Strategic Planning for Today's Heightened Challenges

John J-H Kim, Tess Nicholson Powers, and Joseph Costello

With the Covid-19 pandemic's disruptions to schooling, exacerbating existing issues and creating a host of additional challenges, strategic plans were largely thrust aside. Districts and schools across the country pivoted to crisis-management mode, valiantly seeking to address the urgent needs of their students, families, staff, and communities.

But now, post-pandemic, the public education sector must shift from a reactive, crisis-management approach to a proactive plan for moving forward. Returning to existing strategic plans is not sufficient for most districts; focused plans are essential to address the most urgent priorities and align resources and actions to get results for students.

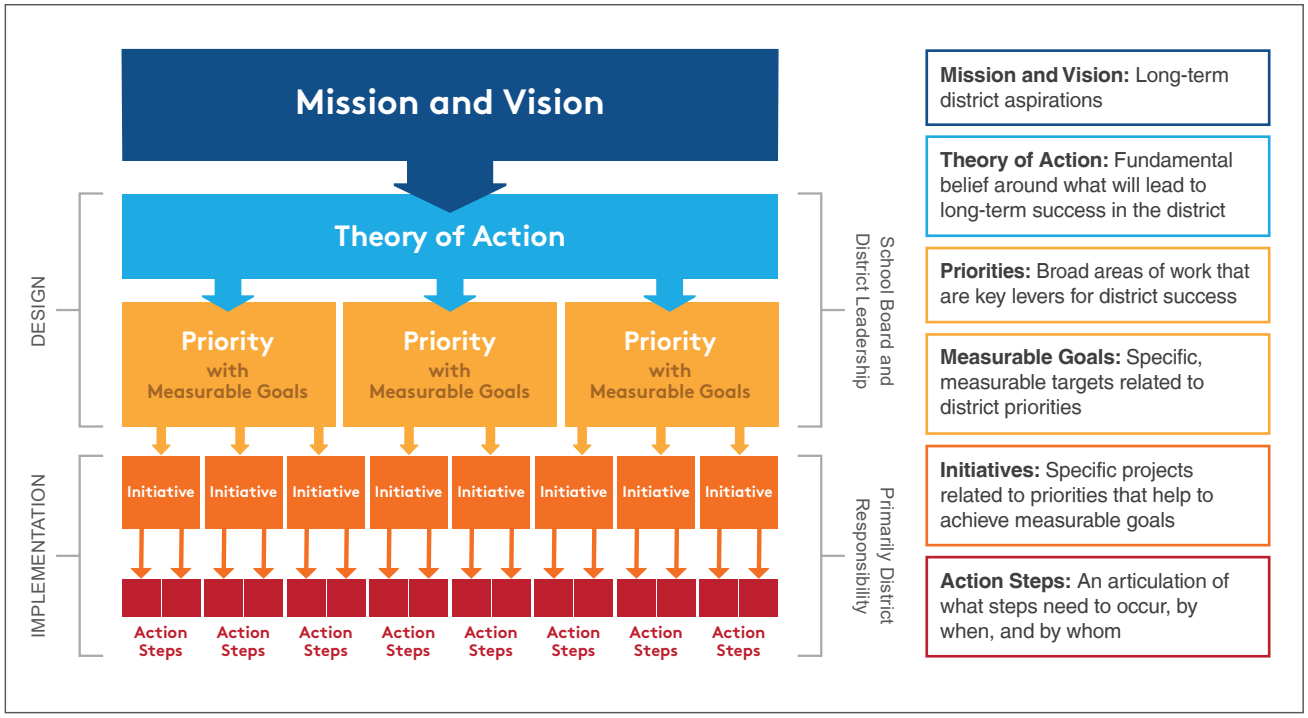
Here, we share District Management Group's framework and approach to creating a powerful strategic plan that provides focus, drives decisions, and aligns resources and actions to deliver tangible progress toward district goals.

DMG's Approach: Different from the Rest

What makes for a truly actionable plan that delivers results? A powerful strategic plan is not a lengthy, bound book with a comprehensive list of work to be tackled. For District Management Group (DMG), a powerful strategic plan is a highly focused plan that zeroes in on a select list of priorities and sets progress measurements that can be efficiently tracked to drive the daily work throughout the district.

