

Focus on the Process - not Vocabulary: Why distinguishing between Strategic Plans and Continuous School Improvement Plans (CSIP) is the wrong approach.
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Background. Much attention has been given and rightly so to the correct interpretation of ACSI's Reach 2.1 protocol for Standard Eight. An unfortunate result has been a hyper-focus on distinguishing between a CSIP and a Strategic Plan. Rather than confuse ourselves with such distinctions, the right response to standard eight should be a commitment from schools to have an intentional planning process that is missional, comprehensive, collaborative, and connected to student learning/outcomes. With this response in view, school leaders and accreditation teams should utilize the following recommendations when planning or examining standard eight.

Planning requires an intentional and mindful process. While obvious on the surface, school leaders often struggle to provide themselves with necessary "think time" to do things well. School leaders constantly fight the battle of attending to the tyranny of the urgent. However, quality planning must include time in prayer and contemplation asking, "What does the Lord's school and its students need to be vibrant and sustain itself into the future?" Our Lord "hovered" before he began His creation. If God had a space of time before acting, shouldn't we? A continuous school improvement planning process creates the vehicle for such thinking.

Planning must connect to your mission. A school leader's responsibility is to tie all strategies, regardless of whether they are operational or instructional to mission. Go back to the drawing board if there is not a clear connection between a plan and the school's mission, core values or expected student outcomes. Connecting a strategic direction to a core value or expected student outcome provides an internal test to the strategies' fidelity to your school culture. Additionally, your school community will increase buy-in as they see the tangible evidence of strategies connected to mission.

Planning is comprehensive. Quality planning in a school setting addresses areas such as instruction, facilities, spiritual formation, admissions, teacher quality, curriculum, parent involvement, and development. Segmenting your planning into two tracks with one addressing day to day school improvement (often called CSIPs) and one addressing long-term operational plans (often called Strategic Plans) runs the risk of one or both plans being lost and/or creating confusion to stakeholders who do not see the connection.

A different approach is to have a fully-integrated plan that is comprehensive of your school. The audiences utilized in planning should be different, but a quality plan should cover all elements of your school community. The [Formative to Flourishing School Continuum](#) created by ACSI showcases this approach as all areas identified in the continuum are vital for the success and sustainability of a school. Additionally, distinguishing plans based on cost is not a good basis as all plans have a cost. Furthermore, the length of implementation should not determine the distinctions in planning. Some day to day instructional initiatives will take years to be implemented effectively.

Segmenting plans can also be cumbersome to the Head of School. Ultimately, the school leader will have responsibilities in both plans. Having one plan allows the leader to collaborate with stakeholders to prioritize effectively across all areas of your school community. Remember: The goal is to create a process that is ongoing, collaborative and connected to mission. The process will culminate in a plan. The goal is

not the plan itself. Rather, the plan serves as evidence to a process that addresses the high achievement of student outcomes, not whether efforts should separate into a CSIP or Strategic Plan. Do away with that line of thinking.

Planning must address the quality of your students' experience. Students are the reason for our existence. Operational issues such as admissions, marketing, and facilities provide essential support to school infrastructure, but all plans need to address how your instructional program will improve. As a result, planning that does not identify teacher quality is probably a bad plan. Why? It is simply unfair to ask a teacher to grow themselves towards being better for students in areas such as biblical integration, discipleship, and mastery of content on their own. That is an overwhelming task doomed to fail for the majority of educators. Our stewardship, exercised in planning, must have at its core the quality of the student experience.

