An Analysis of the Annual District Planning Process

Technical Report

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Introduction

Strategic planning is a systematic, stepwise approach to making important decisions: important in actions taken, resources committed, or precedents set (Grant 2003). In theory, a strong district strategic plan helps ensure large-scale changes in key performance indicators (Wolf, 2017). The annual district plan is a form of strategic planning intended to decompose district goals into discreet strategies and action steps. The strategies and action steps provide evidence of a unified theory of action intentionally connected to prioritized needs. Generally understood benefits of a strategic plan include:

- Communicating consistent priorities and expectations between regions, within feeder patterns, and amongst different stakeholders.
- Informing decisions that determine resource allocation.
- Decreasing attention from tactical problems to higher-stakes issues.
- Exploiting benefits across multiple problem areas with key interconnected strategies

An effective plan should govern important discussions, interactions, and professional learning opportunities throughout the district. The plan should be a living document that is continually reassessed and refined to support success (Mintzberg, 1994b).

Despite the purported benefits of strategic planning, a general reliance on strategic planning has been decreasing in recent years. Academic research regarding strategic planning has been declining since the mid-1990s, and most managers have an ambivalent or negative view of the effectiveness of strategic planning (Wolf, 2017). Still, evidence suggests that strategic planning can play a role in coordinating efforts across an organization and have positive effects on decision-making processes (Das, 1999).

Historical Context with REA

The department of Research, Evaluation, and Assessment (REA) began its involvement with the annual district planning processes for the 2016-1017 academic year. 2016-2017 was the initial year plans were submitted to the state through their electronic platforms. At that time, the Knox County leadership team identified prioritized needs. The director of REA created district-level goals and verified that content experts completed the narrative, strategy, and action step sections. The superintendent assigned these tasks to REA for two reasons. First, the department has ready access to performance data which was required when conducting the needs assessment portion of the plan. Second, the department could use mail merge features to minimize the time needed to complete the plan. The REA director was also responsible for ensuring submission to the state Department of Education (TDOE).

The submission platform changed after REA completed the 2018-2019 district plan. Oversight of the planning process was then assigned to the Federal Programs director since they were most familiar with the submission platform (ePlan). REA again took leadership

of the planning process for the 2022-2023 plan to leverage the analytic skillset of the department. REA actively collaborated with the Chief Academic Officer and various curriculum and instruction supervisors to execute the needs assessment process, develop strategies and action steps, and streamline progress monitoring. The Federal Programs director verified that all sections were complete and submitted the final draft via ePlan.

Operational Analysis:

Evidence collected during this process suggests that the annual district planning process is a compliance activity. District staff rarely discuss the plan in strategic gatherings (senior leadership team meetings, principal meetings, board meetings, etc.). Benchmark indicators developed as part of the planning process are generally not collected at scale. The development of new annual plans rarely (if ever) references previous strategies. Nobody is responsible for reviewing progress goals or interim revision of plans. This evidence suggests that the plans (as written) have little alignment with the district's true day-to-day foci and realities.

REA has learned lessons through the district planning process and conducting internal research. The ongoing qualitative analysis of the district reorganization is uncovering themes that are salient to the strategic planning process. On the surface, decision-making and reflexive actions in Knox County Schools exhibit signs of the cognitive biases presented in the literature (Das 1999). These biases can be observed among all participants in the planning process (district leaders, school-based staff, REA facilitators) and can increase risks to the front-line staff who implement the plan (Das, 1999). REA believes these biases are symptoms of an imperfect system rather than the fault of any individual.

