

Beginning Strategic Planning in Leon County, Florida

Through communitywide planning and strategy setting at the "mega" level, the Leon County School District has formulated ambitious goals for its schools and the community.

The Leon County Schools were searching for a substantive district plan to help us deal with long-term accomplishments as well as short-term results.¹ When the topic of *strategic planning* first came up, we were skeptical. Not all business strategies fit the educational setting, and, besides, businesses have their own problems. Yet, after we heard an overview of the process and understood its potential, we could see that strategic planning makes good sense for schools.

What was most attractive to us about strategic planning was the focus on *outcomes*—outcomes that go beyond the simple exit criteria of schools to broad accomplishments that would enrich our community and society as well. The "mega-level" view of education as transcending schools and encompassing the larger community seemed to fit well with the demands from our own community for the schools to help solve society's problems (see Kaufman and Herman's article in this issue, p. 4). Another element of strategic planning that we appreciated was its focus on strengths and opportunities. As we looked at our district, we saw, in addition to the problems, many good things going on as well. Recasting our problems as opportunities would let us take a forward view, rather than looking for excuses.

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Beginning Steps

To set the process in motion, we established a steering committee, whose membership reflected district employees in a variety of roles as well as business people and university faculty. Once we obtained the school board's support, the committee developed timelines for the first phase of the process.

Over the next several months, we

held a series of town hall meetings with different focus groups: parents, volunteers, and the District Advisory Council; the Chamber of Commerce and other business and industry representatives; the State Department of Education, social services, the university, and the community-at-large; and district employees and clients from all levels, from administrators to students.

During the focus group meetings, we first provided the participants with data on the changing world our students live in. Then, we worked together to generate value and belief statements, rank-order these statements and achieve consensus on a mission statement, generate individual and group mission objectives, and suggest guidelines for the steering committee, which at the same time was organizing the next phase of the process. We were pleased that, of the more than 160 participants, 55 expressed interest in further participation in our strategic planning process. Their future involvement will include reviewing the board-approved mission statement, developing mission objectives, and formulating specific recommendations for implementation strategies.

Our Mission Statement and Action Plan Strategies

Subsequently, the steering committee synthesized our district mission state-



With a countywide strategic planning effort that concentrates on short- and long-term results under way, the Leon County School District is optimistic about better schools for their students.

Photograph courtesy of Leon County Florida Schools

ment from the ideas of all the focus groups. This statement expresses a substantive goal for our district that is outcome-based and targeted to meet the identified needs of our community. It reads:

Leon County Schools will increase to 99 percent the number of individuals leaving the system who will be self-sufficient, self-reliant, caring, and contributing members of the community, as measured by:

- a. gainful employment or enrollment in a postsecondary institution after graduation;
 - b. increased voter registration and participation;
 - c. freedom from care or control of another person, agency, or substance;
 - d. increased involvement in community activities;
 - e. maintenance of stable family relations;
- As a result, we also hope to reduce our community's:
- f. teenage parenthood rate;
 - g. teenage suicide rate;
 - h. crime rate;
 - i. number of individuals/families receiving welfare;
 - j. incarceration rates.

Mission objectives at the mega level

reflect very specific outcomes that can form the basis for action plan strategies to build on. The steering committee further refined focus group input to identify several alternative mission objectives. They included the following:

1. The Leon County School System will assist students so that 98 percent become self-sufficient, contributing, and responsible individuals, either by entering and completing postsecondary education programs within five years or by being gainfully employed and financially independent within six months.

2. We will increase to 98 percent the aggregate number of students graduating from high school who:

- a. enter college, or
- b. enter specific vocational training, or
- c. are gainfully employed (A person who chooses to be a homemaker will be considered gainfully employed).

3. We will, by the turn of the century, reduce the crime rate, unemployment rate, teenage parent rate, and suicide rate by 25 percent, while decreasing the student retention rate by 50 percent (lifelong learning at work).

4. We will develop citizens who are productive, self-sufficient, and caring; they will:

a. have secured gainful employment or be enrolled in a postsecondary institution five years after graduation;

b. be registered voters and vote in most elections;

c. not be under the control of another person, agency, or of drugs;

d. be positive role models as demonstrated by:

- good parenting skills,
- involvement in community activities,
- sustained employment and/or schooling.