District Management Group's Strategic Planning Framework and Approach is the result of deep research combined with refinements emanating from our 20 years of experience helping districts design and implement strategic plans that make a difference. Our strategic planning framework and methodical approach are distinctive in the following ways:

Exhibit 1 **DISTRICT MANAGEMENT GROUP'S STRATEGIC PLANNING FRAMEWORK**



Source: District Management Group

- From Vision to Daily Action

District Management Group's Strategic Planning Framework (*Exhibit 1*) begins with a district's vision and mission, and works to deconstruct it into the specific actions needed to achieve results.

The work begins by ensuring the district has a clear vision and mission. Once a vision and mission are established, much work is then devoted to defining a cogent Theory of Action. The Theory of Action is at the heart of a well-crafted strategic plan; it articulates for the entire district the fundamental change theory which will enable the district to achieve its long-term goals and allow it to focus on the most important set of work despite many needs and competing interests. Next, the district must define a highly focused set of Priorities accompanied by Measurable Goals. In the Implementation Phase, the superintendent and team take these Priorities and Measurable Goals and break them down further into specific Initiatives and Action Steps that drive daily work throughout the district.

- Creating Clear Roles and Responsibilities

District Management Group's Strategic Planning Framework clearly delineates the roles and responsibilities of the school board vis-à-vis the district team. School boards are ideally situated and organized to be actively involved in the articulation of the Vision and Mission, the Theory of Action, the Priorities, and the Measurable Goals. The work of defining the Initiatives and Action Steps is the domain of the superintendent and his or her staff. Creating distinct roles provides greater focus and greater ownership, which are both critical to getting results.

- Measurable Goals

District Management Group's strategic planning approach is distinctive in that it builds measurable goals into the strategic plan. The Priorities stated in the strategic plan are accompanied by Measurable Goals which the school board can use as an accountability tool to track progress against the strategic plan. Action Steps at the school level similarly have Progress Monitoring so that progress can be tracked at the school level and the daily work in the buildings can be tied in a meaningful way to the district's overarching goals.

- Engaging Stakeholders for Meaningful Impact

District Management Group recognizes the importance of engaging stakeholders in the development of a strategic plan. Therefore, District Management Group's approach specifies how stakeholders can be most effectively engaged to contribute most meaningfully throughout the process.

Most districts engaged in strategic planning reach out to their stakeholders at the very beginning of the process by holding a series of open meetings where stakeholders share their concerns and hopes as well as suggest potential ideas and solutions. After dozens of these meetings with different groups, districts typically end up with a lengthy list of objectives. For many districts, all this input becomes overwhelming, and the strategic plan turns into a lengthy list lacking focus. Some districts take all of the feedback from stakeholders and do distill it into a focused plan, but then find that many stakeholders become disillusioned and disenfranchised when they feel their input has been ignored. Discontent brews, and interest and support for the new strategic plan vanishes.

