
Now What: The Impact of COVID-19 on a Strategic Planning Process

ABSTRACT

As leaders, heads of school and boards have an ongoing and important responsibility for the long-term health and sustainability of the institution. It is entrusted to these two parties, working together, to set the course for a school's future, identifying strengths, opportunities and threats in a continual endeavor to fulfill the mission and values of the organization. This responsibility, while always paramount, is never more critical than during times of crisis. We know from past disasters that schools who maintained forward momentum fared far better than those that did not. Schools that worked to understand the full spectrum of their stakeholder's needs, leaned into and highlighted their values and differentiators, and were able to pivot and execute revised strategies quickly continued to be thriving, relevant, and essential entities.

However, the speed, breadth, and depth with which the COVID-19 disaster hit was unprecedented. Seemingly overnight the world as we understood it had changed. The leadership of schools who may have been engaged in a structured strategic planning processes now also had to contend with rapidly making the shift to remote learning and were intently focused on ensuring the effective delivery of programming for months, not weeks. Heads of school and boards who were in the midst of planning may have thought, now what? How can this important work continue when schools are closed and participating stakeholder groups are not able to work in person?

Triangle Associates has found that with careful planning, effective communication, intentional engagement, and efficient use of technology, progress on planning work can continue unabated, resulting in the development of the framework, objectives, and strategies necessary to support a school's long-term sustainability and growth. Our recent work with a large, independent, all-boys school provides an instructional example of how a process interrupted mid-stream can continue and flourish.

Now What: The Impact of COVID-19 on a Strategic Planning Process

[or, how to keep the ball rolling even when you cannot meet in person]

Introduction

As leaders, heads of school and boards have an ongoing and important responsibility for the long-term health and sustainability of an institution. It is entrusted to these two parties, working together, to set the course for a school's future, identifying strengths, opportunities and threats in a continual endeavor to fulfill the mission and values of the organization.

This responsibility is never more critical than during times of crisis. We know from past disasters that schools who maintained forward momentum fared far better than those that did not. Schools that worked to understand the full spectrum of their stakeholder's needs, leaned into and highlighted their values and differentiators, and were able to pivot and execute revised strategies quickly continued to be thriving, relevant, and essential entities.

However, the speed, breadth, and depth with which the COVID-19 disaster hit was unprecedented. Seemingly overnight the world as we understood it had changed. It was estimated that at one point in time during this spring of COVID, globally the number of school-age children who were not in school numbered 1.6 billion! The leadership of schools who may have been engaged in a structured strategic planning processes now also had to contend with rapidly making the shift to remote learning and were intently focused on ensuring the effective delivery of programming for months, not weeks. Heads of school and boards who were in the midst of planning may have thought, now what? How can this important work continue when schools are closed and participating stakeholder groups are not able to work in person?

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The Moment

Beginning in summer 2019, our strategic planning work with a large, suburban pre-k through grade 12 school for boys was well underway and was proceeding in accordance with previously established workflow and timeline charts. Over the course of five months a robust process of research and environmental scanning was undertaken. Two site visits were also conducted, which were comprised of stakeholder focus groups and ideation sessions with members of the Strategic Planning Steering Committee and the Board of Directors to distill the data collected into strategic themes and questions.

Unbeknownst to all, the dates of the second site visit, in February 2020, would be the last time we were physically present at the school working with the planning groups. It was precisely at this point in the process that COVID-19 hit; within rapid succession schools closed, travel stopped and lockdowns commenced.

A substantial amount of work remained to complete the planning process for this school – tasks and multiple planned on-site meetings to build the plan’s scaffolding and develop its content. The steering committee needed to consider the scope of this work; confirming strategic priorities; developing rationales and tactics; and identifying the essential questions that would guide and support establishment of action plans and metrics. How this work would be completed was a bigger issue. The original workplan included several more on-site visits for the consultants to work with members of the steering committee and the board, as well as multiple drafting and revision sessions, to culminate in the presentation of a completed draft plan by the steering committee for approval by the board in June 2020.

How best then, could this work be completed effectively and efficiently, while maintaining the school’s commitment to undertake, throughout all phases of the process, a broadly inclusive process?