5. We will provide a quality education for 100 percent of the students. This education will be designed to guide students toward a successful, responsible, fulfilling quality of life that will contribute to the well-being of our society. Specifically, we want them to achieve adequate per capita incomes regardless of any socioeconomic or discriminatory factors, and we hope to:

a. decrease the number of Leon County high school graduates receiving public assistance;

b. decrease the rate of crimes committed by our graduates.

c. achieve a graduation rate that is one of the top three in the state by June 1995 as reflected by statewide statistics.

Our Next Steps

The next steps for our district include the formation of a representative committee—drawn from interested focus group members and district and school staff—to reaffirm the composite mission statement, review and revise the mission objectives, and make recommendations to the school board concerning specific implementation strategies. At this time, their emphasis will also be on restructuring our district's organization to more directly support the school sites where most of the requisite activities must take place.

We will then present the completed plan to the community in a series of town hall meetings prior to final approval by the school board. Part of the planning process will include accountability measures to ensure that progress toward the mission objectives is monitored and reported regularly. A "watchdog" group, pulled from the representative committee, will oversee the plan's implementation from an outside perspective. This kind of community oversight worked well in our district during a recent school construction bond issue; we plan to continue it in our planning effort.

The Leon County School District now believes that using the strategic planning model can help us focus on making our community better, while at the same time providing a framework for specific action planning for improving the school district management. Though it is time-consuming to involve many representative groups, the community support has been heartening. With a clear vision and mission approved by the school board, specific outcomes, and a realistic action plan, we can better deal with our current needs and future opportunities. □

¹Leon County Schools serve over 30,000 students in 37 school sites in a mixed urban and suburban community, with an annual operating budget of more than \$125 million. All schools are fully accredited and have parent/teacher organizations and active school volunteer programs. Partners for Excellence and the B.E.S.T. (Better Education for Our Students Tomorrow)

row) Fund, co-sponsored with the Tallahassee Chamber of Commerce, provide business/school matches and additional funds for enhancement activities.

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Superintendent, he was the Executive Director of the Center for Career Development, an agency of the Florida Department of Education. **James M. Croteau** is the Executive Director for Planning and Policy for the Leon County Schools. He has worked previously with the district as Deputy Superintendent and Director of Staff Development.

A School Board Member's Perspective

Emily Millett

Everyone can learn. We learn in different ways and at differing rates. Our schools as they are presently structured are probably doing the best job they can, and *it is not enough*. Many of our students are not learning. The public is demanding a change in education, but without direction, and the educational community is hanging on to traditional ways of doing things with fingernails firmly dug in. In looking at the years ahead, we on the school board face a formidable task.

As a veteran board member who has survived numerous restructuring efforts under many names, I did not want to do more of the same. It was my desire to go back to the drawing board and find out what we really want to accomplish. We must have a vision with measurable outcomes and a good evaluation process. Enter strategic planning—Leon County, Florida, style.

Round One: First, we identified some key change agents in our district. Six areas were targeted: school board, superintendent, planning, public relations, technology, and staff development.

Round Two: Our first few meetings with the representative individuals in these positions were chaotic. We brainstormed, jockeyed for position, and each of us thought we had the answer—and it was in his or her area. Eventually, we agreed upon a shared objective: we wanted to make our students and school district more successful, and to do so we must have a long-range vision and indicators to know we were on the right road.

Round Three: Next we looked for a consultant with the knowledge and skill to get us where we wanted to be. A chance meeting with the chair of Florida State University's Educational Systems Department, also a parent in our school system, put us on the right track. He joined our group and recommended Roger Kaufman's strategic planning model. (See p. 4, this issue.) We saw it and we liked it.

Round Four: Discussions with Kaufman about his model led to more chaos. But we survived, with the original model almost intact. Representatives from the schools and the community then proceeded to develop a first draft of a workable vision.

At this point, the planning process has not worked extremely well, but, given the difficulty in creating a climate for change, maybe it has done better than we could reasonably expect. Everyone in the system and many in the community now acknowledge the necessity for a common vision, and many of the original participants want to stay involved.

Individuals who are committed to strategic planning know we have to start with the big picture. It will take time to agree on a definitive vision and to identify outcomes and action plans. Our commitment must be for the long term.

To complicate our problems, Florida is in the midst of a severe financial crisis; cutbacks in funding have already been made, with more expected. Our ability to produce a fiscally sound budget for the next few years depends on our ability to strategically plan for our future. As a board member, I am excited, scared, and optimistic. For learners, I think the best is yet to come.

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