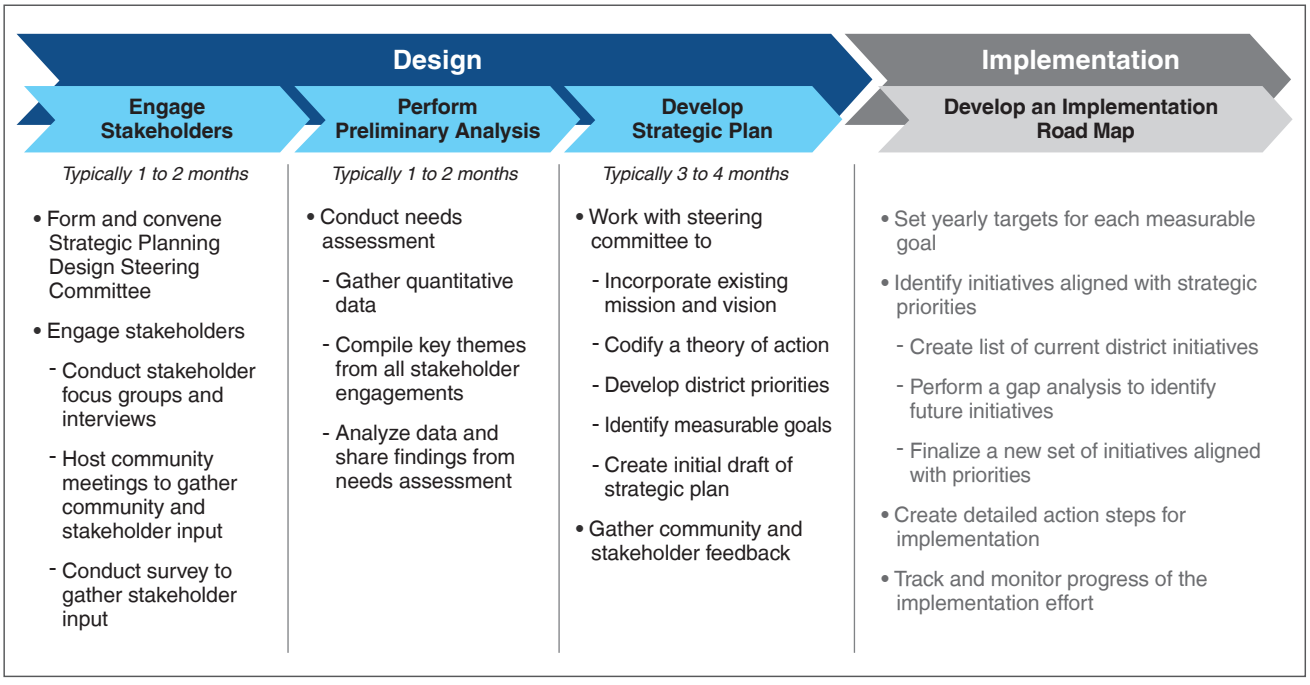
With District Management Group's approach, a Strategic Planning Design Committee is formed at the outset to lead the work and ensure that key stakeholder voices remain central throughout the strategic planning process. In addition, District Management Group's process includes a two-part community engagement process: (1) preliminary input is solicited, and (2) specific feedback is requested and incorporated in response to a draft of the strategic plan.

These distinctive features of District Management Group's framework and process combine to create what we believe to be a uniquely powerful plan that aligns the work throughout the district to bring about meaningful and measurable results.

DMG's Strategic Planning Approach

District Management Group has developed a methodical process for helping school districts work through this framework to develop a detailed, actionable, results-oriented strategic plan. Ours is a four-phase holistic process (*Exhibit 2*) composed of a three-part Design Phase to develop the strategic plan, followed by an Implementation Phase. Here we provide detail on some of the key steps.

Exhibit 2 **DISTRICT MANAGEMENT GROUP'S STRATEGIC PLANNING TIMELINE AND PROCESS**



Source: District Management Group

The Design Phase

Stakeholder Engagement

Successful strategic planning requires the input, vetting, and support of its stakeholders and its community. Indeed, in many communities, the school district is the largest budget line item for the town or city. Plans created in silos have limited potential for success. District Management Group's process engages internal and external stakeholders in the following ways:

- Strategic Planning Design Steering Committee

The very first step in District Management Group's Strategic Planning process is to form, with intention and care, a steering committee to lead and do the work of creating the strategic plan. The ideal steering committee composition depends on the specific culture and context of a district and community. Committee membership needs to be broad enough to reflect the various interests of the district, but it is not meant to be a "representative" body with representation of every area. Steering committees typically include representation from the board of education, district leadership, and school leadership. In some cases, districts opt for student and building-based representation or community representation.

> *"A powerful strategic plan is a highly focused plan that zeroes in on a select list of priorities and sets progress measurements that can be efficiently tracked to drive the daily work throughout the district.*

What is most critical is the cohesiveness of this steering committee. This does not mean that the committee members need to agree on everything, but rather that the committee members are committed to engaging in healthy, constructive discussions to seek the best plan for the *entire* district, and not for a particular interest group. Thus, thinking about the personalities and the potential behavioral roles that members play is almost as important as considering the subject expertise that a person possesses. The members of this committee should be expected to invest significant time and effort into developing the plan.