- Inertia bias causes participants in the planning process to gravitate towards options that allow them to act and think in comfortable or familiar ways. This is similar to confirmation bias and prior hypothesis bias, in which decision-making relies on previously formed hypotheses, beliefs, and assumptions. This bias leads to overlooking evidence suggesting new action is required.
- Recency bias is the tendency to identify a problem or solution presented most recently (a close relative to exposure bias). Most decision-makers work sequentially through alternatives. They tend to gravitate towards the most recently deployed solutions.
- Optimism bias causes planners to overestimate favorable outcomes and underestimate unfavorable side effects. Similarly, illusionary bias underestimates how much of a process is under our control. These biases lead to overly optimistic outcome estimates and the mistaken belief that the consequences are always manageable.

Academic studies have documented pitfalls to effective strategic planning. Early research tended to ascribe shortcomings to the absence of top-level support for the process and environmental factors (Grant, 2003; Mintzberg 1994a; Ford, 2010).

The strategic planning process needs to support the leader to gain leadership support. The process should cater to their specific leadership style. Objectively driven processes are less likely to resonate with leaders who value intuitive thinking and vice versa. One must also consider to what degree an organizational leader should be involved in the planning process. Generally, the literature suggests that an effective plan does not need the deep involvement of the organization's leader. However, they should design the planning process in a general sense (define roles, assign roles, and bestow decision-making powers across the hierarchy) (Grant, 2003).

The implementation of a strategy requires stability in the internal and external environments. Planning requires "articulation and precision – of strategy as well as the conditions in which it is embedded" (Mintzberg, 1994a). Although the school system can exercise a fair amount of control over the internal environment, the external environment is much more uncertain. Sources of external variability include federal mandates from the United States Department of Education, TDOE initiatives, changes to state law, and the local political climate. These factors limit the viability of formalized long-term planning since they introduce unpredictability into the process. For example, key strategies, such as high-dosage low-ratio tutoring, weren't on the planning horizon three years ago. Constantly changing goals in response to these pressures foster an organizational culture in which successful reactions are more valued than a well-designed (but ultimately inflexible) plan (Ford, 2010).

Researchers cite resistance to change as an environmental barrier to effective planning. However, blaming resistance to change tends to be "inaccurate in that it presumes resistance is a unilateral phenomenon" (Ford, 2010). Planning relies on the belief that administrative systems capture knowledge about the tasks completed by the organization. Management develops plans through analysis and synthesis of task-derived information instead of completing the tasks themselves. This detachment seems necessary to the planning process but creates pitfalls (Mintzberg 1994a). Plans generally fail when the strategists fail to incorporate the perspectives of front-line supervisors. Front-line supervisors and strategic planners find themselves in an "us" versus "them" stand-off that impacts implementation.

TDOE's required planning process is inherently analytic. The planning framework requires "hard" analytic evidence to identify prioritized needs, identify root causes, and justify the strategies addressing those needs. Actionable plans require synthesis. Synthesis is a process in which participants absorb, internalize, comprehend, and combine information and ideas into a workable system. Planning tends to be attractive to analytic thinkers, whereas implementation involves doers. Synthesizes live comfortably in both worlds, absorbing the information from analysts and working shoulder-to-shoulder with implementors. The seminal research published by Mintzberg (1994b) suggests most strategic activities fail because organizations lack synthesizers. Without synthesis, analysts develop the "perfect" plan that front-line staff can't implement. Without synthesis, the front-line staff creates reactive plans to address in-the-moment symptoms with little

thought of addressing root causes. Without synthesis, the thinkers and the doers can blame each other when the strategic plan fails.

Proposed Next Steps

"Every failure of implementation is also, by definition, a failure of formulation" - Mintzberg, 1994a.

Is our goal to create a cogent written strategic plan or to support increased strategic decision-making? My review of the reference literature suggests the two may be mutually exclusive. Our proposed pathway initially prioritizes strategic thinking over strategic programming. To be clear, REA will still find ways to support coherence in the annual plan. The plan itself is likely important for organizational-level coordination and communication. However, the quality of a written plan will be a secondary goal. By prioritizing strategic thinking, we hope to influence the process by which leaders make critical decisions. Creating a cogent written plan should take care of itself if we are successful. Therefore, REA proposes the following actions to leverage the planning process as a tool to support strategic thinking. These actions should reduce the likelihood of bias affecting the final plan and address the common pitfalls associated with strategic planning.

