identify individual student needs and develop unique instructional strategies, and district staff used it to provide more frequent, targeted assistance to low-performing schools (p. 6).

Recognition, intervention, and adjustments

Schools that were under-performing were led through an intensive analysis to create an improvement plan in order to close achievement gaps. Likewise, struggling students were provided before- or after-school help and/or required to attend summer school. High performing intermediate grade students (4-6) were provided an accelerated curriculum and high performing middle school students (6-8) were invited to attend one of three Exam Schools (p. 7).

Influential factors

There was a strong collaboration with city services since the mayor appoints the superintendent and the school board, and the school district is considered a city department. The Boston Plan for Excellence, a local education fund, provided literacy professional development, supported innovative practice, and assisted in identifying more effective district policies and practices. Family and community engagement efforts were also expanded (p. 8).

Human resource processes have been changed to provide more pertinent information in the hands of principals as well as becoming more market driven based on school needs. Teacher contracts have been changed to eliminate involuntary transfers, thus increasing instructional time (p. 8).

Case #18: 2007 New York City, Department of Education (NYCDOE)

Teaching and learning

New York's strategy for curriculum and instruction was to ensure uniform core practices were established in every school then releasing autonomy for certain programmatic decisions to meet student needs. A core curriculum in literacy (balanced literacy) and math was implemented in 2002-03 in nearly 800 schools with about 200 schools exempted based on past performance. Curriculum guides and instructional coaches were provided to assist teachers and guide implementation (p. 3).

Schools used general guidelines of effective strategies and data on their students to create lessons to meet individual student needs in meeting the state standards. A tiered approach to intervention was used to assist struggling students with the intent to address problems early in the regular classroom rather than requiring special education services (p. 4).

A comprehensive system of assessments and analysis tools were developed between 2003-06 in order to identify student learning gaps, inform school-wide decisions regarding programs, and for accountability purposes. Extensive school quality reviews were conducted to determine the level of use of the data to improve teaching and learning (p. 4).

NYCDOE established the Leadership Academy between 2003-06 to increase the ability of school-based leaders to support high quality instruction. An aspiring principal

program provided a 14-month internship followed by a year of coaching once principals are placed in schools. Principals were supported by school and district instructional coaches. Local Instructional Superintendents (LIS) conducted walk-throughs and provided feedback to principals as part of the evaluation process (p. 5).

District leadership

When Mayor Blumberg gained control of the NYC schools, he consolidated 32 highly independent community districts into 10 regions under the direction of Chancellor Joel Klein. The model's purpose was to move more to a support and accountability model for autonomous schools. Chronically failing schools were closed and both charter and small schools were established. Students who were not proficient in grades 3, 5, and 7 were retained, requiring schools to determine how to assist students in reaching proficiency by these key grades (p. 6).

NYCDOE is a department of the city government which assists in aligning services for students. The mayor, chancellor, and a deputy mayor for education and community development shape the vision and key initiatives while an appointed board of 13 (8 by the mayor) approves department policies (p. 7).

Schools and regions (10) have clearly articulated goals and targets to increase student proficiency on state tests. Five strands were used to establish school comprehensive education plans (CEP) used for principal evaluation. In 2007-08, school progress reports with designated letter grades were used to compare schools with similar challenges (p. 7).

Operations and support systems

NYCDOE moved progressively toward consolidation of various funding streams into one, increased school-based budgeting such that 80% is under local control, and

developed a weighted student funding formula designed to address the needs of students. Principals received training on how to allocate resources to improve targeted academic goals and their school budgets were published and easily accessible for purposes of transparency (p. 8).

Case #19: Brownsville Independent School District (BISD)

Teaching and learning

The curriculum in Brownsville was based on the state standards, Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), and provided teachers with a scope and sequence as well as pacing guides, objectives, materials, lesson strategies, and assessments for each six-week unit. All grade levels and subjects were required to use state-adopted textbooks. Despite this level of district-led structure, teachers, schools and area superintendents had flexibility in modifying the prescribed curriculum and selecting supplemental materials. Yearly reviews of the curriculum with school-level input from teachers and principals increased ownership. Teacher committees were also used to review new curriculum and recommend instructional materials (p. 4).

Since Brownsville had a high percentage of students with limited English skills, both transition programs (Spanish with ESL) or dual language (Spanish and English), were offered to parents. Most BISD elementary teachers were certified in bilingual education and new teachers were trained on four ELL modules to promote rapid gains in English proficiency. A variety of interventions were offered to all students on Saturday and during the summer, taught by teachers with demonstrated success in those areas (p. 5).

District-wide benchmark assessments tied to TAKS were given twice a year in core academic subjects in grades 3-12. These, along with additional school-wide and

classroom assessments, were used to guide instruction, reteach using flexible grouping so students achieved mastery, and push proficient students to advanced levels. Extensive professional development was provided to teachers throughout the year on data analysis and interpretation tied to instructional decision making using teacher collaboration meetings (p. 5).

School principals' and area assistant superintendents' primary role was to provide instructional leadership. They attended the same training as teachers, conducted regular classroom walk-throughs, and provided teachers with feedback and support. Assistant principals, department heads, instructional deans, and district-level content experts also assisted teachers with a belief in shared responsibility (p. 6).

District leadership

BISD had a clear mission for student learning, strategic goals, necessary supports, and accountability for results for all staff. Ongoing continuous improvement planning processes included teachers, principals, parents, community, district staff, and the school board. BISD offered a wide range of learning opportunities to prepare students for post-secondary education and citizenship. Most of the staff came from the school district and retention rates were high. Parents were considered partners and were provided information and education so they could more effectively assist their children (p. 7).

District goals for student achievement were tightly aligned with campus improvement plans. A District Educational Improvement Committee (DEIC), a broad-based advisory group, reviewed data and made recommendations to the school board on the district improvement plan. Extensive use of school-based decision-making teams included budget, purchasing, curriculum, data analysis, and hiring. As a result of these

efforts, there was a sense of shared ownership of the district plan on the part of parents and the community (p. 8).

Teachers met with principals and principals met with assistant superintendents at the beginning of the year to set goals and identify needed support. Classroom and school walk-throughs monitored progress on the goals. Differential supports were provided to teachers and schools based on their progress (p. 8).

Operations and support systems

Fiscal resources were managed well as indicated by a high percentage of funding going to teaching and learning, the securing of additional funding through grants, superior ratings from the state for financial performance, and an excellent bond rating. The budgeting process was transparent, included principal input, aligned with district initiatives, accounted for school and student needs, and included significant school-based autonomy.

Organizational structures and management

BISD was named safest school district in Texas for the 2006-07 school year. It provided a range of services for special education, gifted, and ELL students. There was a commitment to providing a balanced education, the arts, sports, and other enrichment activities (p. 9).

Support for teaching and learning

BISD provided extensive professional development opportunities for staff that were imbedded within schools to support school and district improvement plans. Some of these were mandated for all schools, while others used set-aside time for school-based or cluster issues (p. 9).

