

Effective Strategic Planning

School systems exist for one reason: to improve student outcomes. Given school systems' limited resources, intentional accomplishment of these outcomes requires a strategic approach to planning and implementation. This is why strategic plans exist. A strategic plan cannot be effective unless it is relentlessly focused on identifying the aligned outcomes, outputs, and inputs that, when implemented effectively, will drive improvements in what students know and are able to do over the next 3–5 years.

While implementation begins with inputs that produce outputs and lead to outcomes, planning occurs in reverse: it starts with the end in mind (outcomes), then identifies the aligned data that signals progress (outputs), and finally selects the aligned strategies needed to drive that progress (inputs).

Step 1: Aligned Outcomes

Outcomes are results knowable at the end of a cycle, so any effective strategic planning process will begin with identifying the desired outcomes. School systems belong to their communities -- not to the staff or even to the school board -- so the first step in effective strategic planning is to determine the outcomes by listening for the community's vision and values. The community's vision is about what students should know and be able to do, and the community's values are the non-negotiables that must be honored throughout implementation of the strategic plan. The responsibility for conducting this listening falls to the school board since it is the community's representative; the school board's expertise is in representing the vision and values of the community.

Using the feedback from listening to the community as owners of the school system, the board adopts:

- One to three Goals (definitely no more than five), SMART statements that are about student outcomes -- measures of what students know or are able to do -- and that must challenge the organization and require adult behavior change. These last three to five years.
- One to three Guardrails (definitely no more than five), prohibition statements that describe what the superintendent may not do in pursuit of the Goals because it would violate the community's values. These last as long as the Goals.

Because the Goals and Guardrails are aligned to the vision and values of the community, they are the top priority outcomes that the school system must accomplish and honor. They describe what the strategic plan is trying to accomplish.

Step 2: Aligned Outputs

Outputs are the measures knowable in the midst of a cycle. The next step in strategic planning involves identifying the output metrics that will be used to monitor progress toward the Goals and Guardrails. Without aligned outputs, school system leaders won't know whether elements of the strategic plan are working or not, so they won't be able to make informed, timely pivots.

Selection of aligned outputs is part of implementing the vision and values of the community. Where the school board's expertise is in representation of the vision and values, the superintendent has strategic expertise in implementing the vision and values of the community. Using the feedback from listening to the board and staff, the superintendent adopts:

- One to three Interim Goals per Goal, SMART statements about student outputs that are aligned to and predictive of accomplishing the Goals. These last one to three years.
- One to three Interim Guardrails per Guardrail, SMART statements about outputs that are aligned to and predictive of honoring the Guardrails. These last one to three years.

Step 3: Aligned Inputs

Inputs are the resources and strategies knowable at the beginning of a cycle. Selection of the inputs is the final step in effective strategic planning and requires tactical expertise in implementation. For this reason, the superintendent's team of subject matter experts selects the inputs. The inputs that are aligned to the Interim Goals or Interim Guardrails are called Initiatives. An "Initiative" is any set of 1) inputs/strategies 2) whose objective is SMART, 3) that is intended to move a school system function from a current state to a future state 4) using school system resources, 5) that has one individual person as the owner, and 6) where the owner spends at least four hours per week bringing leadership directly to the initiative. A Goal- or Guardrail-aligned Initiative is any Initiative that is predictive of an Interim Goal or Interim Guardrail (~.5 correlation or higher) and that is influenceable by staff (where staff have authority over ~80% of the inputs that contribute to the Interim Goal).