The Options

As consultants we identified three possible paths forward for continuing the work:

- 1) Postpone all work until fall 2020 in the hopes that the school would re-open, travel would resume, and the process could continue face-to-face;
- 2) Assign the steering committee the responsibility of writing and publishing, with board approval, a one-year plan to maintain momentum and provide the community with a sense of direction; or
- 3) Continue the scope of work as planned and in accordance with the original timeline – pivoting to an all virtual effort.

The Path Forward

The determination was made that the best option was to work virtually throughout the spring to proceed with the scope of work as planned, adhering to the original timeline. There were several factors that influenced this decision:

- 1) A high degree of confidence existed that the environmental scanning and data collection work was thorough and complete and that a good understanding of the school, its strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities as well as the competitive environment had been established. Thus, a sound foundation for the planning process had been constructed;
- 2) A significant level of momentum had been created, which all were loath to abandon;
- 3) It was important to honor the robust engagement of the community in the process to date; and

- 4) It was critically important, especially in a time of so much uncertainty, to communicate a clear statement to the community that the school was committed to moving forward and that the board was confident in the process and in the ability of the steering committee to establish strategic priorities and an unambiguous direction for the future of the school.

Working backwards from the target presentation date for the plan (June 2020), a revised workflow plan was developed. The scope of the remaining work was not altered, nor were the key elements of the timeline. Previously planned on-site, large group meetings were converted to two 'virtual workshops' during which the full steering committee would review, discuss and make recommendations to iterative drafts of the strategic plan. To ensure progress continued between these two workshops, and in the absence of in person engagement, a series of smaller planning meetings were scheduled, in various iterations and composed of various groups of people, dependent on the expected work product. Communication was frequent and, while not tied directly or limited to the dates of the larger group meetings, usually included calls scheduled for immediately before and after the full steering committee meetings to ensure proper preparation and confirm required follow up.

Preliminary drafting of the plan began and built on the data collected as well as on feedback from the final on-site workshop. A basic framework was developed including strategic priorities, and preliminary versions of rationales and tactics. This preliminary draft was the foundation for future discussions and provided the scaffolding upon which the final plan would be constructed.

The two virtual workshops with the full Steering Committee provided the discussion and iterative feedback necessary to refine and revise the draft plan in a way that reaffirmed the school's values, mission and commitments, and established a vision and direction for the future. The facilitation process for both virtual workshops was consistent with our approach for in-person meetings. Through careful planning of agendas, content, and choreography, Triangle Associates consultants led an efficient and effective review and discussion of the plan, ensuring participation from all attendees and capturing the feedback and inputs necessary to its continued evolution.

Steering Committee engagement continued beyond the workshops as well. After the first meeting, members of the Committee were tasked with unpacking the strategic priorities and providing more detail around the rationales and tactics and developing essential questions that would be part of the plan and would be required for the development of operational action plans and metrics.

The penultimate draft of the plan was presented at the second of the two virtual meetings. This draft had been circulated prior to the meeting, which facilitated an expedited review of and reflection on the document and all of its component parts.

The Result

In June 2020, in accordance with the original timeline, the Board of Directors of the School received the work and recommendations of the Steering Committee in the form of the completed draft plan. In addition the Board, via a presentation from the Steering Committee Chair, was provided with a complete review of the planning process from inception to completion. Adjustments made due to COVID-19 were discussed and special emphasis placed on the successful efforts to ensure a broadly inclusive process.

It was clear from the Board's response that they were confident that the plan was the result of a thorough and inclusive process, data driven and informed by detailed research and robust engagement with the community. The plan was an unambiguous reaffirmation of the school's values, mission and commitments, and established a vision and direction for the future – one that would continue to build on the school's unique attributes and ensure long-term relevance and sustainability in an uncertain and increasingly complex educational environment.

While the strategic planning process for this school continued, albeit in a modified form, throughout the pandemic, the work was not completed in a vacuum. The plan includes a clear statement of commitment to continue viewing the future through a strategic lens and maintain the ability to be flexible and adaptive. The plan, rather than being a static document with all elements set in stone, allows for flexibility in the prioritization of strategies and in the timing and implementation of the tactics.