Case #20: 2009 Aldine Independent School District (AISD)

Curriculum, instruction, assessment, and data management

AISD had an aligned instructional system connecting curriculum, instruction, instructional resources, and student achievement data. There was a scope and sequence built around six-week units in every course at every grade with sample lesson plans that had been vetted. Teachers had easy access to this information through TRIAND, an integrated electronic curriculum and assessment tool. Lesson plans were submitted through TRIAND and reviewed by principals for alignment each week.

Teacher teams reviewed assessments regularly during common planning to focus and improve lessons, as well as determine which student(s) needed reteaching of a skill or concept. Benchmark assessments, given twice a year, were developed by teachers with guidance from district curriculum staff. Same day turnaround made assessment data available that was disaggregated by teacher, grade level, student sub-groups, school, and district. Data from TRIAND was also used in determining students' needs for special education or ELL services and for crafting individual professional development plans for teachers.

Monitoring progress on strategic plan goals

Using extensive community input, the school board and superintendent developed one key objective within each of three areas of focus: student achievement, student behavior, and community relations. Each objective had measurable goals with one- and three-year performance targets, as well as action steps with person(s) responsible and allocated resources.

School action plans supported the three strategic plan objectives. Quarterly reviews with scorecards at the district, regional, and school level documented progress, held leaders accountable, and ensured quick solutions to emerging problems.

Aligning budget and student achievement

Schools were provided extensive budget autonomy as long as they connected funds to priorities in their school improvement plan. Principals were trained extensively on assessing needs, evaluating school programs, and involving stakeholders in budget decisions. The central office held principals accountable for their decisions and also used data to determine where resources needed to be repurposed to address district-wide concerns.

Recruiting and supporting high-quality teachers and leaders

Aldine had developed close ties with 32 of the top teacher preparation programs in the country. As early as their sophomore year, district recruiters were contacting promising candidates and providing information about the relocation process. Job fairs and tuition for candidates in hard-to-staff areas also increased the talent pool. Principals mostly came from within the district and were selected and prepared through sessions that increased their knowledge and skills, in addition to targeted coaching by area superintendents. As a result of these efforts, over 90% of principals and over 85% of teachers have been retained over the last five years.

Case #21: 2010 Gwinett County Public Schools

Rigorous curriculum and instruction

Gwinett developed its own curriculum, Academic Knowledge Skills (AKS), to align with, but be more rigorous than, state standards. Quality-Plus Teaching Strategies (13 research-based instructional strategies) were implemented to teach the curriculum

and raise expectations for all students to be post-secondary ready. Gwinnett benchmarked their performance against the nation's 25 highest scoring districts in key areas of standardized tests, SAT scores, graduation rates, and AP pass rates.

Central office support for instructional effectiveness

There was a strong culture in Gwinette that everyone's role was to teach or support teachers. Central office staff were recognized as supporters and knowledgeable problem solvers who were readily available to assist and build capacity with school leaders.

Superintendent and board relationship

Albert Wilbanks, currently the nation's longest serving urban school superintendent, was appointed in 1996. He is known as someone who knows how to engage the staff and community to look forward, strive for higher performance, and meet current challenges. The school board, which was comprised of five members, each with at least six years of service, was committed to aligning decisions with the district's vision and core beliefs. They worked collaboratively with the superintendent to improve achievement of students.

Organizational structure aligned with district's goals

Operational Management Plans ensured district staff were responsible and accountable for implementing the district's strategic goals through measureable benchmarks. School plans were aligned to district plans. Performance evaluations were based on data.

Schools developed plans and prepared budgets but were held accountable for reaching the same high standards. Principals that met the standards were provided more flexibility and autonomy.

Budget is aligned to planning

Funds at the district level were tied to the strategic plan and at the school level to the school improvement plan. Anticipating the recent revenue shortfalls, the district was able to maintain programs for students and avoid teacher layoffs. Programs designed to increase student achievement had to pass a rigorous program review to determine the cost-benefit ratio in order to continue.

Case #22: 2011 Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (CMS)

Strengthening and energizing teachers and leaders

CMS had invested in strengthening the instructional leadership of its principals as it moved from a tightly managed instruction to more of a performance empowerment theory of action. Teachers and principals felt more empowered and energized to use their creativity to improve student performance. Based on school results, 112 of the 178 schools qualified for “freedom and flexibility with accountability” (p. 4). To improve its lowest performing schools, CMS instituted a strategic staffing model where highly effective principals brought a group of staff with them to form a high-performing team. Teach for America and New Leaders for New Schools added talent to help lower performing schools.

Strategic plan, data, and accountability

CMS established ambitious goals in targets in its strategic plan, “Teaching Our Way to the Top” (p. 5). Initiatives in the goals were managed through cross-functional project charters that identified actions, resources, timelines, progress benchmarks, and person(s) responsible. All educators were trained to use Datawise, an on-line portal that was used to track student and teacher performance and to inform instructional decisions.

Resources are strategically allocated

CMS had schools with widely ranging needs based on the income level of their neighborhoods. Higher need schools received more teachers, coaches, professional development, monitoring, and bonuses, which added up to \$6,000 more per student than other schools.

Twenty-five schools had undergone strategic staffing changes (mentioned earlier) to improve lower performing schools. All principals were expected to place their best teachers with their lowest performing students.

Parent support

Parent University was used to assist parents in providing support for their child's educational progress. More than 50 courses were taught in English and Spanish and were often held in community and faith-based locations. The community supported and funded this effort.

Case #23: 2012 Miami-Dade County Public Schools

Data-driven performance culture

Miami-Dade not only effectively collected data but excelled at using the data to empower students, teachers, and administrators to improve student performance. Teachers and administrators were trained on how to access their user-friendly data warehouse to run prepared or their own customized reports to pinpoint individual and group student needs. "Data chats" were used extensively by all staff to set goals, identify strategies, and determine success. At challenged schools, these conversations were held with the principal, superintendent, and senior staff to discuss progress, challenges, and solutions, and to take immediate action on critical issues (p. 3).

Continuous improvement

Miami-Dade learned from successful corporations how to focus on results, accountability, and efficiency centered around a clear vision and high expectations. As a result, employees owned results and generated innovative ideas to continuously improve. The superintendent also built an excellent relationship with the school board that supported his strategic initiatives (p. 3).

Financial allocation and accountability

In 2008, Miami-Dade's reserves were almost non-existent and bond ratings had plummeted. Cost cutting and revenue enhancing strategies instituted by Superintendent Carvalho stabilized the district's finances even in the midst of reduced state revenue. While district staff was reduced, a concerted effort was made to reduce negative impact on students and programs (p. 4).

