



Strategic Process An ISACS Monograph

What's new?

Contemporary strategic process is different from the traditional strategic plan in three significant ways. In addition to being mission-driven, it is *continuous*; *market aware*; and *data oriented*.

Continuous. We've seen an increasing emphasis on the process rather than the end product – so much so that our language is often more about vision, posture, and position than about a plan.

Christina Drouin, strategic planning consultant, offers “10 Best Practices for Boards when Planning Strategically” in NAIS' handy booklet, *A Trustee's Primer on the Strategic Process*. Number one on Drouin's list: “plan continuously.”

Rob Evans promotes the notion that strategy should be emergent, with the head of school a chief strategist and synthesizer. In “The Case Against Strategic Planning,” he recommends:

Planning [should be] a journey, not a destination; an outline, not a blueprint. It assumes that the actual results of any plan can only be, at best, an approximation of the original aim, that there will always be unintended consequences, and that we often discover what we truly need only after we have begun searching for something else.

Data oriented. It's important to move trustees and other planning participants from a perspective based on personal, anecdotal experience to a broader understanding of both the strengths and challenges of the school and its community. Tools to gather data to inform emerging plans and assessment of progress could include:

- [ISACS School Community Survey](#);
- Informal surveys;
- [Reichheld's Net Promoter System](#);
- [DASL, benchmark statistics tool of the National Association of Independent Schools \(NAIS\)](#).



Source: <http://vpaa.unt.edu/budget-enrollment-raises-usual-suspects>

Market aware. Particularly since the economic events of 2008, schools have become increasingly aware of their market context. The need to distinguish one's offerings -- and strategic posture -- from other independent, public, charter, for-profit, and proprietary schools has become a heightened priority.

Ian Symmonds, of Symmonds & Associates, provides a helpful framework when he states: “*Strategic planning is finding the intersection between mission and market.*”

Strategic process and accreditation

Five of the current standards for ISACS accreditation relate directly to strategic planning:

B2. The governing body shall at least once every seven years (preferably during Year 7 of the accreditation cycle) review, revise if necessary, and approve the statement of educational mission and philosophy; it shall be understood and supported by the governing body, administration, faculty, and staff.

B3. Where appropriate, the development and periodic review of the philosophy and objectives shall be a collective effort involving faculty, students, administrators, parents and the board of trustees.

E3. The board shall engage in periodic review (at least once every seven years, two years prior to the school's self-study/reaccreditation process) and, if necessary, revision of the school's mission and in ongoing and continuous strategic planning.

E4. The administration shall be appropriate in number and organized so as to carry out policies effectively. It shall be responsible for realizing the strategic vision of the school through management of the school programs, personnel, facilities, and resources, including the employment of all faculty, staff and support personnel.

E6. The board and administration shall provide for a clearly understood decision-making process, for an ongoing and continuous process of strategic planning, for the periodic review of all aspects of the school organization, and for appropriate modification of programs and services.

Note, in particular, E6, which calls for an ongoing and continuous process.

Steps in the strategic process

A step-by-step outline of a five-year process was offered by Pat Bassett during his ISACS tenure. Many strategy gurus today argue for fewer goals, a shorter window of time, and a more perpetual process. However, for the school desiring a broad-based community process, Bassett's steps remain sound general guideposts:

1. *Review of Mission Statement: Institutional Re-centering*
Board assessment/revision of mission statement
2. *Survey of Constituents: Needs Assessment or "Customer Satisfaction" Inventory*
3. *Formation of Strategic Planning Committee*
Key players from trustees, faculty, parents, administration – no more than 7-10 people. Data-gathering (demographics, comparative data reports, survey results, five-year financial projections, campus master-plan report, etc.). Identification of up to 8 planning priorities (e.g., admissions/marketing; governance; development; curriculum/program; facilities; finances; alumni; parents/community; faculty/human resources; diversity; technology; etc. Head prepares "white paper" on administration's thinking on each of the planning priorities.
4. *Strategic Planning Retreat*
Brainstorming: 25-35 people -- Board, Strategic Planning Committee, any other key players for 1-2 days. Prior to retreat, results of any preliminary data-gathering are circulated. Retreat, led by a strategic planning consultant or facilitator, focuses on:
 - Recommitment to mission & philosophy statements
 - Analysis of survey results and consultant reports
 - Assessment of external and internal factors ("challenges and opportunities") that can impact the School
 - Presentation of administration's "white paper" assessments of the planning areas, informed by outside perspectives from the consultant and the participants in the retreat.
 - Setting of priority goals.
 - Scenario writing: "vision statement" and various possible scenarios to achieve the vision.
5. *Scenario Testing: Buy-in.*
Sharing of various scenarios with key constituencies to test the waters, see what excites people; scenario-testing events become a vital stage in capital campaign consciousness-raising and involvement of potential donors.
6. *Re-drafting of Strategic Plan/Implementation Schedule*
Fine-tuning. Scenarios refined until one is chosen by Board to be developed into a strategic plan with the following components: goals, rationale, methods of implementation, timeline, costs, responsible party.

7. *Adoption by Board: Going Public*
Internal and external marketing of the plan to all the constituencies of the school.
8. *Yearly Goal-Setting for Board & Head*
Evaluation/Updating: At the annual evaluation session of Board and of Head, agreed-upon goals based upon Strategic Planning document are set.

Resources and recommended reading

Bray, S.H. (ed.) [*The strategic process: 10 steps for planning your independent school's future*](#). NAIS, 2007.

Bray, S.H. (ed.). [*A Trustee's Primer on the Strategic Process: A 10-Step Framework*](#). NAIS, 2008.

[DASL, benchmark statistics tool of the National Association of Independent Schools \(NAIS\)](#)

Evans, R. "[The case against strategic planning](#)." Independent School, Fall 2007.

[ISACS School Community Survey](#)

[ISACS Standards for Membership](#)

Lafley, A.G., & Martin, R.L. [Playing to win: How strategy really works](#). Harvard Business Review, 2013.

Reichheld, F., & Markey, R. [The ultimate question 2.0: How Net Promoter companies thrive in a customer-driven world](#). Bain, 2011.

[Strategic planning: Understanding the process](#). BoardSource, 2011.

Symmonds, I. "[Getting the 'what' and the 'how' right](#)." August 6, 2014.

Symmonds, I. Ridley College Thought Leaders Forum: "[Planning for the Future](#)." Video (18 min.)

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