



By: **Collin Thompson** on July 3rd, 2023

Addressing Teacher Burnout, Post-Pandemic Learning Environments, and Public Mistrust through Strategic Planning

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Last year, I relocated to my home state of Tennessee from New York City, and I had to secure a car for the first time in many years. As luck would have it, my first winter back in Tennessee was one of the state's coldest on record. Just enough snow fell in late December to make driving, especially up my steep driveway, a daunting experience. As I slowly crept up the hill toward my house, my tires spun in place. Decisions needed to be made. Would it make sense to keep spinning my tires in place hoping to gain enough traction to move forward, or would it be better to stop, reflect, and rethink my approach? It was clear that what I was doing wasn't working. I took my foot off of the accelerator, stopped the car, reversed slightly, and attempted a different path on the grass adjacent to the driveway. In a few moments, I was safely parked in my house's garage. Sometimes we need to pause and create new strategies when the ones we have in place are not working. This applies to school districts today who are facing very challenging

circumstances with a record number of educators leaving the profession, math and reading levels at a twenty-year low, and public trust in education eroding.

Addressing these challenges can feel like spinning your tires on a snowy incline. By developing a comprehensive strategic plan with input from community stakeholders, including educators, families, students, and leaders, you can meet these challenges in an effective way, you can find a more effective path forward. This plan should provide teachers with adequate support, address learners' post-pandemic needs, and rebuild community confidence. The strategic planning methodology used by Education Elements facilitates the creation of actionable next steps and metric-based plans for districts. This methodology is rooted in community engagement to ensure that districts hear directly from key constituent groups about what they need most from their school district. A strategic plan that is rooted in community engagement leads to stronger community buy-in and two-way trust.

Addressing Teacher Burnout

More than half of teachers who responded to a recent [nationwide survey](#) indicated they were considering quitting the profession. Anecdotal evidence from respondents who had already quit highlighted concerns about school administrations not listening to them, changing expectations, lack of support, and declining mental health. A strategic plan should include responsive priorities to directly support teachers, including enhancing wellness development opportunities by implementing a professional development scope and sequence, adapting curriculum in response to Professional Learning Community data, and creating moments of connection with teachers and staff by celebrating achievements. When districts involve teachers throughout the entire strategic planning process, including conducting focus groups with teachers to gather their needs directly, priorities are identified and implemented. Having a strategic plan that is created with teachers, and not for them, can help districts identify systemic barriers that contribute to teacher confusion and burnout and address them appropriately.

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Post-Pandemic Learning Environments

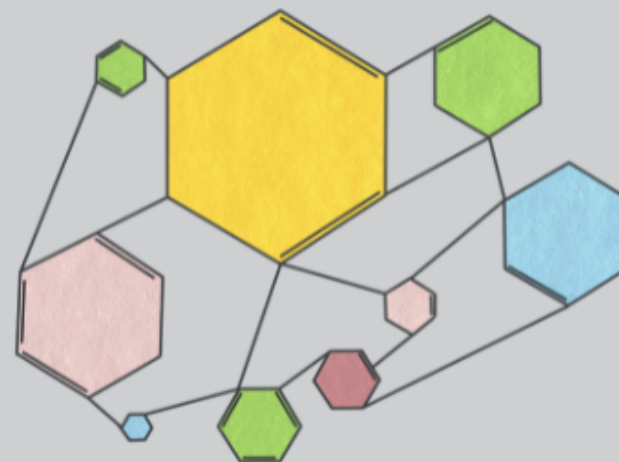
A growing body of data about the effects of COVID-19 on schools, students, and learning is showing just how acute the needs are in post-pandemic learning environments. Researchers and scientists at the National Institutes of Health studied the impact COVID-19 and a shift to virtual learning had on the social and emotional health of students. They concluded that isolation during the pandemic led to an alarming increase in students' feelings of anxiety, depression, fatigue, and distress. This data becomes even more startling when you consider that kids and teens had already been facing record levels of mental health challenges prior to the onset of COVID-19.

Students' social and emotional needs can't be addressed in a one-size-fits-all way, but districts can identify the next steps by creating a student-centered strategic plan that addresses the most pressing needs in their schools. A number of districts that are working to address the emotional and social needs of their students through their strategic plan have identified some key steps to support students. These include the hiring and retention of more mental health providers, establishing a training program to equip

teachers and staff with the tools they need to support students, and creating opportunities for positive student-to-student and teacher-to-student connections which cultivate respect and celebrate diversity. The best plans involve students in their creation, allowing students to provide insights through focus groups, advisory groups, and empathy interviews. The creation of a strategic plan that includes students from the beginning is an effective way for districts to identify students' most pressing concerns and identify ways to support students who are faced with a variety of social and emotional needs exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Public Mistrust

Yet another challenge school districts face is the erosion of public trust. In many parts of the country, tensions between parents and school officials have risen in very public ways, often documented and widely discussed online. Concerns from parents include fears that their children will fall behind academically as a result of COVID-19, safety concerns at school, and their children's acute

social and emotional needs. According to [one survey](#), 9 in 10 parents worry that their children will not be able to recover academically from the pandemic. Transparency and two-way communication are imperative for districts to assure parents that they can trust the district with their children's education and well-being. The creation of a strategic plan that responds to the concerns of parents allows districts to implement structures and systems that help foster communication, collaboration, and trust. As part of the strategic planning process, it is a best practice to have parents and community members provide insight into what matters most to them and their children.

The [Rocky Point Union Free School District](#), in Rocky Point, New York, partnered with Education Elements to create its district's strategic plan in SY 22-23 and is seeing its positive impacts in its community.

“The Rocky Point strategic planning process is an essential tool for identifying the support that both students and teachers need most, providing enhanced opportunities for students, and building public and community trust in districts. Through the strategic planning process, our district assessed its current resources and identified areas where additional support was needed, such as professional development opportunities and new courses for students. By addressing these needs, Rocky Point Schools strives to continuously improve the quality of education our students receive, leading to enhanced opportunities for student success. Additionally, strategic planning can help the district engage with the community by engaging various constituent groups in the planning process and communicating the district's priorities and progress toward meeting its goals. Ultimately, strategic planning is a crucial component of effective district management and can lead to better outcomes for both teachers and students.” - *Dr. Scott O'Brien, Superintendent, Rocky Point Union Free School District - Rocky, Point, New York*

As a means of continuing to build rapport with the larger communities they serve, districts like Rocky Point include initiatives such as revamping communication methods and implementing structures to increase partnerships between the district and other community organizations in their strategic plans. This community-centered approach further boosts confidence in the ability of school districts to serve all students.

Conclusion

It is not perfection, but change that is at the core of strategic planning. Tom Northup, the author of *Five Hidden Mistakes CEOs Make*, says that “all organizations are perfectly designed to get the results they are now getting. If they want different results, they must change the way they do things.” Districts can be proactive in generating and implementing solutions to challenges by developing a responsive strategic plan with pivot structures, rather than simply reacting to challenges as they arise. Without this, they will be forcing their tires to keep spinning around the same challenges without ever getting all the way up the driveway. During these turbulent times for school districts, failure to plan is failing to prepare. The creation of a community-centered, responsive strategic plan will provide districts with the roadmap they need to meet constituent needs. While strategic plans are not a panacea for teacher burnout, post-pandemic learning challenges, and public mistrust, they are a proven way to make the changes needed to achieve the results desired.



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