Action 1: Understand the current goals of strategic planning.

"More has been heard about the top management support pitfall than any other. Yet surely no management technique has ever had more top management support than strategic planning" – Mintzberg 1994a

The first step is to confirm what top-level leadership wants to accomplish with the district plan. Should the plan serve as a communication tool, a tool to exert control over district actions, or something else? Top-level leadership should also define the priorities, roles, and expectations at the start of the annual planning cycle.

Action 2: Tailor the process to our realities

"… empirical evidence – both longitudinal case studies and investigations of strategic decision-making points to strategies emerging from weakly coordinated decisions of multiple organizational members." – Grant 2003.

Evidence suggests that certain strata of the organization value intuitive thinking in the decision-making process. School-level decisions are made rapidly because of the sheer volume and potential consequences of day-to-day issues. The top-level leadership of the district derives largely from school leadership. Those that have climbed the ranks have honed their intuition through considerable experience to react decisively. Additionally, directives to "make big small" have driven district-level staff to work shoulder-to-shoulder at the school level (directing macro-level management into support of micro-level tasks). Effective strategic processes must appeal to intuitive front-line managers. "When planners put down the informal processes of managers, when they discourage commitment in favor of calculation, when they act as watchdogs for the 'correct' practices of middle managers,

they aggravate the classic political conflict between line and staff. Thus can they promote the very climate they find so uncongenial to planning." (Mintzberg 1994a).

What is clear is that participants with different skill sets can be placed in defined roles to maximize the value of planning activities. Diversified skill sets help address bias and allow for richer information to be fed into the planning process. Pairing analytic thinkers and intuitive actors can help incorporate "soft" data into an inherently analytic process. Analysts accustomed to "hard" data likely miss the nuance needed for rich diagnostic processes.

Mintzberg (1994b) defines the REA roles that support effective planning processes. REA analysts can conduct rigorous qualitative and quantitative research studies using a variety of methodologies. The department has been staffed to ensure that "poster-worthy" (if not "publish-worthy") quantitative and qualitative research can occur. The department currently has two staff members with the required expertise to feed "hard" quantitative or "rich" qualitative findings into the decision-making process (the Supervisor of REA and the Qualitative Analyst). Formalized studies can be important tools to counteract some sources of bias and identify long-term trends/themes that less sophisticated analysis may overlook.

Equally important to long-term research studies is the deployment of ad-hoc analysis to meet the day-to-day needs of front-line supervision. Four positions in the REA department can serve these needs (the Director of REA, the Supervisor of Research and Evaluation, the Practitioner Analyst, and the Supervisor of Assessment (*proposed*)). Although these ad-hoc analyses play a vital role in day-to-day decision-making, they lack the rigor and depth of research studies. However, these "quick and dirty" processes can help inform the long-term research agenda of the department.

The planning process is inherently a normative process that seeks to exert some level of control over the practices of an organization (Grant, 2003). Mintzberg (1994a) asserts that thriving organizations need to identify innovative practices. REA proposes to utilize two positions to seek innovative practices through their ad-hoc interactions with school-based staff; the Practitioner Analyst for pedagogy and organizational leadership and the Supervisor of Assessment (*proposed*) for student work. These positions can identify promising emergent practices for more detailed scrutiny through the formal research position.

Catalysts for change are required if we are to adjust our orientation of the district to the planning process. These catalysts seek out and promote behaviors that lead to effective performance through strategic thinking outside the planning process. Catalysts draw from a variety of techniques and contacts to broaden support for action and work to build commitment and consensus across the organization. The Assistant Superintendent of Strategy and the Director of REA are positioned to serve as catalysts.