In the same way that selection of aligned outcomes requires listening to the school system's owners -- the community as a whole -- selection of aligned inputs requires extensive listening to the school systems customers — the staff, students, families, and partners. The selection process should only proceed after customers have had an opportunity to review the Goals, Interim Goals, Guardrails, and Interim Guardrails and then provide feedback regarding recommended resources and strategies that should be deployed to accomplish the Interim Goals and Interim Guardrails. If, at an absolute minimum, parent leaders, lead principals, and master teachers haven't been included in this conversation, then the process should not proceed until they have been. Using the feedback from listening to the staff and to the community as customers of the school system, the superintendent's staff selects and then the superintendent adopts:

- Usually one to five Goal-aligned Initiatives per Interim Goal, SMART statements about the sets of inputs/strategies that are aligned to and predictive of the Interim Goals, and that require school system resources -- time, talent, and treasure.
- Usually one to five Guardrail-aligned Initiatives per Interim Guardrail, SMART statements about sets of inputs/strategies that are aligned to and predictive of the Interim Guardrails, and that require school system resources.

Example

The following are examples of formating, not content. Local listening is required for appropriate local content.

Aligned Outcomes

- Goal Example:
 - Early Literacy -- The percentage of 3rd graders reading on grade level on the school system's summative literacy assessment will increase from 45% in July 2019 to 68% by July 2025

Aligned Outputs

- Interim Goal Example:
 - Literacy Growth -- The percentage of 3rd graders who began the year below grade level in reading but who are on track to grow by at least 1.5 grade levels in reading according to the school system's interim literacy assessment will increase from 20% in September 2020 to 50% by September 2023

Aligned Inputs

- Goal-aligned Initiative Examples:
 - Literacy Intervention -- The percentage of target 2nd graders who receive a monthly average of an additional 2 hours of support from a reading specialist each week will increase from 0% on the first day of school to 90% by the end of the first semester

- Literacy Coaching -- The percentage of target teachers — teachers who are teaching target 1st through 3rd graders and who are not rated highly effective in literacy instruction — who receive at least 20 hours per month of in-classroom coaching and modeling on literacy instruction from a master teacher or instructional coach will increase from 0% on the first day of school to 90% by the end of the first semester
- Literacy Curriculum -- The percentage of K-2nd grade teachers who have been provided with aligned and sequenced literacy instructional materials and training on their use will increase from 50% on the first day of school to 95% by the end of the third quarter

Aligned Outcomes

- Guardrail Example:
 - Community Voice -- The superintendent may not make major decisions without first engaging impacted communities

Aligned Outputs

- Interim Guardrail Example:
 - Trust-Building: The percentage of target community leaders -- district-wide student government representatives, PTA parent chairs, AFT building representatives, principals, and community MOU partners -- who, in the school system's quarterly five question culture survey, indicate that they trust school system leadership will increase from 56% in June 2025 to 86% by June 2028

Aligned Inputs

- Guardrail-aligned Initiative Examples:
 - Leadership Training: The percentage of assistant principals, principals, and central office administrators at the executive director level and above who pass inter rater reliability training in listening standards implementation, impact assessment development, and community voice transparency methods will increase from 40% in June 2025 to 100% by June 2028
 - Listening Standards: The percentage of targeted listening sessions where the Effective Listening implementation scoring is conducted will increase from 45% in June 2025 to 85% by June 2028
 - Impact Assessment: The percentage of major district decisions presented to the board that include a documented community impact assessment indicating expected community impacts, mitigation strategies, and community member input will increase from 40% in June 2025 to 100% by June 2028
 - Feedback Transparency: The percentage of major decisions accompanied by publicly available feedback transparency reports clearly documenting the decision-making process -- which voices were included in giving input before the proposal was drafted, the raw feedback on the proposal, a summary of feedback with key themes, and a summary of how the feedback was used in the creation of the final proposal -- will grow from 40% in June 2025 to 100% by June 2028

All three of these elements -- the aligned outcomes, aligned outputs, and aligned inputs -- together and working in concert collectively make up the strategic plan.

Optional Step 4: Playbooks

Steps 1-3 are must-haves because without them, the strategic plan is neither strategic nor planful. Step 4 is a good-to-have, but there are compelling reasons to not include the full Playbooks for the Goal-aligned and Guardrail-aligned Initiatives in the larger plan, the main being the frequency with which they need to be revised to address real situations on the ground. That said, the superintendent may choose to include some or all of

them as a means to bolster organizational alignment, especially if it's primarily an internal rather than public document.