Strategic planning

A broad range of stakeholders were asked to identify district strengths and areas needing improvement through surveys and focus groups. Focused around student achievement, four pillars were created. Extensive research was used to identify strategies to meet the goals. The plan was visionary, well-articulated, and effectively monitored by the superintendent and school board. Initiatives were regularly evaluated as to their cost/benefit ratio in achieving the plan's goals and changes were made accordingly (p. 4).

Section V: Recent Doctoral Dissertation Studies (2008-2012)

Following are nine case studies conducted from 2008-12 as a part of a doctoral dissertation. With the exception of one study, the findings are limited to one school district, limiting any ability to generalize any findings. However, these were chosen

because of their emphasis on the superintendent's leadership in implementing district-wide reforms. Studies #24-34 are not included on the summary chart (Exhibit #1, p. 74) because the focus of these studies was more narrow in scope.

Case #24: Johnson, P. (2008). Exploring relationships and interactions between district leadership and school teams. University of California San Diego.

This case study is of a K-8 district in California in its second year of not achieving Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). The leadership teams in the schools had been provided professional development prior to a survey that included five schools and district leaders. The purpose of the study was to determine the linkages between school and district leaders in order to build capacity (social, human, and intellectual) needed for school reform. School leadership teams were included, recognizing that the principal cannot be the only connecting point between schools and the district staff. Findings included the importance of a shared understanding regarding what constitutes good instruction, a trusting relationship between schools and the central office to provide appropriate support and creating a collective knowledge base.

Case #25: Trujillo, T. (2008). Political and organizational dilemmas of centralized instructional management: Rethinking the coherence model for urban district reform. UCLA.

This study examines one California high-poverty, high-minority district's response to meeting state determined performance targets. Like many districts under pressure to improve, a tightly coupled prescribed curriculum, aligned with standards, assessments, and professional development was implemented. Using theoretical constructs of the politics of education, instructional change, and organizational change, various tensions were identified. Questions to be addressed were:

1. What processes were used to implement the aligned system?

2. Did these processes develop instructional coherence, produce deep change, and account for adult learning?
3. What instructional outcomes were impacted?

Findings included:

1. Despite strong commitment from the district, political pressures undermined the desired changes.
2. The centralized instructional system was most successful in the alignment of curriculum with standards.
3. It only impacted teaching and learning at the surface level with little deep and lasting change.

Case #26: Garcia, E. (2009). An urban superintendent's strategies for systemic reform: A case study. University of Southern California.

Using the Urban School Leadership Foundation's (USLF) 10 key reform strategies, the House Model, the researcher sought to determine which strategies were selected by the superintendent and how the superintendent's background and the district's context affected these choices. The purpose of the study was to identify a useful set of ideas and implications to inform superintendent preparation programs and early years success. Study methods included interviewing the superintendent and document reviews.

Findings were that the superintendent used many of the 10 House strategies in response to the unique context. The driving goals were:

1. Create a focused, cohesive plan
2. Align resources with the plan
3. Develop learning communities to address diverse needs
4. Ensure effective public engagement and transparency
5. Create strong accountability mechanisms and program effectiveness

Case #27: Blanco, J. (2009). A case study in reform: Implementation strategies of an urban school superintendent. University of Southern California.

This strategy is similar to the previous one in that it evaluates the reform strategies of one urban superintendent who was trained by the Urban School

Leadership Institute. The purpose of the research was to provide findings that would help USLF refine its preparation program. The researcher sought to determine which of the USFL House key strategies (10 in all) were utilized and how both the superintendent's background and the unique strengths and challenges of the district influenced those choices. Using interview and document reviews, the study found that superintendent preparation and leadership skills, along with the district context, influenced which and how the House strategies were impacted.

The focus strategies included: 1) strategic planning, 2) building capacity, 3) creating a common vision, 4) identifying a Theory of Action, and 5) focusing on data driven results.

Case #28: Gifford, B. (2009). "School reform is like cleaning out your garage": A case study of one school district's influence on student achievement. Colorado State University.

Using interviews of district staff, principals, and teachers in a small urban Colorado school district, this study sought to answer three questions:

1. How does the district support schools?
2. How do the district's theories on what is coupled tightly or loosely impact the type of support to schools?
3. How do theories of action of the district impact teaching and learning at the school and classroom level?

The results indicated:

1. There is a strong agreement around moral purpose and an alignment of Theory of Action and what is "tight" or "loose"
2. There is clarity regarding how the Theory of Action provides a framework for schools
3. Building capacity is a critical priority for everyone in the organization
4. There is an emerging understanding about how autonomy is defined

Case #29: Danielian, H. (2009). District level practices in data driven decision making. University of Southern California.

No Child Left Behind was intended to expose lower performing subgroups in order to motivate educators to close achievement gaps, by creating a culture of inquiry. Unfortunately, the challenge of building educators' capacity to understand and use data was underestimated. This study's purpose was to determine what conditions at the district level affect the degree to which data driven decision-making (DDDM) was used district-wide.

The researcher interviewed representative district leaders including the superintendent, assistant superintendents, assessment directors, and technology directors known for their knowledge of using DDDM.

Six themes emerged to categorize the use of DDDM:

1. Recognizing NCLB's impact on data
2. Determining the processes of DDDM
3. Selecting which types of data to use
4. Creating a district-wide culture of data use
5. Building structures and practices to support data use
6. Identifying challenges to DDDM in order to overcome them

Case #30: Fisher, V. (2010). School improvement from the central office: A view of the five year school system strategic planning process in selected West Virginia counties. University of West Virginia.

Using case study methodology with four school districts in West Virginia, the author identified what theoretical frameworks were used to understand and interpret the decision-making process. He found that all four districts used similar processes to build consensus and make decisions.

Four theories that emerged were:

1. Systems theory as the overarching process
2. Distributed leadership to describe shared leadership roles

3. Stasis theory (the use of structured, sequential questions) as a model for interaction, knowledge building, and problem solving
4. Social decision scheme (a way of identifying individual and group preferences, patterns of influence, and collective responses) to determine the characteristics of their consensual decision-making

Case #31: Bravo, R. (2011). The persistence of hierarchy: How one school district's top administrators worked to guide a culture change toward collaborative leadership. UCLA.

The author interviewed the superintendent, cabinet, and half of the 25 principals in one district to determine the perceptions regarding a district led effort to increase collaborative leadership. The study was conducted seven months into a Facilitative Leadership training that included all school-based and district administrators. While all participants interviewed supported the idea of greater collaboration in decision-making, three areas of concern emerged:

1. The perception was that the superintendent and district administration were sending mixed signals to principals which limited collaboration.
2. There was a concern regarding the lack of time to meet to use more collaboration.
3. Many administrators continued to view their roles as hierarchal.

Case #32: Umekubo, L. (2012). District-school leadership for organization learning: Finding the balance. University of California San Diego.

This study was conducted in a high-achieving district with a high number of students on free/reduced lunch and identified for English Language Learner services. The purpose was to determine which actions taken by the district supported or restrained instructional initiatives at the school level.