District Management Group recommends a group size of approximately 10 to 12 members. This number is large enough to have significant representation but small enough that it should be logistically possible to have full attendance at each meeting. Full engagement by every member of this committee is essential to the process.

- Stakeholder Engagement, Part I

At the outset, District Management Group conducts a series of interviews, focus groups, community meetings, and surveys of key stakeholders to capture their perspectives and insights. Key stakeholders include board members, district leaders, school leaders, school staff, support staff, students, families, community partners, small business owners, and any other stakeholders identified by the steering committee. This ensures perspectives and insights can inform the discussions from the very beginning.

Preliminary Analyses

Because there are always myriad opinions and theories on what the district could do differently, District Management Group believes it is critical to begin with an analysis of the state of the district. A common "fact base" grounded in rigorous research and analysis ensures that the strategic planning process begins with a shared understanding of the district's current status—both its strengths and its challenges—from which to accurately and effectively plan the path forward.

To provide this fact base, District Management Group gathers and analyzes both the quantitative data and qualitative data discussed above. The qualitative information collected from the interviews and focus groups with stakeholders is summarized and analyzed. In addition, District Management Group conducts a thorough analysis of district data, including student academic performance, financial

information, and operational performance such as teacher turnover data and survey answers. Ideally, this information is broken down by subgroups (e.g., by race, special education, etc.) and over multiple years, looking for trends and outliers. As much of this data as possible is then calibrated through benchmarking. This helps to pinpoint areas in which the district may be excelling or which may need particular focus. Together, the quantitative and qualitative data provide a rich understanding of the district.

Creating the Strategic Plan

The Vision and Mission set the stage for building the strategic plan. In districts where a vision and mission are already in place, language is reviewed to ensure that there is broad support and clarity to all. If districts do not have existing language or the needs of the district have evolved, the process begins with formulating a clear vision and mission. But for most districts, the bulk of the effort in building a strategic plan is spent on the following three components: the Theory of Action, Priorities, and Measurable Goals.

> *"One useful litmus test is whether the Theory of Action allows the district to determine the work that it would not do.*

Theory of Action

Crafting a well-articulated Theory of Action is challenging work: it requires various parts of the district to come together to engage in authentic and courageous discussions about the core beliefs of the district, the history and context of the district, what is working well, and what needs to change. Above all, it requires an honest conversation about the root causes of the challenges facing the district. Based on this rich discussion and reflection, the district can develop a Theory of Action—an articulation of the fundamental driver of change that will allow the district to achieve its long-term vision and mission.

For example, some districts conclude that a greater level of centralized decision making is essential to success. An example of a cogent Theory of Action based on this belief is the following:

If *district leaders*
- *Provide clear and cohesive direction to schools on delivering high-quality instruction through centralized decision making with input from school leaders and teachers;*
- *Focus time, effort, and resources on schools, providing excellent core academic instruction and social-emotional learning supports over other additional programming; and*
- *Provide school leaders with autonomy to use specific identified resources aligned to school needs;*

Then,
- *The district will enable schools to focus on foundational skills critical for student success;*
- *Schools will meet the academic and social-emotional needs of their student population, and every student will be prepared to succeed after graduation;*
- *Families will be confident in sending their children to our district.*

Other districts conclude that providing schools with greater levels of autonomy and decision making is the best way to address the different needs of various communities within the district and hence the best way to succeed as a district as a whole. Examples of theories of action based on decentralized control are the following:

If *resources are allocated directly to the school:*
- *School communities have autonomy over resources;*
- *Allocation is transparent and done according to a formula based on student population and characteristics; and*
- *There is appropriate guidance, support, and accountability from the district office;*

Then *school communities will make improved decisions based on school needs, and student achievement will increase.*

If *principals*
- *Are responsible for being instructional leaders;*
- *Oversee teacher effectiveness;*
- *Convey district priorities to appropriate stakeholders; and*
- *Are in charge of focusing the use of school resources;*

Then *they will be the primary leaders of change throughout the district.*

Too often, crafting a Theory of Action is viewed as an academic exercise. In truth, a well-crafted Theory of Action is transformative and empowers all levels of the system to drive toward meaningful change. One useful litmus test is whether the Theory of Action allows the district to determine the work that it would *not* do. A well-articulated Theory of Action should be able to easily guide decision making and budget choices, making the district's strategy actionable.

