

This article is written for superintendents who wish to assess their planning efforts.

Consider educational planning

by George Crawford and Jerry Bailey



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All of us plan. Some of us are more successful at the process than others. All of us have heard that planning is important in the successful operation of our schools. This paper is provided for superintendents who wish to assess their planning efforts.

Laurence J. Peter provides the writers solid advice in the preparation of this article. "The rational process is taught in schools and universities, yet is seldom put into practice outside of the classroom. . . . Most schools . . . have complex, formalized procedures for problem solving and decision making—procedures that are hard to follow under the stress of day-to-day life when immediate responses are required" (pp. 157-58). Since practitioners know the pressures of their positions far better than we could ever understand, this article is general in nature. In order for it to be of maximum use, the reader needs to consider the principles discussed in the light of his or her unique school environment—its current situation, the district's goals and aspirations and the options available for reaching its objectives. We intend to provide a three step approach to the analysis of planning difficulties.

The steps are a definition of planning, a consideration of major roadblocks, and finally guides to action for the superintendent.

A working definition

"Once I was asked to head up a new long-range planning effort. My wife listened to my glowing description of my new job. Next evening she blew the whole schmeer out of the water by asking: 'What did you plan today, dear?' Bless her" (Townsend, p. 128). As Mr. Townsend may be suggesting, educators sometimes attempt to separate the planning function from the realities of the moment. We believe that this approach is unfortunate. How do you get to where you want to be if you don't remember where you are? *In its basic form planning involves identifying some desired state, comparing that state (goal) with the present, and providing the means for getting from present to future state.* Planning, then, is a process which develops a product—a plan. And, since situations change, the plan needs ongoing scrutiny and possible revision.

Major roadblocks

In considering roadblocks to planning, effectiveness is influenced by (1) the superintendent, (2) the organization and (3) the social environment.

The Superintendent

The first roadblock to planning on the part of the superintendent is lack of commitment to planning. Many superintendents do not believe, or are not aware, that planning will make any significant difference. This apparent lack of commitment is often a product of human or fiscal resource scarcity.

Second, there is a tendency for superintendents and school districts to not keep pace with changes in contemporary society. First on the list of social changes is the change in knowledge itself. Our knowledge base is dynamic—as what we know grows, information becomes obsolete. How do we organize schools to accommodate new knowledge while eliminating "obsolete knowledge" from the educational program? How do we "transmit the culture" when we're not sure what "the culture" is? A major part of the change in the knowledge base is technological in nature. How does our capacity to be informed about world-wide events on a same-day or same-

hour basis affect the schools' need to respond? Is the curriculum still textbook bound?

Think about the technological developments which make it possible or *require* one move every five years for American families. How do curricular and organizational formats accommodate the turnover of students within individual districts? Does a 50 per cent turnover in a school's pupil population during a given year require a different educational approach? Would schools serve mobile students more effectively by offering discrete learning units 15 days length over the course of the school year?

A third potential problem area for superintendents is related to specific planning knowledge and skill. How many of us are skilled in the uses of trend analysis, future forecasting, cross impact matrix analysis, Delphi technique, *Perting*, and scenario writing (see Hencley and Yates, 1974).

It is becoming increasingly apparent that the interest of the public is shifting from how the schools *do* things—processes—to what the schools achieve—products (Mosteller and Moynihan, 1972). The term accountability, as it relates to these products or outcomes, may be with us for a long time. The manner in which superintendents do or do not deal with the accountability question becomes the fourth potential roadblock to effective planning.

A fifth and final problem facing superintendents concerns the relationships that exist between planning and policy-making. If policy makers are not persuaded that planning is an essential activity, planning can not succeed. If the commitment on the part of board members is absent, planning becomes a task that happens "because everyone knows you are supposed to plan;" and, if there is a correlation between what actually occurs and the plan, it is coincidental. The superintendent is in the key position to advocate or oppose the planning process at the policy level.

Organizational Roadblocks

One organizational roadblock to effective planning is that schools and school systems tend to be statically organized and operated. We "keep on keeping on." This orientation is a potentially fatal flaw.

In its most elementary form planning involves an individual decision maker without a specific mandate. If planning is to occur the person must have a set of priorities, an understanding of the odds of reaching the priorities and an appreciation for the potential consequences if these objectives are met. Then, the plan of action most likely to maximize satisfaction can be developed (Daniere, pp. 168-69).

Many educators argue that they *do have* a mandate—to teach. Such a mandate is a process, rather than product, mandate. Consequently, little emphasis is placed on the requirement to define expected outcomes, even on an individual basis. This creates, of course, a larger problem at the building or district level. The fact is that few schools and school systems are organized to identify, work at and evaluate specific outcomes on a building or system-wide basis. This lack of conscious, systematic coordination of planning activity contributes to the inability of schools and districts to identify or respond to needs. Do not misunderstand—we believe that process *is* important in education; we also believe that product is important and frequently is overlooked.

Other factors appear to contribute to the tendency for schools to be statically organized and operated. Humankind tends to resist change—to respond irrationally when "our territory is invaded." Second, education is subject to unfortunate time lags. For example, schools of education tend to include innovative practices in preparation programs more slowly than is desirable (they are probably also subject to a charge of being unresponsive because *they* are not organized to identify promising innovations which occur in the field). Third, education has placed relatively little emphasis on the acquisition of planning skills by practitioners, and on the relationships which should exist between planning in various sectors of the profession.

An additional planning roadblock relates to the failure of educational organizations to fully utilize existing resources. What is the average amount of time that educational facilities stand silent and empty? We use—at both the elementary-secondary and postsecondary levels—organizational structures which fail to tap the creative potential of staff members. These structures in some cases can be shown to waste time and money; it is no wonder that we sometimes lose the good will of employees, clients and communities.