Data was collected through surveys, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. Using social network theory, the author sought to identify the quality of relationships between principals and central office staff and whether they led to increased social and intellectual capital, and organization learning. The author also

identified what structures and processes were used to provide principals flexibility as long as there was accountability for results.

Findings were provided in two areas:

1. There were high levels of trust across the district that led to a degree of autonomy, and
2. A balance had been created by focusing on results rather than programs.

Case #33: Bealer, D. (2010). Promoting student achievement: A case study of change actions employed by an urban school superintendent. University of Southern California.

In this case study of one urban superintendent, a primary question and three sub-questions were asked.

1. Which of 10 specific reform strategies were used to improve student achievement?
 - a. How did the quality and implementation of the strategies align to the strengths and weaknesses of the district?
 - b. What additional strategies were used?
 - c. How did the choice and implementation of the reform strategies relate to the superintendent's prior background and experience?

Results indicated that the superintendent's clear focus on student achievement articulated in the strategic plan which took account of the district's characteristics created the environment to support systemic improvement.

Start-up strategies used by the new superintendent included:

1. Communication plans emphasizing transparency.
2. Built relationship with the school board that defined governance roles.
3. Reorganized district organization around academics, operations, and assessment.

Conclusions were that superintendents take the lead in system-wide reform around three areas:

1. Maintain focus on increasing student achievement.
2. Increase capacity for using performance data for decision-making.
3. Take into account the district's strengths and weaknesses.

Case #34: Hagland, D. (2009). System change and the system leader: A case study of superintendent action to improve student achievement in a large urban school district. University of Southern California.

This study is very similar to the previous study by Bealer in that it focuses on the superintendent's impact on the quality and implementation of 10 specific reform strategies. Sub-questions included:

1. How did the district's characteristics affect initial entry implementation of reform strategies?
2. How did the superintendent determine which specific actions should be taken?
3. How were these actions affected by the unique characteristics of the district and the superintendent's background?

Results indicated that superintendents implement plans that:

1. Align district goals to all activities in the district.
2. Provide clear connections with consequences between district vision and actions, thus creating coherence and building district capacity.

Three key strategies were identified for superintendents to effectively lead a change process:

1. Ensure equity of resources to schools and students,
2. Ensure effective hiring, developing, and retention strategies are utilized, and
3. Ensure an effective, on-going strategic planning process guides the work.

Summary

While a few of the studies represented in this review focused on a single district, most identified common initiatives or practices used in multiple districts. These strategies were synthesized into a comprehensive list to determine the degree of commonality in the case studies #1-23 (#24-34 were not included). (See Table #2-2.) While there were a number of strategies with one or two citations, a consistent pattern emerged, particularly when similar strategies were combined.

Based on the summation of findings in this review, high performing districts:

1. Build civic capacity and trust.
2. Share a common vision and beliefs that all students can learn at high levels, have a sense of urgency, and adopt a 'no excuses' attitude.
3. Have a strong superintendent and senior staff to lead the reform effort.
4. Have an aligned instructional system including common performance standards, curriculum, materials, recommended instructional methodology, and assessments. This system is built over time beginning with elementary reading and mathematics, then branching out to all subjects and all grades.
5. Provide an extensive professional development program tied to the curriculum, using instructional coaches, and creating professional learning communities at each school.
6. Create and use a comprehensive data management system to identify students' instructional strengths and needs based on the standards and common assessments with the goal to differentiate instruction, particularly for low-performing students.
7. Create an accountability system that holds schools and district staff responsible for specific improvement targets based on realistic stretch goals, with positive and negative consequences.
8. Allocate resources based on need and aligned with key district-wide initiatives and pursue additional external resources.
9. Provide additional assistance to low-performing schools and, as a last resort, reconstitute them in order to create a highly dedicated professional teaching staff.
10. Provide as much school-based decision making in budgeting and hiring staff as possible.

APPENDIX E
REDACTED SAMPLE INTERVIEW

INTERVIEW #[]: [Superintendent]

February [], 2013

PD: [Superintendent] on February []. As I told you in advance, [superintendent], this is about the strategic planning process, which is not only just what your plan looks like and the elements and how it was built and so forth, but the process, and particularly from the perspective of the superintendent I think is unique in terms of how that process is used to improve student achievement and the critical role that the superintendent plays in that. So it's as much about the how as the what. So, if you will first of all describe your plan. What are some of the key elements, key components to it? What does it look like?

[Supt.]: It was very clear for me when I had my first workshop on strategic planning and development with the board that we needed to look at the previous plan, learn from it, and then throw it away and start anew. And I think, consistent with what we find across many organizations, both public and private, strategic plans are cumbersome, they tackle too many goals and objectives, and more often than not achieve few of them. It is something that is discussed, printed, and shelved, unfortunately. So we've begun this conversation by recognizing that we need to be very [] about the plan, and we decided that we would develop a plan with a [] goal, student achievement. []. That goal rests [], and the [] all leading to increasing achievement are #1, organizational efficiency and that you have everything from the support systems, managerial issues, budget and finance, you have it. Second, human capital, development support. Third, community engagement and support. And, fourth, you

have this whole issue of a surrounding envelope for student achievement. So we're talking about

PD: Talking about social, emotional, behavioral support.

[Supt.]: Correct. And in addition to the support provided to schools by organizations. This is [] and [] and our college partnerships for dual enrollment can all come in.

PD: Okay.

[Supt.]: The process that took us there was achieved, as I said, through board workshop, but staff really, through preliminary polling and conversations with stakeholders in the community, got to the point of producing this strategic plan reflective of both local input as well as best practices across the nation. In some cases, we actually pulled stuff from international [] that presented [] performance, academic performance. So we stole everything that was good to be implemented in our plan, modifying slightly to adapt to our community.

PD: So you looked at who was doing well, nationally and internationally, looked at their plans.

[Supt.]: Correct. And we adapted and adopted the very best into our own. You know, it was funny, because in our conversations, leading to the adoption of the strategic plan, we kept referring to as best practice of others, if it was not copyrighted, we adopted as our own. And we packaged it, rebranded it, and it became part of mine and [the district's] culture.

PD: You talked about an engagement process with the staff and the community. Was that formalized, were there announced meetings, we really want your input on where the direction of the district would go, how did that..

[Supt.]: Formal and informal.

PD: Okay. Gotcha.

[Supt.]: at all levels. So we had community town hall meetings, we had conversations with organized labor, sought their input, had conversations with the local business community, both at [the] Chamber of Commerce as well as [] the economic development arm of the county. I, myself as superintendent, I have [], seek their input. This a [] meeting. So I expose them to the process, parents and students. So I think we left no stone unturned in terms of surveying people's feelings about the system, getting ideas from them, and helping them simultaneously. You cannot have just sort of an open-ended conversation. Helping them provide input within specific areas that are central to our core function.

PD: So you had already come up with the [] and so they knew that was the structure in which to provide input.

