Roadmap to Excellence: Strategic Planning for State Boards

Great organizations have a clear sense of what they want to accomplish and how they are going to get there. For state boards of education, this vision and roadmap are typically articulated in a strategic plan. The best plans are living documents that guide state board actions for multiple years; lesser plans gather dust.

What separates the two? The answer lies partly in what the plan includes, partly in the process by which state boards arrive at the plan, and in large measure by what happens after the state board approves the plan.

State board members cannot dash off their strategic plan one morning around

Savvy boards can increase the odds their plans will live, breathe, and have measurable impact.

Paolo DeMaria and Abigail Potts

a conference table: Many and varied state stakeholders must be involved in the process to build a broadly shared understanding of desired outcomes in education and support for effective implementation and action.

A well-developed plan is the bedrock beneath other board and state education agency actions. Committees can be formed that align with each strategic priority. Budget and staffing decisions should align with plan goals. State board meeting agendas ought to reflect key components of the plan. And the plan can guide a board's self-assessment and monitoring.

A well-developed plan is the bedrock beneath other board and state education agency actions.

There is no such thing as a model strategic plan. The best plan is the one that makes sense for, guides, and is actively used by those who developed it. To avoid having the strategic plan emerge from its creation only to land in an obscure, never-visited state board web page, state boards can take steps to ensure the plan is meaningful, realistic, focused, and actionable.

Plans do not have to be comprehensive. There may be many routine board activities and responsibilities that are not necessarily reflected in the plan. However, the plan should reflect the state's priorities: where it intends to focus its efforts and what is likely to have the greatest positive impact on the education system.

The Elements

The structure of a strategic plan ought to match the needs and context of the organization. Thus, every state strategic plan will rightfully be different. States may select and include components from those listed below to best reflect their unique state context, knowing that not every plan needs all the components.

Vision. Most strategic plans will include a statement of vision intended to be the ultimate aspirational objective. The extent to which the plan applies to the board, the state agency, or the state education system should be reflected in the framing of the vision.

Mission. The mission statement is a clear statement of the purpose of the state board. When a board creates a strategic plan, a mission statement makes sense. A statewide strategic plan, developed in concert with the governor, state education agency, or state legislature may have less need for a mission statement and rely more on the vision statement.

Values. Articulating values can create a shared understanding of the core beliefs that shape the strategic plan. Value statements can help the reader of the plan understand the mind-set of those who wrote it. For example, one value might be "We focus on what is best for students." Maine's strategic plan sets out principles that guide the board's work, including "ensuring the voices of the public are heard in the educational policy development and debates."[1] The state of Washington's plan lists its values: equity; student-focused education; strategic action; dynamic and future-focused innovation; collaboration, caring, and inclusion; and integrity.[2]

Analysis. Strategic plans often present the latest data and state of play that animates the plan. These may include data on student outcomes and well-being, staffing, initiatives, and resources. Insights from workforce development, business communities, and higher education systems may also contribute important contextual information. Connecticut's 2016 five-year comprehensive plan was developed after a thorough review of data on access and opportunity, which drove the plan's equity focus.

Framework. Some states will put forth a framework for the plan. States have used "pillars," "domains," "elements," and other similar vocabulary to help audiences understand how they organized the strategies in the plan. For example, the "Alabama Achieves" plan addresses five overarching strategic priorities to support local schools and school systems: academic growth and achievement; college, career, and workforce; safe and supportive learning environments; customer-friendly services; and highly effective educators.

Strategies, priorities, and actions. Strategies encompass the "how" of a strategic plan. They are high-level statements of priorities and describe an overall approach for addressing a particular challenge. Actions are specific activities that will be undertaken in furtherance of the strategy. Strategic plans need not go deep into specific actions. In some cases, however, high-level recommended actions are presented. Sometimes actions may relate to conducting additional research and analysis around a particular challenge and developing a plan specific to that challenge. A strategic plan does not need a

Box 1. Examples of Metric Types

Various types of measures can be used to assess progress toward goals and objectives.

