

Schools can use the approach to policy development employed by corporations to answer a new set of questions, interpret information, and consider the consequences of decisions.



Curriculum as a Strategic Management Tool

In the corporate world, strategic management has emerged as a new approach for policy development and long-range planning. It has been fueled by the desire of corporations to be in the most advantageous position possible in relation to market forces and environmental constraints. The application of strategic management techniques requires finding answers to a new set of questions, offers new ways to interpret information, and forces consideration of the future of current decisions. Strategic management has been defined as "management by structured foresight" (Steiner and Miner, 1977).

Applied to the educational community, strategic management may provide the process that could restore confidence in public education, confidence based on clearly demonstrated success in anticipating future problems and opportunities and designing strategies to cope with and profit from them.

Not-for-profit organizations such as school districts possess unique organizational characteristics that affect the application of strategic management techniques (Newman and Wallender, 1978). These include the diversity of objectives sought, the uniqueness of the clients (students), outcomes that are often hard to assess, weak consumer (student) influence, reduced allegiance of teachers to school districts due to commitments to unions or associations,

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the intrusion of government into the internal management of district resources, and restraints on the use of rewards and punishments as a result of negotiated contracts and courts or arbitrator decisions. Because of these characteristics, education is more often managed in a short-term operations sense than in a strategic, long-term mode.

Steps in the Strategic Management Process

Steps involved in the strategic management process include organizational goal formation, environmental analysis, strategy formation, strategy implementation, and strategic control (Schendel and Hofer, 1979).

Step 1: Shaping Organizational Goals. Establishing the goals of the organization is the first step in the strategic management process. For education, this is most often accomplished through policy statements developed by the board. Board policy reflects the power and personal goals of educational stakeholders in the broader educational community, and the condition of the organization and its relation to the educational community. The priorities given goals through policy statements are instrumental in the formulation, evaluation, and implementation of strategy in addition to determining how goal conflicts will be resolved. Board pol-

icy is a reflection of the organization's mission. The mission statement of a district must reflect congruence between the institution and the community that supplies the resources, clients, employees, and sanctions to operate the school. Board policy that facilitates the strategic management process provides a unifying foundation and direction for planning.

Step 2: Environmental Analysis. Not only is the present environment analyzed, but future environmental conditions are forecast as well. Stating assumptions about the future represents a crucial step in the process. Given the rapid rate of change and the degree of uncertainty with which schools must cope, increasing efforts must be focused on scanning the environment for new opportunities and potential problems. Knowing which factors to consider is difficult, and overlooking a significant factor may be a more serious error than forecasting it inaccurately. Given the present environment in education where high school graduates may choose among 90,000 occupations and where technical knowledge is doubling every ten years, it is hard to project accurately ten years ahead. However, to plan for the wrong future penalizes our youth. As stated by Alvin Toffler:

If the schools have any function, any justification, it is to prepare young people for the future. If it prepares them for the wrong future, it cripples them.

Step 3: Strategy Formation. Strategy formation deals with the development of a specific plan to meet the goals. As a first step in the development of a new plan, it is essential to evaluate the effectiveness of any

existing strategy. This process includes:

- Describing the current planning process, identifying board policy supporting this process, and analyzing the environmental assumptions on which the plan was developed

- Determining whether the plan was effective, to what extent and in which areas

- Comparing the environmental assumptions used in developing the previous plan with the assumptions regarding the future educational environment

- Determining whether the strategy used in the past is appropriate for the future.

This task is often compounded by the inability to determine whether failure to meet the desired objectives was the result of the strategy employed or ineffective management. Answering this question will affect a decision to continue with the present strategy, modify the strategy, or adopt a totally new strategy.

Step 4: Strategy Implementation.

Guiding the implementation of the strategy is a crucial task. While essentially an administrative function, success or failure of the plan is closely related to the administration's ability to communicate with staff; develop a supportive, nurturing environment; and provide the leadership necessary to implement the plan. Provision must be made for monitoring the implementation process and making adjustments based on short-term and long-range feedback.

Helping staff acquire the skills necessary to implement a strategy should become the basis for design of the district's staff development program. When the staff development program is integrated into the long-range goals of the system and this relationship is understood and supported by the staff, the likelihood of effective implementation of the plan is greatly enhanced.

Engaging in Strategic/Tactical Curriculum Decisions

The curriculum is a management tool of strategic importance because it is a response to a mission statement for the entire system, it implements policies adopted by boards of education, and it serves to ensure the public and the board of consistency in the implementation of the overall policies

of the district as they are translated into teaching activities and pupil outcomes. It does this by forcing the system's resources to flow in specified directions. It is an instrument to create *strategic control*, which responds to such environmental pressures as:

- Immediate and long-term fiscal pressures, sometimes highly regressive, that may reduce staff, materials, or time for selected facets of the educational program

- Shifts of the contents of the curriculum to include something "new" or downgrade or reduce the curriculum's current emphasis as the result of legislative mandate or public demands

- Staff reaction, acceptance, rejection, or indifference to any particular area of the curriculum

- Changes in policies that reflect an overall shift of content emphasis as developed by boards of education.

Master Policy: The Value Base For Curriculum Development

As a strategic management tool, the curriculum is a means to carry out a school district's strategic decisions. Policies that define the framework for strategy development or function as a strategy are called master policies. These are usually developed by legislative bodies.