[Supt.]: Correct. Correct.

PD: Okay. Gotcha.

[Supt.]: And by the way, the input that we got was specific usually to the [] that represented their interest. It helped focus the conversation. We found that approaching strategic plans by simply going out there and asking, you know, what do you think we ought to be about. You're gonna get, that's why you get a dozen goals and objectives and metrics galore. And, for us, it's been important to keep the main thing the main thing and the main thing is student achievement and force everything to be around that.

PD: Okay. Anything else about how the plan was created? What was the relationship with you and the board, how much ownership did they take, leadership, did you have consultants working with you? A little bit more about the process.

[Supt.]: We had one consultant toward the end that was actually somebody who we brought in, brought [] in, and we didn't pay them, by the way. So these folks, we invited them to come in to help frame the conversation from an outside perspective, so that it would not be just superintendent and staff speaking to the board or the board speaking to superintendent and staff.

PD: Now this was you, senior staff, and the board?

[Supt.]: Me, senior staff, and the board. Correct. And we did it in a very public environment, but we took it out of the board auditorium where we hold board meetings because of the..

PD: You wanted it casual.

[Supt.]: Yea, and this was not board and staff, you know, from a position of power or authority, or even superintendent/cabinet versus support staff. So we went to an environment where even the way we sat was very collaborative, very, a very level playing field across the board for all. The conversation was facilitated. We brought in []. [] facilitated a conversation. So everybody felt empowered.

PD: Good:

[Supt.]: But we started with the understanding that we were going to be concise and narrow the playing field in terms of the specific objective, the goal for our school system, and then how organizationally we would arrange the conversation around the [] as I described. That facilitated the process a great deal.

PD: And it was also clear that this was a team plan. While they had a different role than you did in terms of implementation, you came away with a sense of collaborative ownership on the board/superintendent team.

[Supt.]: Right.

PD: Okay.

[Supt.]: And actually part of the facilitated conversation up front was to clarify those roles.

PD: Okay.

[Supt.]: In that for the purpose of plan and development, we need to have a meeting of the minds, and treat this not as my turf versus your turf. This is the collective arriving at the best approach, the framework, and the journey for the system.

PD: Okay.

[Supt.]: Part of the conversation also included, so what is, once we agree on a plan, what is your role and responsibility versus mine. Let's agree on that as well. And I have to say that, so [] was very important in clarifying, you know, to the extent that there was any doubt, I don't think there was any doubt, but to clarify once again, it's always good to have a reminder, the roles and responsibilities of the board versus the superintendent and staff. Right?

PD: Right.

[Supt.]: And even the role and responsibility of organized labor versus staff and the board, and even the private sector versus staff and the board. The role of lobbyists versus staff and the board. So those dimensions were discussed as well, 'cause once you have a plan, how do you tackle it? []? Who does what? And I think it was

important too, at that point, to reassert, if needed clarifying, the distinct roles and responsibilities in a very respectful way. And I think we did that and that was actually, from my perspective, the most helpful piece of the discussion.

PD: The roles and responsibilities?

[Supt.]: Sure, sure.

PD: Which often gets confusing.

[Supt.]: It often gets confusing, and the outcome, as you know, is discord between board members and board and staff, as a result of this unclear separation of responsibilities. So it's important for us to get that straight, to be absolutely unified in one single voice on the plan. So what do we hope to achieve by when, what metrics are we going to look at, and what respective role shall we have as we each push towards that one goal?

PD: How was this communicated? Once you framed the larger picture, how was that then presented to the community? Obviously you have a [] community here, a very [] school system. The degree to which they might understand at least some of the key elements, whether it's internal, within the district, or the community-at-large.

[Supt.]: Number one, we took a great deal of pride in having [], and we advertised that widely. [], after the planning session and workshop, there was actual translation through actual board policy, and this was an item that was presented to the board. That gets quite a bit of media coverage, []. But then we marketed it using all media, social media, through all communication with staff, principals, to communicating into their buildings. I communicated to our Chamber [], every one of our stakeholders, and we actually built the communications plan to achieve that.

PD: Goes with [inaudible].

[Supt.]: But, I tell you, the strategic plan is most relevant to us on the inside. The outside ought to see the benefits of you having a clear, strong strategic plan. The outside world does not necessarily need to know what your strategic plan is. Your strategic plan is an organizational document that orients your work.

PD: Right.

[Supt.]: The outside world ought to see the result of fruit of that. If you have a good plan and good implementation and good fidelity, then the outcomes are positive. If you have a disconnected plan, then the outside world will only see that as a manifestation of lackluster results, disconnected action between board and superintendent, which is usually the most visible thing. And we were more concerned about people really internalizing it and showing it vertically and horizontally in the district, more so than folks outside of the district understanding what our strategic plan is. They out to understand, however, what we value, what we value.

PD: So if they could say the number one goal of the district is this, then that would be a success from the communication standpoint.

[Supt.]: Correct. Student achievement. So when I say what the value is so when it comes time for budget adoption, and we have a practice in this district actually coined by us, which is a value is a [] process. Each year with the budget process we actually [] departments, functions, personnel, if they do not have a connection to student achievement. And, for us, the value of the strategic plan is being able to ask those tough questions. So the community would see, okay, we understand. It's, these are tough calls, tough decisions, but that's their, it's their bible. That's what they told us they

were going to do. They're gonna fund everything that connects to student achievement, directly, indirectly, through a support level. []? Through an advocacy level. But it has to have a connection. If it does not have a connection, we abandon that function and we [] or that role.

PD: Talk some about the process of monitoring, both the process part of it. You had certain activities planned in order to accomplish certain goals. But also formative outcomes, obviously you have probably yearly summative, but as you are going throughout the year.

[Supt.]: Yea. Just like student achievement, you know, you have a formative and a summative process. The summative is sort of much easier than a formative, actually, because it's more objective. It's more data-driven. So, at the end of the year, in each one of those four [], if we're talking about the [], in terms of finances, were we able to maintain our reserves, did we improve our credit rating? And, I am giving you examples. Did, were we able to pass a bond referendum to fund []? []? Were we able to provide [] to the students? Those are all very concrete specific. Were we able to negotiate contracts with value-added performance pay benefits to the employees? It's easy to know whether or not you hit those. []? In terms of student achievement, did we meet our graduation targets? Did we reduce the number of low-performing schools? Did we increase student participation AP, IP, Dual Enrollment programs? Easy to target. So it was very clear as to what the metrics were to evaluate, in a summative fashion, the implementation of the strategic plan. At the formative level, it is actually more interesting [], because depending on the vision, you have different ways of assessing and there are milestones. On the academic side of the house, it's easier because I get a sense as

to what the pulse of the system is through a battery of baseline interim assessments, etc. []? As most systems I think have. So I know whether or not I'm building towards the ultimate target. In other instances, a little tougher. So, on the community and support [subgoal], it's a little tougher to gauge. []? The issue of parental engagement is somewhat subjective. Now, we have the benefit, the value of []. And we measure that. So many parents are engaged, attend meetings, so many [], etc. But, in some instances, it's harder to get an interim gauge of progress if you do not have objective means of assessing, whether or not you're moving in that direction. But, I would say **PD:** Does that make that kind of a work in progress and/or is that something where the summative are pretty clear? Most of them are dictated either by the state or by obvious things in the community.