Define District Priorities

Once the Theory of Action is articulated, the next step in the process is to determine a handful of Priorities—thematic areas of focus that will propel the district toward achieving its vision and mission. The challenge with this step is to pare down the lengthy list of items that a district may want to pursue to a short list of key priorities. District Management Group advises limiting the stated Priorities to four to six in order to drive focus. Research conducted by District Management Group revealed that while virtually every school district has a strategic plan in place, only 3% of the district strategic plans reviewed had focused Priorities (*Exhibit 3*).

Often a district will have a laundry list of Priorities that reflect the varied opinions and perceptions of the steering committee team members charged with drafting the plan. The committee needs to work together to rise above their ideological differences or, at the very least, to appreciate those differences, and then move on to select a handful of Priorities. It can be helpful for the steering committee to refer to district data to ensure each Priority is aligned to a pressing challenge or need in the district.

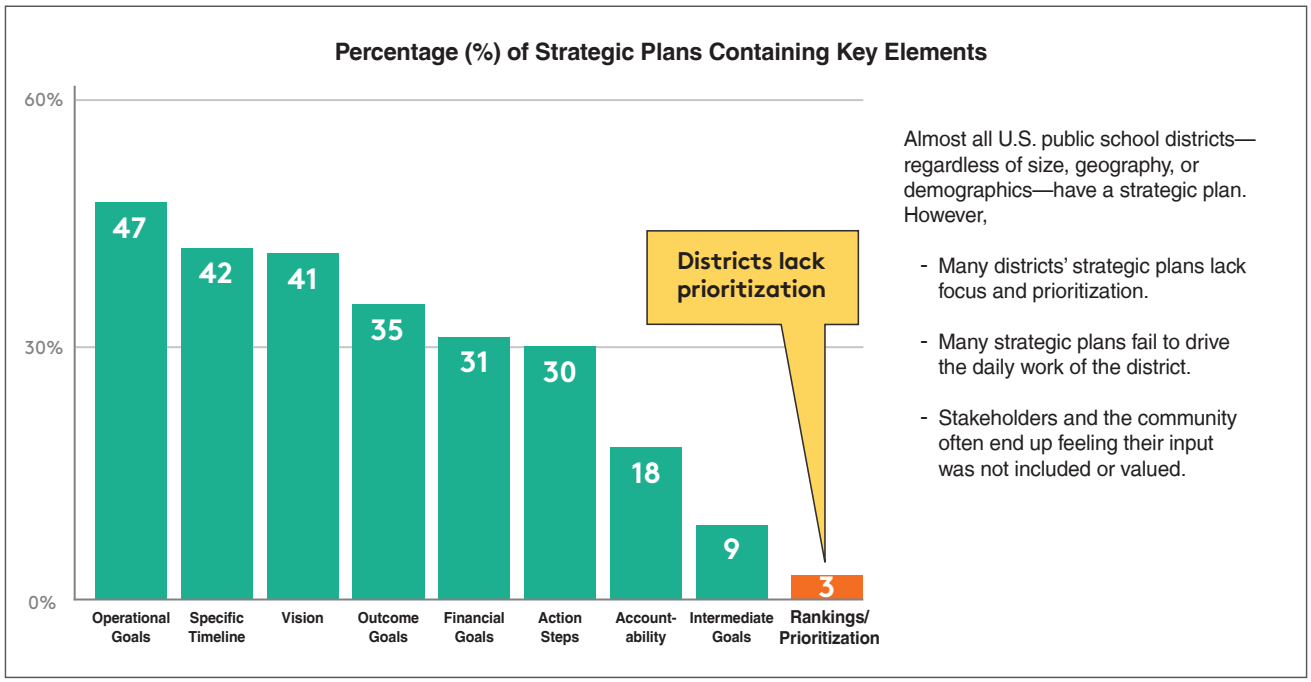
Identify Measurable Goals

District Management Group's approach to strategic planning is distinctive in that Priorities are accompanied by Measurable Goals that are articulated from the outset. The strategic planning committee is charged with developing Measurable Goals aligned with each Priority, following the SMART paradigm (**S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**ggressive yet Achievable, **R**elevant, and **T**ime-bound). Establishing Measurable Goals at the outset is fundamental to the long-term success of any district's strategic plan. For the strategic plan, District Management Group believes that two or three key Measurable Goals are sufficient to measure progress for each Priority.