- **Input.** These assess the resources committed to a strategy. It answer the questions, "Did we invest the resource? Did we staff the effort appropriately?" For example, $500,000 was used to hire six coaches.
- **Activity.** This addresses the activities performed in furtherance of a strategy. For example, the six coaches provided 1,000 hours of coaching support.
- **Output.** This measures the change in behavior or circumstances that leads up to an ultimate impact. For example, coaching support resulted in 100 teachers adopting and effectively using a new instructional approach.
- **Outcome.** This measure focuses on the desired result. For example, the percentage of proficient students in classrooms of teachers who received coaching increased by 25 percent.

clear answer to every issue that an organization wishes to address.

Goals and measures. Boards should consider the question, "How will we know that we are making a difference?" The concept "what gets measured gets done" is prevalent in many strategic plan development processes. While various types of measures can be used—focused on inputs, activities, or outputs, for instance—boards are encouraged to set goals and craft outcome measures that focus on the desired result. For example, an activity statement to "hire more literacy coaches" is not as powerful as the desired outcome, "increase early literacy proficiency by 10 percent in two years" (box 1). The selection of measures can have a profound effect on how progress toward achieving the desired outcomes are monitored.

Goals should meet the "SMART" test: specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timely. They should be established based on available data. In some cases, new measures may be defined and plans for collecting new data established. Care should be exercised not to impose too great a burden on those who will do the data collection and reporting.

Baseline values for measures should be established, and targets should be set both for long-term and interim outcomes. Targets should be ambitious but achievable. Short-term measurable wins that show momentum can advance commitment and buy-in to the overall plan.

Implementation and monitoring. Strategic plans often include discussions of how the plan will be implemented, assign high-level roles and responsibilities, and describe processes for monitoring progress. The best plans often stall due to poor implementation. Setting clear expectations for implementation management is essential.

The Process

There are many ways to develop a successful strategic plan, and the circumstances and context of the board and the state will shape the exact approach. Generally, boards should consider the following steps at the outset.

Get organized. Defining a clear process for plan development is an important first step. The entire board should engage in oversight as well as final approval. Some states have established a steering committee that can engage more regularly and monitor the work more closely. A smaller group can also help shape how the plan is framed for consideration by the full board. It can be helpful to establish a working group, including staff from the state education agency, to carry out the day-to-day activities of developing the plan, preparing reports, and conducting background research. Such a group may also take on the responsibility of the actual drafting. Outside facilitation or process guidance by someone with education system knowledge can also be useful in supporting a successful

Boards should consider the question, "How will we know that we are making a difference?"

planning process and ensuring broad constituent engagement.

Understand the current state and gather information to make the case. A meaningful plan is founded on a clear understanding of the current landscape. It is important to review data on student outcomes, teacher supply and quality, leadership supply and quality, school climate, student conditions, among other things. Strategic plans can benefit from a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis; analysis of current activity; a root-cause analysis focused on specific challenges, and research summaries reflecting evidence-based solutions. The review of the current state of education should make the case to the plan's audience for the strategies that are developed. For example, Mississippi and North Carolina's boards took stock of their strengths and successful practices and lessons learned that could be applied to areas identified for improvement.

Engage stakeholders and build trust. Engaging stakeholders and building trust are fundamental to the success of strategic planning. Engagement and trust lay the foundation for a "coalition of the willing" who will join hands to ensure effective implementation. Engagement does not mean that everyone gets what they want. It does mean that everyone gets an opportunity to be heard. Trust helps ensure that everyone feels invested in a successful outcome. In many cases, those who are part of the process emerge as strong supporters, even if their preferred actions are not fully embraced. A strong process makes space for diverse voices and multiple perspectives in plan development that is sustained throughout implementation. Significant information is gained from these processes.

A strong process makes space for diverse voices and multiple perspectives in plan development.

There are several ways to approach engagement and trust building:

- **Public surveys.** Surveys can cast a wide net to achieve broad engagement of large, diverse constituent groups. Care should be taken to ensure that questions are structured in ways that allow constituents to provide meaningful input. Too many open-ended questions can be challenging to synthesize when there are many responses. By taking the time to craft concise, easily understood questions for public input, Washington received an unprecedented response to their strategic plan survey.
- **Peer group meetings.** Many states have found it valuable to meet with groups of teachers, students, parents, and principals. Valuable input can also come from business groups, philanthropies, and local government leaders. Associations can usually help set up such meetings. Maryland kicked off its strategic planning process with a student roundtable led by the board's student member, a teacher roundtable led by the board's teacher member, and a family roundtable led by the board's parent representative.
- **Focus groups.** Focus groups can be effective at testing ideas and gauging reaction to a range of approaches and possible strategies. It is important to structure focus groups effectively to benefit from honest reactions. Kansas received valuable insights that shaped the "Kansans Can" vision for education by asking three easily understood questions during 20 community tours: What are the skills, attributes, and abilities of a successful 24-year-old Kansan? What is K-12's role in developing this successful Kansan, and how would we measure success? What is higher education's role in developing this successful Kansan, and how would we measure success?
- **Policy leaders.** Other state policy leaders will have thoughts and perspectives on the strategic work. These include the governor and legislature as well as other state agencies (e.g., higher education, workforce development, human services, health). They should be engaged in order to inform the plan, promote alignment to other state efforts, and ideally gain their buy-in. How authority is delegated and policy developed in each state will influence which stakeholders need to be involved.

Develop a framework. Through a combination of understanding the current state, reviewing research and evidence-based practices, and engaging stakeholders, a set of main ideas and strategic components will begin to emerge. These core organizing elements reflect key, high-level priorities on which the state wants to take action over three to five years. Coming to consensus on the plan's framework is a difficult but essential task for state boards. They must make a realistic assessment of where improvement can be made with a concerted focus and what to leave for later years.

In some cases, it may make sense to take some issues off the table—ones that engender high emotional responses and for which significant unreconciled divisions exist, for example. The purpose is not to avoid these issues but rather to allow for productive conversation on the many aspects of the plan for which collective commitment can be reached. In some plans, it may make sense to have a written section that lays out both sides of a controversial topic to show the importance of the issue and explain why the plan did not attempt to resolve it.

Again, the plan should focus on strategies and actions that have a high degree of impact and are likely to be achievable. In reviewing many state strategic plans, some common organizing elements that reflect priorities over successive years include, but are not limited to, the following:

- **Student access, opportunity, achievement, and well-being.** Twenty-eight states' plans focus on college, career, and workforce readiness; 20 states on student physical and mental health; and 18 on access to rigorous content and coursework.
- **Educators and leaders.** Twenty-four states include plan elements on developing an effective, high-quality educator workforce; 10 on targeted professional learning; and 9 on educator diversity.
- **Parent, family, and community engagement.** Twenty-eight states set priorities around constituent engagement and 14 around building partnerships and collaboration.
- **School culture and climate.** Eighteen states' plans focus on safe, supportive, and healthy learning environments.
- **System improvements.** Fourteen states have specific elements related to increasing data timeliness and transparency; 9 on developing a system that is oriented in customer service; 6 states emphasize innovating data systems.

Plan writing and draft review. The strategic plan should be a living document that all board members, current and future, can relate to. Clear, concise, evergreen language is essential. To achieve this goal most efficiently, one or two key individuals should be identified to be the lead writers. These individuals should be afforded a good bit of license to prepare an initial draft consistent with the framework and key ideas that emerge from the process. However, their work must be subject to review and modification to ensure the final document reflects the full board's perspectives informed by those of external constituents. The language should be aspirational, engaging, and jargon free.

Implementation and Monitoring

A plan is developed so it can have an impact. Sometimes, the plan itself may address certain aspects of implementation. The plan may also specify how implementation will be monitored to ensure the greatest likelihood of success. Specific implementation plans should be developed with clear roles for the board, the state agency, and other key partners. Key aspects of implementation may include the following:

- **Organizational alignment.** A strategic plan may require clarification of the responsibilities of offices within an organization or, in some cases, the establishment of a different organizational structure. It is important to understand the organizational implications of the plan and to avoid creating disconnected silos that are neither connected to other offices nor in alignment with plan goals. It is also important that an organization develop a workplan that lays out the steps and activities that will take place in furtherance of each strategy or goal area. It also is useful to specify the work of the board in advancing the plan as distinct from the work of the agency.
- **Practices alignment.** Boards may want to emphasize the importance of the plan by aligning various board functions to it. The board's committee structure should align to the plan, and its meeting agenda should point to strategic plan components. Budget processes should be connected to the plan, and decisions about allocating staffing resources and other inputs should also be structured around the plan. State boards are encouraged to review their current strategic plans and determine if their current agendas and board work are aligned to them. Following the development of its strategic plan, the Mississippi board ensures that each agenda item is linked to the plan; otherwise, the item is moved to the consent agenda.