Using a one-page template, each Initiative owner tracks critical elements such as:

- Goal # & Goal: To which Goal does this Initiative apply?
- Interim Goal # & Interim Goal: To which interim goal does this initiative apply?
- Initiative Title: What's the short name of the initiative for reaching the Goal?
- Initiative Description: What's the plain wording description of the initiative?
- Outcome Metric: This is the actual initiative itself. It is a lag measure / summative result measure that describes at the end of the initiative's lifecycle whether or not the initiative was successful. Outcome metrics are SMART and take the format of, "abc will increase from w% on x date to y% by z date". Outcome metrics are generally knowable at the end of a cycle.
- Problem Description: The initiative owner describes the problem the initiative is trying to solve and provides the evidence / data / research they're relying on which suggests that solving this problem will significantly contribute to accomplishment of the Interim Goal/Interim Guardrail.
- Solution Description: the initiative owner describes the solution and provides the evidence / data / research they're relying on which suggests that this initiative, if implemented, will solve the problem.
- Initiative Owner: What's the name of the one person who has the right mix of leadership autonomy and implementation responsibility? Generally speaking, this person will have enough authority within the school system that most aspects of implementation are leaf or branch level decisions, but is also hands-on enough with implementation that they spend between half a day and two days per week focused on leading the initiative. If most of the implementation decisions associated with the initiative are not leaf/branch level decisions for the person identified as the owner, then the owner is likely higher in the hierarchy. If less than a half a day of work time per week is deployed on the initiative by the person identified as the owner, then the owner is likely lower in the hierarchy. There should only be one owner per initiative.
- Cabinet Member: To which direct report of the superintendent does the initiative owner ultimately report?
- Initiative-specific FTEs: These are the amount of staff time -- other than the initiative owner/contributors -- measured in 1/4 FTEs, that is applied each week explicitly to leading the initiative. This is not the list of people involved with implementation; just the amount of time, in people, for whom accomplishment of the initiative shows up on their annual evaluations. The update must indicate which of these are filled vs vacant.
- Budgetary Impact: What's the amount needed to implement the initiative? The update must indicate the gap (if any) that exists between current expenditures and the amount needed to accomplish the interims.
 - Note: The summary of this item for all initiatives aligned to a given goal should describe the total budget needed to accomplish that particular goal.
- Interdependent Contributors: These are people who do not meet the definition of initiative owner, but who are owners of adjacent initiatives or enablers that will make or break the likelihood of the initiative's success. When there are several key initiative decisions that are branch level, these are the other leaders in the organization with whom the owner must be communicating and/or coordinating.
- Output Metrics: This is the implementation measure / interim result measure that describes whether or not the actions being taken appear to be having the desired effect. Output metrics simultaneously are examining the quality of implementation of the inputs and offering insight into the likelihood of accomplishing the outcomes. That double duty often makes these metrics the hardest to determine. Output metrics are SMART and take the format of, "abc will increase from w% on x date to y% by z date". Output metrics are generally knowable in the midst of a cycle.

- **Input Metrics:** This is the effort measure / diagnostic result measure that describes which action steps are being taken. This is measuring the action steps themselves, not the result or effect of the action steps (that's the job of output metrics). Because the people gathering/tracking input-level data are often the people actually doing the work, there's a tradeoff between them doing the work and collecting data about the work -- and, in general, it's a better use of their time to have them doing the work. For this reason, while input metrics can be SMART as well, it's also appropriate and most common for them to simply be a regularly occurring counting of activities in the format of, "# of abc things that happened was x". Input metrics should indicate the frequency with which the data is updated. Input metrics are generally knowable at the beginning of a cycle.
- **Status:** The update must indicate the current status of the initiative's implementation. This can be done in many ways, but what's important is that it's standardized across all initiatives. The most simple version is often just a red / yellow / or green indicator. The legend might look something like this:

Blue	All initiative deliverables have been completed and match the standard of completion
Green	All output metrics are on track to be completed on time and initiative deliverables match the standard of completion
Yellow	Some initiative deliverables are not on track to be completed either on time or do not match the standard of completion
Red	Without significant changes, most initiative deliverables are off track and/or will not be completed
Gray	Initiative has not been started yet

Common Questions About Strategic Planning

How often should strategic plans be updated?