The purpose of policy development is to create a political value base from which a curriculum can be designed. As such, the value base defines the concerns and sets the priorities and emphasis for the curriculum that delivers them.

Policies often are simply statements of the things the board "believes" are true or the way things "ought to be." From the perspective of the private sector, policies are framed to answer the questions at the heart of any enterprise: "What business are we in?" and "Are we in the right business?" (Drucker, 1973). Despite the simplicity of these questions, they are not easy to answer.

For example, a business may diversify and grow into providing many services beyond those provided at its inception. These may involve significant capital investments and personnel. When the question "What business are we in?" is asked, the answer may therefore become clouded. When the answer is forthcoming, it

may not be the appropriate response to "Are we in the right business?"

In education, the schools have taken on many social services over the years. Today, schools administer public health policy in the form of disease immunizations, prepare students to drive automobiles, feed and clothe some students, and provide a variety of direct special services and act as a referral for others.

Were these services established by policy or by expediency? Do they detract from the central function of schooling? What business are schools in? Are they in the right business? If the consequences of those decisions and the time and energy devoted to them had been calculated *at the time* laws were passed, would they have been passed or would another agency have been created or selected to handle them?

Master policy must ask and answer the question regarding the aims or mission of the schools. Curriculum becomes the strategic management tool to carry out such a policy.

Projecting Decisions into the Future

The curriculum represents a series of decisions at all levels of a school system about what will be important tomorrow. It is a projection into the future and is not amoral, scientific, or totally unbiased. It involves making decisions about social utility and value since the possibilities of activities or content far exceed the capacity of any curriculum to include them all.

What is included in a decision regarding curriculum content depends on how one defines "a good decision." Howard (1977) defines a good decision "as a logical consequence of what you can do, what you know, and what you want."

Perhaps the most important part of a good decision lies in "what you want." This means that any curriculum developer has some idea of the preferences he or she brings to the task of creating a strategic plan for a school district and/or the processes by which such preferences are defined.

The curriculum developer works with both the values of the dominant system and his or her own personal values which shape both the content and emphasis of the strategic plan. Knowing "what you can do" refers to the options open; in this case, the school system or the teachers who will implement the curriculum. "What

you know" refers to information about the kinds of relationships described and their importance in developing a curriculum.

The curriculum of a school system is therefore a strategic statement of the system that determines how it selects activities, organizes its resources, and determines how well it has performed its function within the overall policies it was constructed to implement.

Curriculum as Tactics

From the curriculum, teachers and other building level support personnel may engage in *tactical decisions* that enable the curriculum to be effectively implemented simultaneously in a school district servicing many pupils of diverse backgrounds and interests in multi-instructional sites.

A tactic is the delineation of a specific curriculum for a separate program, a school, or a specific instructional station because it fits into a larger strategy, deals with problems already structured at higher levels, and is less risky in terms of providing a reasonable linkage to master policy. The more curriculum development is translated into instruction the more it becomes a tactic and the less uncertainty there is in its implementation. This continuum of curriculum as both a strategy and a tactic is shown in Figure 1. As competency testing becomes more of a nationwide practice, the trend across the nation has been to develop more and more detailed curricular guidelines (tactics) to ensure their congruence to tests.

Beyond Curriculum Cycles

Strategic management emphasizes systemwide, high level management decisions. It provides for the identification of ideas that are potentially powerful for affecting the school district, ideas that are currently focused on, and ideas that affect the distribution of funds to and within the organization. Ideas that are powerful in guiding actions are considered ideas in good currency. Curriculum topics presently in good currency include basic skills, citizenship, and energy education. Ideas in good currency can usually be plotted on a life cycle moving from a period of latency, when only a few individuals are concerned with the issue, to a period of growth, when there is widespread support for the concept, to a period of peaking or leveling off, and finally to a period of decline. Strategic management will identify these cycles and move decision making into a realm that not only includes but goes beyond them. From the perspective of strategic management, some of the conflicts regarding thinking about curriculum as policies or as engineering are seen on a continuum rather than as totally opposite conceptions.

Strategic curriculum thinking and decision making must go considerably beyond the engineering or tactical level. As such, it is an exercise in policy development and *politics* rather than simply a technical exercise devoted to technical issues. Curriculum development is *both* strategy and tactics. How one looks at it is not as much a matter of taste or

philosophy, as a matter of the organizational level at which the curriculum issues are being considered. ■

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Figure 1. Curriculum Development Continuum.

| | Strategy | Tactic |
|--------------------------------------|---|--|
| Scope | Systemwide, all levels | Program, school, or classroom specific |
| Specificity | Low level of detail | Higher level of detail |
| Delineation of Instructional Methods | Broad or nonexistent | Embedded and more specific, closer to the classroom |
| Organization, Location of Decision | Highest levels of management/policy | Much lower level, building, classroom |
| Risk Involved | High risk, more uncertainty | Lower risk, much less uncertainty |
| Assessment | Broadly indicated as a requirement upon which to make decisions and re-examine policy | Specifically delineated by objective, type, expected standards of achievement for groups of students |
| Consideration of Alternatives | Broad, conceptual | Narrow, operational |

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