Lastly, it is important to note that while this case study focused on a school that transitioned mid-stream from an in-person to a virtual process, we are confident that the process can be run from start to finish remotely, if necessary. Focus groups, listening sessions and surveys are all methods of undertaking environmental scanning and collecting data that, thanks to Zoom and its peer platforms, can be facilitated virtually. While the preference will always be to conduct a planning process on-site and in-person, it provides not a small measure of comfort knowing that it can be conducted remotely. The lack of proximity should not dissuade boards and school leadership from undertaking this critically important task, especially in times of crisis.

Eight Key Lessons

There are a variety of criteria of which to be aware when undertaking a strategic planning process, some common to all processes and some specific to a process that must pivot mid-stream, moving the work to a virtual platform. The list following covers both:

1. **Successful strategic planning is a group effort.**

It is important to ensure well-defined roles and responsibilities for all stakeholders involved in the process. The success of the final plan is dependent on the right type of engagement, from the right people, at the appropriate phases of the project. Roles and responsibilities must be clearly delineated for the steering committee, the board, the head of school, the staff, the consultant, and the various stakeholder groups. These roles and responsibilities must be broadly communicated to build awareness and understanding.

2. **Successful collaboration and planning rely on the intentional composition of the steering committee.**

This is a critical criterion and one whose impact on the outcome of the process cannot be overestimated. Building a steering committee whose composition reflects the full school community will of course add to legitimacy, confidence, and the buy-in from the community. However, when identifying prospective members of the committee it is important to consider necessary skill sets as well:

- **Individual Attributes:** Open-minded; Patient; Self-confident; Flexible; Honest; Empathetic; Self-aware; Decisive; Persistent and diligent; Trustworthy; and Friendly. If a virtual process is being undertaken, it's also important to consider agility, adaptivity, and a willingness to step outside of one's comfort zone.
- **Interpersonal Skills:** Good communicator; Active listener; High EQ; and Likes working with other people and does so well.
- **Group Processes Skills:** Facilitation; Negotiation; Collaborative problem solving; Skill in group dynamic; Consensus building; and Mediation.
- **Substantive Technical Knowledge:** Technical knowledge of subject area; Project management; Organizational skills; and Time management.

3. **Create a collaborative and inclusive process:** Collaboration is the linchpin of a successful planning process. A broadly inclusive and collaborative plan will garner support and buy-in from a variety of stakeholder groups and will more accurately reflect the future vision for your school. If your process starts or transitions to a virtual process, it will be critically important to define opportunities for stakeholder engagement.

4. **Operate off of data, not assumptions:** As we saw from this case study, the effort expended at the start of the process to data gathering, environment scanning and market analysis supported a smooth shift to working virtually. Even if that had not been the case, starting a planning process without gathering data is a recipe for failure.
5. **Accountability matters:** Different than achieving the goals and objectives of the plan, accountability relates to how a school empowers and manages the plan as it is implemented. Schools that consider the importance of accountability in the planning process create more effective plans. Creating accountability structures (at the leadership, board and stakeholder level) ensures transparency in the process. Additionally, accountability measures ensure a cycle of action. Board agendas and action items dedicated to advancing the plan, divisional action plans and key metrics, and ongoing stakeholder engagement lead to a broadening of the implementation platform.
6. **Prioritize communication:** Transparency and communication build trust and ensure the aforementioned accountability. Stakeholders need to understand how the process is unfolding as well as seeing how their perspectives and inputs are being captured and reflected. This is especially important when much of the work is happening virtually.
7. **Think beyond the plan:** A successful strategic planning process results in a living document that is continually reviewed and refreshed. Because of this it's critical to think past the planning phase and analyze how the plan will actually be implemented. You need to have a clear understanding of the resources at your disposal and focus on the key priorities that will best support the advancement of your school's mission and goals. Metrics and action plans, along with timelines and accountabilities, must be developed.
8. **Ensure equity in access to and capabilities with technology:** This is critically important if your process starts or transitions to a virtual platform. This may seem simplistic, but it is unwise to assume that everyone has the same access or familiarity with the technology you choose to use during the planning process. It's up to those leading the process to ensure that all participants can engage in a way that is meaningful and productive.