- Strategic plans are living documents and should be updated as circumstances on the ground require the Interim Goals, Interim Guardrails, Goal-aligned Initiatives, and Guardrail-aligned Initiatives to change. By default, strategic plans last as long as their Goals. Goals and Guardrails are generally unchanging during the term of a strategic plan.

Should strategic plans be adopted by the school board?

- No (or, more accurately, not unless state law requires it). Strategic plans are management documents about implementation, not governance documents about representation. The Goals and the Guardrails should be adopted by the school board, but not the rest. When school boards adopt strategic plans, it changes them from being living documents that staff uses to pivot to being political documents that staff typically puts on a shelf.

Who should write the strategic plan?

- There are many voices involved. The school system's owners -- the full community -- should be heard in advance of the board adopting the Goals and Guardrails. The school system's customers -- students, staff, families, partners -- should be heard in advance of the superintendent and senior staff adopting the initiatives.

Are Goals and Guardrails of equal priority?

- No. The first priority for resource allocation is accomplishment of the Goals. The superintendent does need to provide evidence that the Guardrails are being honored, but the Guardrails, while non-negotiable, do not carry the same priority as the Goals.

Do strategic plans ensure that outcomes will improve?

- Absolutely not. Plans must constantly evolve and change based on circumstances on the ground. Plans provide a starting point, but they can't be treated as final. As a general once said: I find plans to be worthless, planning to be indispensable.

How do I know if something is an initiative or not?

- If it's a SMART strategy that uses school system resources (time, talent, treasure) with the intention of changing the current state to a desired future state and it has one clearly indicated person who is leading the initiative and they're investing at least 4hrs per week into it, then it's probably an initiative. If someone has called it an initiative but it's not actually SMART or isn't actually resourced or no one knows who's leading it or there is a named leader but they're not spending any time on it, then it's not an initiative, it's just a hope.

How do I know if an Interim Goal or Interim Guardrail is aligned to its respective Goal or Guardrail?

- For Interim Goals, alignment isn't an opinion, it's a math problem. What we're really talking about is correlation: do the SMART metrics of the Interim Goal have a moderate to strong (generally we think of this as .6 or higher) correlation to the metrics of the Interim Goal? If the answer is yes, then the Interim Goal is aligned; if not, it isn't. If there are 100 different output metrics in a school system, expect that a base rate of 95 of them won't be aligned. Starting out, most output metrics are NOT going to be aligned to the Goals.
- For Interim Guardrails, alignment is an opinion since Guardrails aren't SMART. So what we're really asking is: does the board agree that the Interim Guardrail is a reasonable interpretation of the Guardrail. Notice that the standard for alignment is not, "does the board agree with the Interim" or "is that the Interim the board prefers" or anything else. It's a reasonableness standard not a preference standard. If a typical person would look at the Guardrail and then at the Interim Guardrail and agree that the Interim is a reasonable interpretation of the Guardrail, then the board either needs to accept that it's sufficiently aligned OR the board needs to modify its Guardrail to be more clear about what it intended. The board does NOT get to edit / modify / recommend changes to the Interims.

How do I know if an initiative is aligned to an Interim Goal or Interim Guardrail?