Social Roadblocks

Our society at large has what may be *the* impediment to effective educational planning. For lack of a more eloquent label, let's refer to this perceived roadblock as "social dynamism." A dynamism (or ongoing, random change) exists within society, and we had better be about figuring out some of its educational implications.

First, social divisions along ethnic, political, ideological, class and interest group lines are becoming increasingly formalized. Along with this formalization of social division there is a tendency for the various groups to pursue competing or conflicting demands. These demands lead frequently to overt conflicts between and among various social groups and agencies. For the educator who plans this situation presents a problem when attempts are made to develop consensus supporting various choices of action.

When you begin to think about larger society in this fashion, it becomes easier to understand how group interactions lead to such outcomes as having schools controlled (or at least significantly influenced) by courts, legislatures and interest groups. It is also apparent that social agreements established at district-wide, state and national levels are tenuously accepted, or vigorously resisted, at various other levels of the social system. Topeka's Brown decision was rendered in 1954; we are still trying to desegregate schools in many parts of the country. It is important to remind ourselves that much of the "trouble" that educators perceive today is traceable to something as fundamental as a free people exercising guaranteed rights.

We may live in a world today whose behavior is more unpredictable than stable. If we live in a society which behaves in unpredictable ways, then it is doubly important that educators become skilled planners. A persisting society requires workable social contracts. A society that operates only in terms of short-term, specialized interests which are pursued by various conflicting groups may cease to exist. The schools represent one pervasive social institution which will continue to be called upon to solve social conflict.

Planning guidelines for the superintendent

The creation of a productive planning capacity for education will be implemented only if superintendents provide necessary leadership at the district level. Leadership—acts which move people and organizations in directions that they would otherwise not choose—is irritating to those who have become accustomed to operating in a familiar groove (or rut).

Let us state one necessary assumption and then suggest guidelines to help the superintendent assume a productive role in educational planning. The assumption is this: The superintendent *can* exercise leadership.

Roadblocks

An effort has been made to identify and discuss planning roadblocks. If you are to make significant inroads in improving your planning capabilities, you must first address the problem of viewing the world as it is. An accurate, objective understanding of the complexities of contemporary society is essential. You must develop the capacity to analyze complex, social interactions and interpret their implications for education.

Knowledge and Skill

Once you've discovered the planning roadblocks, you can turn to gaining knowledge about the planning process. Be forewarned that initially we recommend only that you *become familiar* with planning knowledge and skill. Rather than becoming expert at such things as Queueing Analysis, Morphological Analysis, Cross Impact Matrix Analysis, Demographic Analysis, Trend Extrapolation, Future Forecasting and Computer Science, you should acquaint yourselves with the planning applications of these and related techniques.

As you learn you can begin to specify the value of various kinds of techniques for *your* district's adoption. Then you may make judgments about the comparative value of becoming expert in the area yourself, identifying an existing staff member who has (or will acquire) the expertise, hiring a new staff member with the expertise, or contracting for the required expertise.

Systems Perspective

The third guideline consists of the recommendation that you consider applying a systems perspective to the administration of your district if you have not already done so. To begin to view your district as "a set of objects together with relationships between the objects and between their attributes" (Hall and Fagen, p. 18) and to develop the perspective that your district has sub-systems—and is a sub-system of other supra-systems—is helpful. Moreover, the way of viewing schools as systems consisting of inputs, processes, outputs and feedback permits the superintendent to place that emphasis on assessment of outcomes which society now requires.

As you begin to apply systems theory, be aware of the need to provide an adequate, regularly updated data base to support your planning efforts. Your plan describes targets and ways of achieving them. Your up-dated data base must tell you what is being achieved, what inputs are being used, and what processes are being used. When discrepancies between targets and achievements are noted, system analysis permits assessment of relationships of inputs and processes in ways which help provide explanations for discrepancies (see Mansergh, 1969).

Timing and Organization

"Will D. Lae was grossly overweight but was fascinated by the idea of becoming a mountain climber.

Determined to master the skill, he was able through hard work and continuous practice to develop his arm muscles so that they would support his obese body. He practiced on local slopes and then decided to try his skill on a mountain worthy of his ambitions. He picked the granite face of El Capitan. Halfway up the sheer rock he looked up and was startled to discover that his rope was fraying and in a second or two would break. He looked down and saw that there was no ledge or bush to break his fall. He made a quick decision—he decided to use a heavier rope. Will's decision was right, but his timing was off" (Peter, pp. 164-65).

Some school districts' sense of timing seems no better than Will's. Some of you are probably thinking that you can't afford to take the time to get a productive planning system organized. Systems theory contends, among other things, that "All systems tend toward a state of randomness and disorder, the ultimate of which is entropy, or inertia" (Immegart, p. 167). This suggests, in the absence of necessary interventions and controls, that school systems lapse into nonproductive entropy. We can see signs that this already is happening in some locations. All you have to do is to read the daily newspapers to note the conditions in some districts. We argue that, since the probability exists that systemic decay will occur under present conditions, you would be well advised to take time away from doing whatever you're now doing in order to do something that may reverse the present trend; that is, get organized and provide time to *plan solutions*. Seek policy support for organizing a planning effort. Then take your line officers on a retreat (or "advance") for a sufficient period of time to devise a planning system which is right for your district. You, of course, have to assume the leadership role in building policy and personnel support, for *planning* the organization and implementation of your planning system and, finally, for coordinating its operation.

Old Will could have saved himself a world of grief with a little planning. See that your organization has the chance to avoid a similar fate.

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