[Supt.]: Yea, I think that's correct.

PD: How can we get at the data in real time that approximates what we're gonna get summative-wise?

[Supt.]: Right. I wouldn't say that we rely strictly on the state. Certainly for academic data we do to the extent that it's FCAT driven or EOCs. Everything else is actually, it's data that we value, and we, so where we're talking about intense academics, even something as simple as a complex. A number of [] programs that will open in one year. We value []. So, we continue to expand []. We control that data. Student enrollment in non-traditional programs, we control that data. So some of the data, yes, there's a final recognition what it is because the state does produce that data. But I say the vast majority of the data is actually produced locally. But there are some areas that

it's tough to, it's tough to actually measure because all of the inputs are outside of our control. So it makes it difficult.

PD: Talk some about, specifically on the academic program, the connection of the standards, curriculum, instruction, assessments, professional development. To what degree are those developed at the district level and, if so, is that with teacher input? To what degree of those are left in the hands of schools or some of your areas or clusters? How tightly and loosely coupled are those?

[Supt.]: Yea. So that goes to the heart of one of the reasons why we [] is consistency, district-wide consistency.

PD: So pretty tightly coupled, including professional development and instruction.

[Supt.]: Correct. That's correct. So here's how it works, and I'll just take you through like a 12-month cycle very, very quickly. Last year's FCAT data becomes the first input. That's for student achievement. []? Becomes our first input for, right after that, I will actually address one issue that you did not mention, a sector from professional development, because professional development is the process of optimizing your human capital. Right?

PD: Right.

[Supt.]: That's important. But I actually asked the question about, should I try to, is it my responsibility in some areas to actually improve the human capital that I have? Or, should it have been somebody else's responsibility to develop that skill set? And, if I have the [] but the [] does not have the skill, should I be in the position of saying, you're not going to be my [] anymore? And what's the dividing line, [], between

human capital that I have, but I believe it's not my responsibility, or my cost, or my dime to actually perfect. I will let go of you and I recruit better talent. Okay.

PD: Right. Those would be my next questions. [inaudible] makes sense. Go ahead.

[Supt.]: Yea. So we use previous year FCAT data in addition to other assessment data that we have locally as the primer for decisions on professional development needs, professional personnel deployment, human capital assignment, at all levels, whether we're talking about teachers, principals, assistant principals, counselors, downtown stuff. []. So when you go to a principals meeting and you say by a show of hands, who has been appointed principal over the past [] years the [inaudible], hands go up. And we use data to make those determinations. So right here at this table, I meet with the [], and they bring me their recommendations for promotion, for example, and I have []. We look at performance for the individual in question for the previous four years. And we actually have descriptives that look at, if this somebody who's an AP in the process of being recommended to become a principal, the [] has his or her areas of responsibility in the previous schools over the past four years and the performance in those schools. []? And then we're able to match based on that data, is this the right match for this school, okay, considering the challenge. Why do I say that? Because you look at FCAT data, you look at the first baseline assessment, by first baseline assessment you have your people in place, school's is on, so [], new principals, assistant superintendents, etc. Then you have the interim assessments, and it is not uncommon for us to make tweaks all throughout the year. At this board meeting next week, I'll be [], if the fit was not right. It's a very impersonal, unemotional process. It's data driven. There's some subjectivity. Obviously, we'll take into consideration extreme

cases that people put on the table. So, the process is data-driven. We observe the data. We have a process called [] that allows us [] to meet with all the principals, particularly []. And it affords us an opportunity to look at the data, make data-driven decisions as far as professional development. So, if we're looking at one specific school, but we scale it out regionally and district-wide, we see some trend data let's say in reading or writing or geometry or algebra, biology. We make decisions right there at the table to invest resources in professional development in these key areas. Or, as I said earlier, we may make decisions right at the table to pull out teachers and involuntarily transfer them and put them in a [] in an area where they will cause least harm until they finish the [] and then, depending on their performance, we'll put them on a plan to actually lead to termination. []. And the way we started doing that was, one advantage of Senate Bill 736, we modified the way we hired teachers and the way we renewed contracts giving more and more, including a greater number of teachers in contracts that were no more than 12-month entitlement. But, on the back end, we also loaded extremely high performance pay enticements. So, I still don't know of any district in the state of Florida that's doing performance pay with []. I think we're still the only ones who do it. We do it by share, we were the only ones to do it I don't know if anyone else is actually doing performance pay with [].

PD: Which [] funds?

[Supt.]: The []. Remember the process that was

PD: I remember we were a part of it. It was a variety, a []. We had []. We had several sources.

[Supt.]: We put [] million out to teachers. Teachers can get [] in one year on top of their base salary. So, that's how we bought it, you know. I don't know if I answered your question.

PD: Yea, you did. It sounds like it's not just accountability at the school level, but also it's about identifying which support systems are necessary, mobilizing district staff around supporting so there's a mutual accountability, mutual responsibility.

[Supt.]: To the point earlier, principals have very little latitude, very little. Well certain principals. There are [] principals that have very little latitude out of [], have very little latitude over pacing, sequencing, budgetary decisions at their schools. The other ones have a great deal of latitude because, in my book, with increased performance, you get autonomy. []? Now when we first appoint the principal into a low-performing environment, their lack of autonomy really translates into a great deal of support. You get a lot of stuff done for you. You know, you have all kinds of coaches, you have a lot of curriculum support through []. You're familiar with our [] structure. But the one thing you will see across the district in [] is consistency. Pretty much, you can walk into any school, I can walk as any form as there may be into a school and know exactly from my expectation what should be taught at that point. Now that does not stifle acceleration in certain environments, but, you know, the standard distribution, there's a middle there, within certain deviation, you should have an expectation.

PD: Not necessarily this day at this time, this is what you're saying. But you have a learning calendar, you have assessments built on that calendar, so, therefore, the expectation is that people are generally moving in that same timeline.