Given the large amount of data that is typically available in districts, DMG has developed a few guidelines that have eased the process of setting Measurable Goals:

- **Include both lagging and leading measures.** Lagging metrics look back and tell us how things

Exhibit 3 **COMMON ELEMENTS OF SCHOOL DISTRICT STRATEGIC PLANS**



Source: District Management Group analysis of approximately 400 strategic plans

have been in the past—for example, four-year graduation rates—whereas leading metrics are predictive. Combining lagging metrics with leading metrics to track performance allows for intermediate course correction. For instance, the number of students who fail Algebra 1 in eighth grade is a leading indicator of how graduation rates may look for the cohort, all things remaining equal. Therefore, tracking this indicator can prompt the district to take preemptive action to improve graduation rates.

- **Minimize measures that track processes.** Completion of tasks does not necessarily lead to desired outcomes. Tracking progress on processes is helpful during implementation, but process metrics should not be the overarching goal. For example, is your goal to ensure all students are taking strong formative math assessments? Or is your goal to increase math achievement? Formative assessments might be a part of your approach to improving outcomes, but the ultimate measure of success should be improvements in achievement.

> *"Having a draft of the strategic plan to share with stakeholders helps to ground the discussion and allows for thoughtful, insightful feedback.*

- **Create several layers of Measurable Goals.** It is helpful to create different layers of goals to be used by different stakeholders. For example, the Measurable Goals drafted as part of the strategic plan will be used by the board as part of a district "scorecard," but other more specific goals will likely be more applicable for members of the district to chart progress.

An Initial Draft of the Strategic Plan

With the Mission and Vision, Theory of Action, Priorities, and Measurable Goals defined, an initial draft of the strategic plan can be written.

Stakeholder Engagement, Part II

Once a draft of the strategic plan is in hand, District Management Group's approach includes a series of facilitated meetings with the various stakeholders (e.g., all principals, broader groups of teachers, non-instructional staff) and community members, including community leaders, business owners, foundation heads, and residents without children in the system. Having a draft of the strategic plan to share with stakeholders helps to ground the discussion and allows for thoughtful, insightful feedback. These meetings provide essential insight into different perspectives and can highlight details that may have been overlooked and that need to be adjusted in the plan.

This engagement process also helps to create broader understanding and buy-in. Hearing various reactions to the plan can help cultivate an appreciation for the complexities at hand. While it may not create consensus, the engagement process creates a deeper understanding of the needs of the district and some sense of the types of tradeoffs that the district often needs to make.

Following the gathering of feedback, any necessary adjustments should be made by the steering committee. Then the school board should move to approve and adopt the plan. Through the public unveiling and sharing of the strategic plan, districts can ensure that various stakeholders understand and digest the intent and goals of the plan. This concludes the design phase of the strategic planning process.

With the public portion of the strategic planning process complete, the Implementation Phase—the critical work of developing concrete steps to put the strategic plan into action—must begin.

The Implementation Phase

The success of a strategy is rarely defined by the strategy itself, but by its success in implementation. The implementation plan needs to be tactical and highly specific. For this reason, primary responsibility for developing the implementation plan must lie with the district—specifically,

the superintendent and those charged with executing the plan. It is up to the district to translate the stated Priorities into daily action, defining the actions that need to take place, by what date, and by whom. If districts don't have a well-structured plan to break down the Measurable Goals into concrete actions and progress monitoring, the plan will just end up being another plan that sits on a shelf.

While the Implementation Phase is separate from the Strategic Planning Design Phase, District Management Group frequently will continue to work with districts in this phase, shifting to work directly with superintendents and their teams to develop a focused, detailed Implementation Plan.