The success of the planning process as a support for strategic thinking seems to hinge on synthesizing analysis and experience into a coherent plan of action. REA is confident it can

support the analysis, but external partners need to perform the synthesis. Synthesis allows "hard" analytic data to be combined with "soft" experiential data to capture the complexity involved in operational decision-making. The original intent of the REA Practitioner Analyst position was to fit this role. However, the operational complexities of the organization are too great for one person to synthesize the requisite information streams.

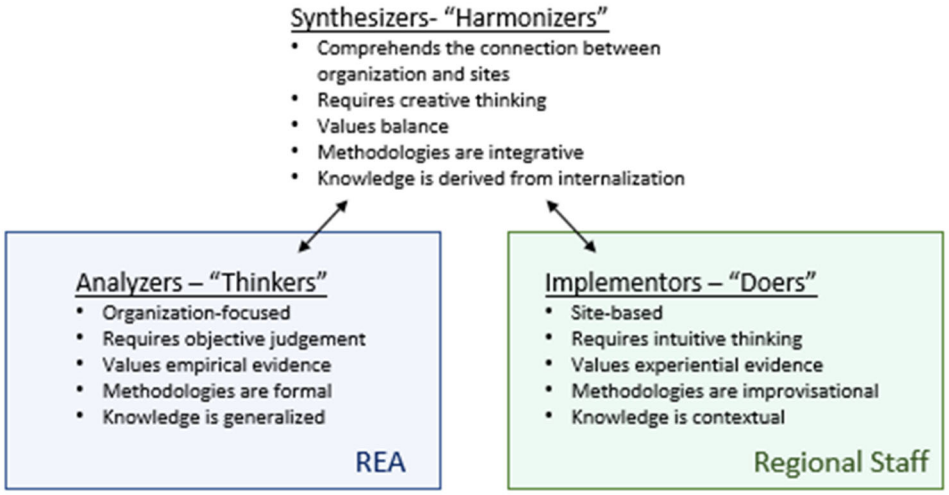

Figure 1: Current Orientations to Strategic Planning

Synthesizers are important in the formulation of an actionable plan. Synthesizers need intimate knowledge of implementation and an understanding of the district's vision. Synthesizers provide direction to the analyst's research so that they can understand cause and effect. Then who synthesizes? Regional staff members seem the most logical candidates. However, these staff members are currently fully scheduled for other tasks. Leadership may flexibly staff the synthesizer role to minimize short-term disturbances to school-level support. The synthesizer roles need not be permanent, as leadership may cycle staff with the prerequisite skills into the synthesizer roles for defined periods. Regardless, REA will have to formulate its goals related to the planning process based on the presence or absence of partners acting in the synthesizer roles. Strategic planning will be less influential on strategic thinking without the synthesizer role.

Action 3: Deformalize the Planning Process

"Effective strategy making thus connects acting to thinking, which in turn connects implementation to formulation" – Mintzberg 1994a

The referenced literature suggests that the formalized, ritualized processes that guide our strategic planning alienate intuitive thinkers (Wolf 2016; Mintzberg 1994a; Mintzberg 1994b; Grant 2003). Rubrics, flowcharts, and planning templates generally appeal to convergent structural thinkers but hold little appeal to experiential learners. Structured,

linear action steps make sense to theoreticians but hold little appeal to front-line staff encountering non-linear processes.

The annual district plan could be restructured to align with processes that may feel more natural to participants. Below are some examples of how to (potentially) align the district plan with the operational realities of the supervisors. These less-formal plans capitalize on a normative emergent process to drive strategic thinking (Grant 2003) but would need broad support across the organization to be effective.