[Supt.]: Right. But I should see in a week or so. In that [] setting meeting, when we are looking at the data, and we did [] at the beginning of the year after the FCAT data came in, we started the school year so the principals come together. []. And then, after the interim assessment, I'm sorry, the baseline, then after each one of the interim assessments, then for high schools only to deal with second 800 points, we have the final []. And in [], the principal sits there with the [] next to him, [] is at the table, []. []. All kinds of data. And it's their opportunity to, well their task is identify risks, opportunities, the gaps, and then strategy, self-strategy. You don't, if you just come in and tell us what the problem is, you probably lose your job. Simple as that. You need to bring us strategies. If you do a good job, if we believe the strategy, then the people at the table wind up in a position of actually making an investment in you. You, as the principal, can say, you know what. Here's what I'm about to do consistent with the strategic plan, so they know exactly which areas to tap into. []? And I need your help in this area, human capital, so I can start documenting this teacher. But this is a small school, and I only have two third grade teachers. And for me to document this teacher at the same time as I'm trying to produce, elevate student achievement in third grade, it's too hard. So, can you help me move this teacher and help me find a highly-effective teacher? This is a meeting on Friday afternoon. Monday morning you will have a new teacher there. And it's my responsibility as superintendent to have HR move heaven and earth to remove that teacher, take on the union over the weekend, remove that teacher, and find a great teacher, and incentives for the great teacher to go there. It happens all the time. We will have [] involuntary transfers in one year, out of [] schools, which is you know a nightmare for the union.

PD: You had talked some about the connection with budget and also HR. Anything else in those two areas about the alignment of basically resources around your plan?

[Supt.]: We don't believe in equally funding anything in the district. So to provide ample opportunity, you need to provide unequal investment. []? So, the way we target, not as much general fund, but the way we target obviously the federal programs, Title I, II, III, IDEA, I think actually we do a better job than most. We really have a seamless way of bringing general fund and these federal investments together and invest on the basis of need, an actual data-driven...

PD: So you have a chart. Here's the priority initiatives, and here's operating, here's IDEA, here's Title I, and they're all aligned to accomplish..

[Supt.]: Now [] the schools on the basis of need. []? [], for convenience, []. By the way, we also [] teachers, [] teachers. [] schools. We don't tell teachers they're [], but we know who they are. And,

PD: There's not a document that has their names on it that [inaudible] share with the media.

[Supt.]: The schools, not the teachers, Even though if you were to pull what the state published recently in terms of highly-effective, etc., all the way down, we had, []. I know [] and [], everybody's great. [], I think they reached an agreement where everybody was basically highly-effective.

PD: Okay. Talk about some of the internal and external factors, either that supported, enhanced your plan, or that got in the way of you implementing your plan.

[Supt.]: Well, you know, success has made parents, failure are orphans, []. So, you wouldn't need a plan if everything was great. []? If everything is great, what do you

need to improve? So there's always a little bit of a struggle, I think, with the different [] you need to deal with that can be reduced down to the issue of ownership. I wouldn't say there necessarily impediments, but sometimes it's noise.

PD: So you have to pay some attention to it, but it doesn't derail your plan.

[Supt.]: It cannot derail the plan. [].

PD: [].

[Supt.]: [].

PD: Right.

[Supt.]: So that's a constant conflict. []. So you have to negotiate that. The interesting thing is that you're stuck in the middle, because who does the union try to influence? Board members. []? Board members depend on the unions for re-election. And, between those two elements, there's that strategic plan for the system. And you try to navigate it, creating a balance which sometimes can be tough to manage. [].

PD: So, they would be interested in being involved if need be in elections should board members try to micromanage, say fall off your track, etc?

[Supt.]: [].

PD: []?

[Supt.]: [].

PD: []?

[Supt.]: [].

PD: Okay.

[Supt.]: []. So this safeguards and [] as far as implementation of the strategic plan.

There are the possibilities for influence or deviation, but you have to offset those with the balance from [] groups and, most importantly, the sophistication of the [].

PD: You already talked quite a bit about the process of modifying, that that's an ongoing process with your academic achievement, [] probably don't change very often, if at all. But, underneath there are the strategies that change based on their effectiveness, program effectiveness, strategic abandonment, etc. Anything else about modification of the plan? It's those, you said earlier it's primarily data-driven.

[Supt.]: Yea. Let me tell you the cycle and this is sort of a modified continuous improvement model that I adapted here. []. So we, we're always analyzing condition, so current condition, and current condition is. I'll give three big ones, actually four big ones – academic performance, so where are we today in terms of student performance. []? And everything that that entails. So critical instance in school, attendance. []? Students leaving, coming in, retention, transient data for student mobility, interim assessments. All that is there. Second financial stability. So are we getting our property tax collections, are they coming in as expected, are there state issues that are going to impact the financial stability as we know it. sequestration is everybody's going crazy now. What is the impact? So that is being monitored? Third is, how is the public seeing us. For me, that is very important, by the way. And that is not something we can [].

PD: So do you,

[Supt.]: So I [].

PD: You [].

[Supt.]: []. And the last is not only what are people saying about us, but what are people thinking about us in terms of []. What are people actually saying and doing about us? So the power of the media, how they speak about us, is important. Those four things are inputs that we monitor all the time. And, by the way, student achievement is our [], but I did not at all discount the impact that financial stability will have on us. Or the impact that public opinion will have on us. Or the impact of what's being said and done about us in Tallahassee or the local media [] will have on our ability to deliver our student achievement. And, so, there are, the gap analysis that we do will always identify critical needs. The critical need is followed by a solution. []? An action. That action is implemented. We plan, []. We've spent a lot of time in this room right here analyzing problems, opportunities. We've spent a lot of time, really a lot of time [] the plan. When we []. Okay? You implement. You analyze. The analysis is a determination of whether or not the solution we came up with worked. And this is again, you know, the latest improvement model, whether it worked or not. If it worked, then we scale up, we accelerate implementation. So, if we tried something in a cohort of [] schools, it worked, we take it to [], very quickly. If it didn't work, we eliminate it. That's our, our loop, all the time. And the way we, we've actually, when we present it to the school board, part of the strategic plan, there's actually []. It's a never ending loop. I mean, it starts here but then it loops, it continues to go a different problem, and each year, you know, you have one loop.

PD: So it's a functional continuous improvement.

[Supt.]: It is a functional continuous improvement.

PD: Not a model on a paper, but it's

[Supt.]: No, it is actually, it is actually done. It is actually done. It helps that I have a research team that I value, that everything we do is submitted to research, and a report [] totally without my influence. And, let me tell you, the analysis comes. Sometimes the study shows that what I thought would have great impact, even though there was national research endorsing the approach, bombed. And I have to . . .

PD: So they can even tell the superintendent that his idea didn't work.

[Supt.]: They can. And, actually, I just got one. I tried an [], and it, it's not that it didn't work, it's just there was, there was no hard evidence that students benefitted from it any more than they had benefitted from a more traditional approach. I have to listen to that, [], because to our initial point that data's going to drive investment decisions in the future. So, I always look at what does the national research [], what we know that's been done here that's worked. []? Can we learn from that and implement something? And then, we put it through a loop. And if it doesn't work, it goes into what we call the []. That means you're screwed. You just lost your funding. You just got [].

PD: Right. So how much time do you give something?

[Supt.]: It depends.

PD: Or, in the case, let's say, the case of the []. I'm assuming you looked at implementation. Did we implement it the way we said we were gonna do?