The board's committee structure should align to the plan, and its meeting agenda should point to strategic plan components.

- **Subplans.** In some cases, strategies may require their own plan for implementation. For example, Ohio's strategic plan led to the later development of a Whole Child Framework to support one of its key strategies.[3] Those charged with developing such plans should make regular reports so that the board and other stakeholders can monitor these processes and their alignment to the overall plan. When subplans complement major strategies, the stage is set to drive coherent change through effective use of resources and coordinated measures of success.
- **Monitoring processes.** Strategic planning is a successive process for identifying, implementing, and monitoring progress toward long-term goals. A well-defined monitoring process usually involves data collection and reporting, regular updates on implementation actions and progress, and discussions about challenges to implementation or barriers identified. Processes usually have set timelines that create review routines. Each year, Mississippi's board publicly reports on the strategic plan's annual progress, for example.[4] Monitoring involves constituent engagement to gauge on-the-ground impact. Transparent accounting of progress, or the lack thereof, draws attention to where the plan is succeeding, where additional resources or attention should be focused, and where course corrections need to be made. Transparent reporting also allows for celebrating the collective efforts of schools, teachers, and families in achieving progress—especially important in areas where there have been persistent challenges. In May 2021, Connecticut's governor touted the state's efforts to increase educator workforce diversity after the board announced that the state had exceeded its strategic plan goal.
- **Course corrections.** A strategic plan should be a living document. Consequently, there will be times when the board will need to make updates in response to changing circumstances or emerging issues. A similar process should be followed for such updates to ensure inclusion and transparency. It is also critical that a board distinguish between when the plan simply needs modifying as opposed to when it is time to engage in a new strategic analysis of the needs of the state.
- **Communications.** A well-articulated communications plan is an important part of implementation. States should be strategic in promoting the vision and goals and keeping stakeholders and citizens apprised of progress. Ensuring the plan is featured on the state website, referenced in public presentations and publications, and featured on social media will build awareness and shared focus on the plan's direction and impact. ■

Resources on Nonprofit Strategic Planning

Bryson, John M. *Strategic Planning for Public and Nonprofit Organizations: A Guide to Strengthening and Sustaining Organizational Achievement*, 4th edition. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011.

Cooper, Harry A. "Strategic Planning in Education: A Guide for Policymakers." Alexandria, VA: NASBE, 1985. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED297439.pdf.

Kotter, J. P. "Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail." *Harvard Business Review* 85, no. 1 (January 2007): 96–103.

McNamara, Carter. *Field Guide to Non-Profit Strategic Planning and Facilitation*. Minneapolis: Authenticity Consulting, LLP, 2007. ■

[1]"Maine State Board of Education 5-Year Strategic Plan 2022–2026" (December 2021), https://www.maine.gov/doe/sites/maine.gov.doe/files/inline-files/Strategic%20Plan%202022-2026%20F.pdf.

[2]Washington State Board of Education, "2019–2023 Strategic Plan," https://www.sbe.wa.gov/sites/default/files/public/documents/StratPlan/Strategic-Plan.ac.pdf.

[3]Ohio State Board of Education, "Each Child, Our Future: Ohio Strategic Plan for Education 2019–2024" (2019), https://education.ohio.gov/getattachment/About/EachChildOurFuture/Final-Strategic-Plan-Board-Approved.pdf.aspx?lang=en-US; Ohio Department of Education, "Ohio's Whole Child Framework: A Collaborative Approach to Learning and Wellness" (2020); https://education.ohio.gov/getattachment/Topics/Student-Supports/Ohio-Supports-the-Whole-Child/Whole-Child-Framework.pdf.aspx?lang=en-US.

[4]Mississippi State Board of Education, "Strategic Plan Annual Progress Report" (2022), https://www.mdek12.org/sites/default/files/Offices/MDE/OCGR/2022_strategic_plan_annual_sbe_report.pdf.

Transparent reporting also allows for celebrating the collective efforts of schools, teachers, and families in achieving progress.

Paolo DeMaria is president and CEO of NASBE, and Abigail Potts is director of strategic initiatives and planning.