- Use the district plan to describe the framework for strategic thinking in Knox County: In this scenario, the plan defines the systems built to make and monitor strategic decisions. One example would be a district plan that delineates the process by which a team of experts convenes to work on a specific problem. This group would be granted authority to decide on action and dissolve upon completion. The written plan can focus on the methods used to identify a need for a team, the process used to recruit its members, the authority the group has, and the conditions under which it will dissolve.
- Create a district plan that guides general rather than specific action: The focus of strategic planning can expand beyond a series of defined strategies and linear action steps. The plan can communicate broad features of a strategy and leave the operation details to front-line managers. An example would be using the plan to communicate that math instruction must include tasks designed to build conceptual understanding. The plan would list the menu of resources that the district-level math staff will be able to deploy at the school level. The benefit of this process is that it doesn't lock supervisors into specific courses of action. Instead, it offers a series of options that can be deployed toward general problems.
- Create a sustainability plan: The district plan can focus on specific actions to protect the longevity of key initiatives. The plan can lay out the process by which key initiatives are targeted for sustainability, the mechanisms for reviewing continued effectiveness, and the structures promoting connection with shorter-term activities. Additionally, the plan can lay out the processes that ensure resources are available at adequate levels, including financial and human capital.
- Create a plan for equitable consequences: Evidence suggests that defining roles and responsibilities is an ongoing process following the district reorganization. Making decisions in this environment can lead to unintended increases in risk for the decision-makers. The increased risk can be from an objective perspective (from the objective consequences of a poor decision) or a social perspective (the impact of "errors" on someone's perceived value to the organization). The district plan could articulate priorities and define the consequences of failing to meet explicit expectations. This type of plan can minimize operational uncertainty and increase implementation efficiency.

The orientations above would require organizational change outside REA's locus of control. Below are concrete steps REA can take fully within its sphere of influence.

- Develop the plan through more informal processes: The narrative portions of the plan can develop conversationally. Analytic staff can transcribe these conversations with supervisors and insert responses into formalized documents. A conversation is a more intuitive interface in which front-line staff can engage. REA plans on piloting a similar approach with Region 4 leadership in the summer of 2023. The pilot approach is intended to outline how a conversational approach can guide the school planning process and set the agenda for progress monitoring visits.
- Continue to conduct organizational research: The ongoing case study of the district reorganization shares many thematic elements with this analysis. REA can commit resources to qualitative research studies of the organization's ecosystems. The findings from such studies may be vital to informing new pathways for engaging other actors in the planning process.
- Keep actions close to the person responsible: Often, the person assigned responsibility for an action step is not in the direct line of authority to school leaders. Crossed power lines lead to confusion regarding the execution of tasks. REA proposes that action steps only impact the hierarchy directly below the person responsible. Such a stipulation would preclude, for example, any action step regarding classroom implementation in the district-level plan. The district plan could define the resources the central office provides for implementation support, but school plans would need to define the parameters of class-level implementation. Keeping action steps close to the person responsible also has theoretical benefits for progress monitoring.

Trade-offs

Implementing this plan involves inherent risk. To execute this plan properly, REA will have more formal research agendas. Doing so will lock REA assets into specific lines of inquiry at the expense of ad-hoc data exploration. This risk can be mitigated by regular reviews of long-term research projects. Review periods will help ensure the allocation of REA resources aligns with the district's commitment to the researched initiative. REA analysts will have to decline some school-level requests for ad-hoc in favor of longer-term studies. Saying "no" has never been a part of REA's culture. This risk can be mitigated by allocating some ad-hoc requests to the Supervisor of Assessment (assuming it becomes part of an amended job description for this position).

The proposed changes to the district planning process have ripple effects outside the organization. TDOE must review the annual plan to ensure it meets federal guidelines. The (relatively) small-scale changes made in the 2022-2023 district plan required time to gain approval from TDOE. REA staff discussed the plan with TDOE staff in detail to assure them that the plan was developed thoughtfully. Some of the proposed larger-scale changes to the district plan may be stretching TDOE's intended process too far (i.e., focusing on thematic

elements instead of specific actions). This risk can be mitigated through constant communication with the TDOE to assure them of the intentionality of our approach.

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