[Supt.]: Fidelities and [inaudible].

PD: But also, how do you decide, I still think it has value, but here's where it fell down. We didn't account for this in our planning. Let's try it one more year and account for that, or when do you know when to pull the plug would be another way of saying it.

[Supt.]: So the researchers actually tell us that.

PD: Okay, good.

[Supt.]: The researchers tell. And maybe it would helpful, I can give you one of these []. They're called []. Sometimes it feels like a suppository. It's not a pleasant thing, but it's [].

PD: Well, and independent.

[Supt.]: It's very independent. These, by the way, and this is subject to publication. So the researchers are very independent minded, very objective, they are totally empowered with doing the research, coming up with conclusions, and publishing them. And my agreement is, once produced, I cannot bury it. Once produced, I send it to the board. Once produced, it's public. And, it takes a little bit of getting used to because you are committed to your own failures. But, I think that makes us stronger, actually. The wins are, by far outweigh the losses. And, it helps me do away with something quickly, because it didn't work. Why would we want to continue to do it? Now, I use this strategically as well. I can ask the researchers say, look at this, look at this, you know, look at these different areas.

PD: You can help decide what they research.

[Supt.]: What they will, I often encourage them to look at certain areas. And I'll tell you one strategic that we used, []. Let's look at that. But they also know that, without me telling them, that every rollout of something new comes with an internal research arm.

PD: So it's part of the plan.

[Supt.]: It's part of the plan.

PD: Here's what we're trying to accomplish, here's our outcomes, here's our measureables along the way, and what's our evaluation strategy.

[Supt.]: Part of that loop.

PD: What data do we need to collect, and what time do we have the assets and resources to do that? So all of that's a part of the [inaudible, phone dial tone].

[Supt.]: Right. I'm actually gonna ask, I'll give you this one. It's an interesting one.

[Phone ringing]

Female: Yes, sir.

[Supt.]: Get from [] the last research study on the [] implementation.

Female: Sure. You got it.

[Supt.]: You'll see. I thought it was a great idea. And they basically in a polite way said it stunk. [laughter] I said, okay. We sent it to the board. We're not gonna do this again, or we're gonna modify it.

PD: [inaudible]

[Supt.]: They will adapt.

PD: So what advice would you give to superintendent's embarking on this process of strategic planning? How does that fit into the overall accomplishment of academic achievement gains?

[Supt.]: First piece of advice I would give is, number one, know your system, know your data, know your needs. And by know your data, I really mean not just knowing your achievement data, know your data. Know where the kids are, but know also where the adults are. []?

PD: Is that a community scan or is the community, is that broadly what their belief systems, how much are they willing to be supportive, etc.? Is that...

[Supt.]: Actually, not as much that. That's important too.

PD: Okay.

[Supt.]: It's more about what is the level of effectiveness of the [] I have.

PD: Gotcha. Okay.

[Supt.]: So it's this and, by the way, we do that a lot here. It's the matching up of skill and will set between the staff you have, the [] you have, and the need and challenge. So one set of data is brought to you by the students. []? They show up every year, and they all bring their talents, their fears, their aspirations, their dreams, their deficiencies, their lack of readiness for learning. []? Their own proficiency, which may not be par with the grade level they're in. They bring all of that – poverty, disability, ELLs, they bring all, that's your data on that side. And you have no control over that, by the way. And what you do have control is, what do you have here to match that, to address that. And, so when I say my first bit of advice is be daring in your analysis of the data that you have control over. You don't control the factors, these inputs. We control these. And that's a very, to do it honestly is actually very intimidating, because it's not getting the data. It's not knowing just so who are your, your high flyers. Why'd you [] principals? Your [] central office staff, or your [] teachers. It's now that you have that data, once you know where they fall, what do you do? Who do you assign a [] teacher to? []? Who do you assign a [] principal to? And that's a very, very tough thing.

[Female entered room.]

[Supt.]: Thank you.

Female: This is the last one and this was back in [].

[Supt.]: Thank you.

Female: But I don't think the attachment is there. They're giving you [inaudible]. Is that all you needed?

[Supt.]: Yep, absolutely. So, this is, I'm really promising, we're launching a new []. Great. June, and then February [] [inaudible] of [], and remediation learning with compensation, external, etc. And basically, I'll give you an example. See [] indicates that the reading program had a beneficial effect on achievement only for fourth grade participants. Well, we implement it district-wide for just one grade, it's not really that great. []? Well the mathematics program did not have an impact at any grade level. So, it takes courage to say, I think we tried it, and [], and it didn't work. So, advice to a superintendent – know your data, know your inputs, know your data, and be cognizant of the fact that, if you have a strategic plan and you have a specific goal that you need to meet, and you're aware of your data, your strengths, your deficiencies, and you do not so sufficiently over the factors you control to ensure success towards the goal, knowing that you have zero control over these inputs here, you probably will fail. And, by the way, [], that's what I see more often than not as I look at districts. I've started [] and that one element is the most critical one. Everybody wants performance, [], everybody wants to deliver on high graduation rates, lower dropouts, and they want increased participation in advanced academics. They want good [] scores, but there's a need and, or the fact is they have control. They don't dare to be disruptive, and unless you are able to discern between effectiveness and connection to function, you're never gonna be able to implement your strategic plan. So ownership of the data over which you have absolute control is critical. A lot of people, by the way, spend a lot of time talking about the poverty of the kids and this, and that's, you know me, I recognize that.

But, unfortunately, I'm not gonna be able to change the social status of the kindergarten kid on the first day of school. You know, he comes as he is. But I do have 100% control over the inputs on my side – leader effectiveness, teacher effectiveness, support systems, partnerships with external []. I have control of that. So my big, big advice – know your data, know your pressure points, and maximize your, maximize your influence over those.

PD: Okay. Good advice.

[Supt.]: That's what I do.

PD: Well, [inaudible] []. Thank you, I appreciate it.

[Supt.]: No problem.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

William Edward “Ed” Pratt-Dannals began his career in Duval County Public Schools as a middle school mathematics teacher, then served as an assistant principal and principal at six schools. He was a regional superintendent supervising 33 schools before becoming Chief Academic Officer and finally Superintendent from 2007-2012. His entire 36-year career was in Duval County. During his tenure as Superintendent, the district experienced significant growth in student achievement, graduation rates, and percent of students taking college level courses, qualifying as college ready, and completing career/technical certificates. Truancy, major conduct violations, suspension rates, and the number of lower performing schools were drastically reduced. Community partnerships became highly effective at providing wrap-around services.

Since his retirement at the end of 2012, Ed has been completing his dissertation and consulting with large urban school districts. He currently serves as a Senior Advisor with the District Management Council, partnering with public school district leaders to improve student outcome, operational efficiency, and resource allocation.

Ed earned his B.A. in Urban History from Georgia State University and his M.Ed. in Student Services Administration from the University of North Florida.