- In this context, alignment isn't an opinion, it's a math problem. What we're really talking about is correlation: do the SMART metrics of the Initiative have a moderate to strong (generally we think of this as .5 or higher) correlation to the metrics of the Interim Goal or Interim Guardrail? If the answer is yes, then the Initiative is aligned; if not, it isn't. If there are 100 initiatives in a school system, expect that a base rate of 95 of them won't be aligned. This isn't a bad thing, it's a reality-of-large-organizations thing. The task of strategic planning is to notice this reality and then take intentional steps to generate slightly more alignment tomorrow than we had yesterday. But starting out, most initiatives are NOT going to be aligned to the Goals and Guardrails. The school system will have to cause that alignment -- typically in small steps -- day after day after day.

Who decides which initiatives make it into the strategic plan or not?

- After a lot of process, a lot of analysis -- that senior staff lead, and that key staff and community as customers should be part of -- and a lot of brainstorming about what are more aligned ways to deploy the school systems time, talent, and treasure, it will be impossible to create change without creating change. That said, at the end of this process, because change is challenging and organizationally expensive, while the senior staff selects the proposed initiatives for the school system, the superintendent will have to make the final choices about how much alignment the organization needs vs how much it can afford (financially and psychologically). The superintendent is the final adopter (we

do not recommend that school boards vote to adopt strategic plans since they've already voted to adopt the Goals and Guardrails that drive the strategic plan). But superintendents can't make those choices on their own; they need staff and community as customers to help co-create a plan for what will cause the organization to accomplish the Goals while honoring the Guardrails.

What does a Playbook page look like?

- There isn't a right answer to this; it'll be different for each school system. What's important is that it contains the information necessary for the Initiative owner and anyone reliant on the Initiative to understand what its dependencies are and what its current status is. While [not an exemplar](#), here is one example of what one team came up with.

What is the relationship between the strategic plan and monthly Goal monitoring in board meetings?

- Monthly monitoring during the school board meeting is the primary mechanism through which the school board evaluates progress toward the Goals and Guardrails on which the strategic plan is based. The plan articulates from an operational/managerial level how the superintendent will accomplish the community's vision (Goals) while honoring its values (Guardrails). Monthly monitoring examines the degree to which current system performance aligns with the vision and values. It allows the board and superintendent to collaboratively assess whether students are making adequate progress and whether the superintendent's strategies are appropriately responsive to performance data. This process is foundational to setting expectations, reinforcing priorities, and maintaining alignment across the organization. If there is significant non-alignment between the strategic plan and monthly monitoring, that is a massive red flag.
- It's also worth noting that the board's monthly monitoring efforts also serve as a formative evaluation of the superintendent.

What is the relationship between the strategic plan and superintendent evaluation?

- The annual superintendent evaluation is the board's formal summation judgment of whether the superintendent is effectively leading the system toward the Goals while honoring the Guardrails. The evaluation is not arbitrary; it is based on the data reviewed during monthly monitoring at board meetings and reflects how well the superintendent's actions and leadership are driving student outcome improvements in line with the plan. As such, if there is significant non-alignment between the strategic plan and the superintendent's annual evaluation, that is a massive red flag.

What is the relationship between the strategic plan and the evaluations of other staff?

- Clever superintendents will ensure that at least 50% of their direct reports' annual evaluations are the Interim Goals and Interim Guardrails, as is appropriate for their respective roles. Similarly, those senior leaders should ensure that, over time, at least 50% of the annual evaluation for all central office leaders and front line building leaders are based on the metrics embedded in the Goal-aligned and Guardrail-aligned Initiatives. So essentially, the strategic plan as envisioned by this document also reveals the evaluation metrics for all of school system leadership.

What is the relationship between the strategic plan and the annual budget?

- The budget is the strategic plan in numeric form. It is one of the clearest expressions of whether or not the organization is aligned with the Goals and Guardrails because it shows where resources are being directed. The board's role is not to balance the budget as a standalone goal, but to ensure that the budget is aligned to the strategic plan -- that dollars are prioritized for the Goal-aligned and Guardrail-aligned Initiatives since they are most likely to advance student outcomes and uphold community values. If funding decisions are not rooted in the metrics found in the strategic plan, the plan itself has little operational relevance.