Define Initiatives

As the first step in this phase, the superintendent and team must consider each Priority and determine the specific programs, or Initiatives, that will enable them to achieve the Priority and the Measurable Goal. When District Management Group is involved in implementation work, we typically kick off our first implementation meeting with staff by asking the following:

- How many major initiatives are you working on this year?

- How many major initiatives can you do well in any given year?

Without fail, participants readily admit they are attempting to pursue far too many projects and that it feels impossible to do them all well. District Management Group's process involves creating a short list of high-impact Initiatives for each Priority. To arrive at this list of Initiatives, DMG goes through the following three steps:

- **Create a list of current school-system Initiatives:** The "out with the old and in with the new" approach or the layering of additional programs on top of existing programs is wasteful and ineffective. The best approach is first to take stock of the work already being done in the district and leverage these programs to create a coherent and aligned approach to moving the work forward.

- **Perform a gap analysis to identify future Initiatives:** Once the existing programs are aggregated, they need to be assessed in terms of their effectiveness and their alignment with the strategic plan. This process will expose gaps where additional Initiatives may be needed to achieve the strategic objectives.

- **Finalize a set of Initiatives aligned with Priorities:** New Initiatives can be formulated to address identified gaps. The final list of Initiatives is a combination of existing and newly formulated ones.

Identify Action Steps

For successful execution, each Initiative needs to then have specific Action Steps that detail the following:

- What will occur, i.e., specific tasks that need to be performed

- How often or to what extent these actions will occur

- Who will carry out these tasks, including identifying specific school or central office staff members

- Which individuals will be required to provide feedback on interim work products, and who else will need to be informed as part of the process

> ***"Strategic planning is not an exercise in coming up with 'out of the box' ideas, nor is it a required exercise to satisfy the school board and stakeholders. A powerful strategic plan should connect the overarching vision to the daily work throughout the district.***

- When will these actions take place and for how long
- What are the key milestones to achieve as part of the process
- What resources (if any) are needed to carry out the proposed tasks

Action Steps provide the details of what must occur, align all stakeholders in a common process, and help everyone involved to think in a structured manner about the future of the work.

Progress Monitoring

Successful implementation should result in improved outcomes. Just as Priorities have associated Measurable Goals, Action Steps must have Progress Monitoring mechanisms to ensure that the daily actions are effective and help to work toward achieving the broader district goals. Sharpening the link between tangible daily work and the overarching strategy gives stakeholders a holistic view that can enhance their motivation and their understanding of the big picture.

Very tangibly, Progress Monitoring consists of the following:

- **A monitoring system:** Technology-aided dashboards or simple spreadsheets to track progress against defined action plans. Baseline and desired performance levels, timeframe, and responsible individuals should be included.
- **Regular review of progress:** Leadership staff should commit to holding regular meetings (e.g., monthly) to review data.
- **A designated individual:** Someone needs to be charged with gathering, interpreting, and presenting data, ensuring timely action steps and adjustments as needed. This person should possess project management and leadership skills in order to oversee successful implementation of the strategic plan within budget and on schedule.

Conclusion

We have provided here a quick overview of the key features of District Management Group's framework and process for developing a powerful strategic plan and implementation plan that focus and align the district's work to get results.

Strategic planning is not an exercise in coming up with "out of the box" ideas, nor is it a required exercise to satisfy the school board and stakeholders. A powerful strategic plan should connect the overarching vision to the daily work throughout the district. It should create focus, align efforts across the organization, and drive decisions about resource allocation to achieve the district's vision and get results for students.

The challenges confronting the public education sector have never been greater. In the wake of the pandemic and in the midst of transformative technological and cultural change, it is essential that districts chart a path forward. Existing strategic plans must be revisited and likely repositioned to respond to the new landscape. A highly focused strategic plan with a detailed implementation plan and progress monitoring is essential for the sector to take on the myriad challenges before it and get the results that our nation's students so desperately need.

We hope that this introduction to our framework and approach will help your district in crafting a plan to deliver on your district's vision and mission. As always, District Management Group stands ready to partner with and support districts in this all-important work. ◆

"A highly focused strategic plan with a detailed implementation plan and progress monitoring is essential for the sector to take on the myriad challenges before it and get the results that our nation's students so desperately need.