Planning is collaborative. Planning that involves a committee of one will lack ownership and buy-in from the people who will ultimately be implementing the work of your school. Creating two distinct plans could also result in a subtle division between stakeholder groups. As a result, a well-designed comprehensive plan should elicit expertise such as:

- Faculty and Staff: Some of the greatest experts of classroom instruction are available to you at your school. Utilize them in the planning, support, and evaluation of your efforts.
- Parents: Likewise do not be afraid of your parents. They have much to offer related to the needs of your students. Invest time in finding out what they know about students and your culture.
- Board: Board members need not focus on items where you are an expert as much as they need to complement and advance the school's mission in the areas where you need support.
- Pastors: Local pastors are excellent assets when it comes to discipleship. Use them and you may find that they appreciate a partnership based on our common cause of bringing people to the knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Planning is prescriptive. A plan shares how your school culture will function. Do not create plans that intentionally excludes the teacher down the hall because "He just will not do or get it." Planning that is meaningful expects full compliance from the target audience. Not all will be fully committed to the process of school improvement at first. This is ok as having some compliant yet reserved stakeholders is actually healthy. They will keep the process honest and provide a quality assessment of your plan's implementation. Not ok is partial compliance allowed by the leader. When partial compliance is permitted, the leader is sending a subtle message about expectations within the school culture and the importance of the planned initiative.

There are essential elements for any planning. Plans must identify the tasks, people, timelines, and finances needed to accomplish your goals. A plan that does not include the needed steps, people and resources will probably remain a desired outcome as opposed to an achieved step.

Planning must prioritize strategies. Prioritization is essential for the implementation, support, and evaluation of all planning efforts. The likelihood of enacting too many strategies when planning is high. However, all of your strategies should be listed. How then, do you address the disparity between creating a comprehensive plan and leaning into several key areas? The answer is prioritization. Use the following questions to prioritize effectively:

- What will have the most significant impact on making the quality of our student experience better?
- What strategy has the greatest ease of implementation in terms of buy-in, cost, and time?

- What strategy has the most significant impact related to the number of staff affected by the plan?
- What strategy can sustain other strategies? Use the example of our Heavenly Father. God, in His creation, began with things that would continue into other elements of His creation.

Planning is evaluative. Most plans fail to get legs and traction because there is not an attempt to evaluate progress. Every plan must have a stopping point to see if effective in:

- **Implementation:** Good plans measure implementation. Do this by measuring the degree of a strategy's implementation across an identified stakeholder group. (ie. The percentage of teachers successfully curriculum mapping when beginning a curriculum mapping strategy or participating in service learning when embracing a service initiative.) Caution: Do not look solely at the places in your culture where things readily get done. All schools have soft spots, and the quality of your implementation is ultimately measured by examining all areas to see if the implementation of your plan is taking place uniformly.
- **Achievement:** A plan should measure itself against a student outcome and not solely against adult implementation. For example, an identified strategy in biblical integration should not only measure whether your staff is fully implementing the strategy. While a good starting point, efforts should ultimately be measured against how well students are connecting biblical truth to content. A note of caution: Assessing strategies against performance is essential, but should be done when confident that implementation is occurring with fidelity.
- **Revision:** The purpose of evaluation is to refine, revise and sometimes scrap an idea. Implementing a strategy with fidelity and discovering that it did not produce the desired outcome is ok.
- **Time to Measure:** Create the target to evaluate a strategy against, and also a time to measure. God in His creation set up both long and short term stopping points to evaluate His success. God evaluated His work at the conclusion of every day and then at the end of six. We need both short and long term evaluation cycles as well. Translation: Put the times in your calendar and stick to it. Something will have to give, but dealing immediately with the student in your office for not raising his hand is probably not nearly as important as the planning, monitoring, and evaluating of a God-honoring classroom management plan that will affect your entire culture. There is even a good chance that students will be in your office less frequently when a comprehensive classroom management initiative is taking place resulting in teachers receiving instruction, tools and support.

In summary, ***stop*** focusing on distinguishing between a strategic plan and a continuous school improvement plan(CSIP.) Good planning regardless of time or area of focus has the same vital elements. Instead, develop a comprehensive plan that elicits feedback from the right stakeholders as it is ultimately the intentionality, process, and evaluation surrounding your plan that will make the difference for your students. Focus on ensuring your plan always includes items that directly affect the quality of the student experience at the classroom level. Finally, in all of our planning, acknowledge that we want our efforts connected to God's purpose. Proverbs 19:21 shares that, "Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand."(ESV) Let us pray for one another to the end that our plans fully align to His purpose.

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