The Case against Strategic Planning

Robert Evans

Looking back, it is clearer to me now that these plans—for all their seemingly tight, logical connections between mission, belief, goals, actions, responsibilities, and evaluation—were like beautiful but badly leaking boats.

-- Mike Schmoker[i]

On a sunny Saturday morning, the trustees of an independent day school were trickling in for their annual retreat. The head of School and I had started earlier. He had resisted several board members' wish that they embark on a formal strategic planning process and he wanted me, as the retreat's facilitator, to understand why.

"I've been here nine years," he said, "and we've already done two plans. My predecessor was here for ten years, and they also did two. Each one is thicker than the last. They look terrific; very comprehensive. But we haven't finished a quarter of the steps in the last plan." Nonetheless, the school was doing well. There were "things to tweak," but even if major change were needed, he no longer saw strategic planning as a valuable tool. Once he had thought it "the very essence of leadership." Now it seemed "like a ritual with minimal relevance to how this school operates and the actual problems I have to solve."

Every year I have similar conversations with heads across the county. When I press them, they acknowledge advantages to strategic planning. One typical response is: "Most people like the process of thinking about the school. Discussing its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats helps people feel they're contributing to our future direction and decisions." Another is: "We get to remind ourselves of our values, which is always good, and new trustees end up better informed about the school and more strongly committed to it." But most heads agree that most of the goals ultimately adopted are predictable from the beginning: faculty recruitment and retention; facilities; technology; diversity; marketing—and fundraising to support all this. Many complain about the rigidity and size of the plans. (As I write this, I have on my desk six recent plans from well-known schools. They range from 12 to 45 pages in length. The shortest translates its goals and objectives ultimately into 40 action steps; the largest, into 207.) A small but growing number of heads, when they speak candidly, are not just skeptical about the process but frankly cynical, like the one who told me: "Strategic planning makes people feel very 'executive.' We have lots of trendy talk about 'benchmarks,' 'drivers,' 'metrics,' 'thinking out of the box,' 'globalization,' and how 'the world is flat.' We almost never talk about actual teaching."

Despite these reservations, and others I will cite, strategic planning is ubiquitous, widely accepted as a hallmark of sound school governance. It's hard to find a school that lacks a plan—indeed, few state or regional associations would accredit such a school. Many trustees and others who participate in the process do seem to enjoy it. And taking a fresh look at realities and challenges can engage everyone's attention in a constructive way, helping to renew energy and commitment, quite apart from specific steps that do get enacted. But my experience—and the experience of most heads I know—indicates that classic strategic planning is not the best path toward improving the quality of a school.

I want to be clear that I do not object to all planning, or, within limits, to being *truly* strategic. Nor do I deny that a traditional strategic plan can be valuable at certain moments in a school's history. But I do not believe that simply calling for more planning, or trying to improve the strategic planning process, is going to help schools get where they want to go. The problem is not just that strategic plans are often badly done, but that the very activity itself has inherent weaknesses, particularly as applied to schools.

Given the fundamental flaws in traditional planning, it is time we replace it with strategic *thinking*, re-examine the very concept of "strategy" in schools, and simplify the way schools approach planning, leading, and governance.

Planning Flaws and Fallacies

Within the management field, opposition to strategic planning has been growing for some time. The primary charge against it is that it isn't actually strategic at all. This critique has been led by management expert Henry Mintzberg, of McGill

University, who sees the very concept of "strategic planning" as an oxymoron. He has famously observed that planning is analysis, strategy is synthesis, and the former cannot produce the latter. Planning gets you a plan, not necessarily a strategy. It consists of studying problems and possibilities, choosing goals, breaking these into action steps, and spelling out the expected results of each step. Strategy, on the other hand, is "an integrated perspective of the enterprise, a not-too-precisely articulated vision of direction" that is compelling but not rigid, simple rather than detailed (more on this below).2

This challenge to strategic planning is part of a larger opposition to the prevailing approach to organizational development and innovation. The prevailing approach relies on logic, rationality, and cause-and-effect thinking. It emphasizes step-by-step problem-solving, structural remedies, time lines, and measurable results. It tends to treat innovation as a set of fixed outcomes. To its critics it is a simplistic, narrow, rigid, "technoholic" effort to avoid uncertainty and unpredictability, to minimize the "fundamental back-and-forthness" of human interaction.[3] At its core, Mintzberg asserts, lie three key fallacies: predictability, objectivity, and structure.[4]

The first fallacy is the assumption that the world will "hold still while a plan is being developed and then stay on the predicted course while that plan is being implemented."[5] In fact, the environment within which all organizations live, far from being predictable and static, keeps changing at an ever faster rate, meaning that plans can quickly end up out of date or irrelevant. (Consider how little of what we currently take for granted in technology, or in political, corporate, and social life was foreseeable five years ago.) This risks reification—the tendency for a plan to become an end in itself that must be pursued even when unexpected changes in the environment invalidate the assumptions on which it was based. Following the blueprint becomes a substitute for addressing the realities facing the institution.

The second fallacy is the assumption that the keys to strategy lie in objective measures of hard data, and the consequent ignoring of the "decidedly soft underbelly" beneath the hard data, even though this underbelly is often crucial to choosing the right direction for an organization—especially one as people-centered as a school.

The third fallacy, closely related, is the assumption that structural systems and "a rational sequence, from analysis through administrative procedure to eventual action" are superior to human judgment. In practice, however, formalized procedures almost never "forecast discontinuities…or create novel strategies."[6] Rather, they incline planners to concentrate on means rather than ends, on how-to-do-things rather than why-to-do-things, on better ways of pursuing current objectives rather than reconsidering which objectives should be pursued.[7]

To these flaws we might add two, also closely related to each other: imitation and faddism. Few strategic plans are truly original. Many plans tend to base future projections on the recent past and to borrow heavily from competitors' plans. And they tend to reflect current management fads. For example, when Total Quality Management (TQM) was all the rage, company after company embraced TQM in its planning. (Schools eventually followed suit—just about the time corporations began discovering TQM's limitations.) A planning process that is derivative and trendy doesn't lead to strategic thinking; it inhibits it. To many critics the larger underlying issue is that the very enterprise of strategic planning is itself a fad, an activity that symbolizes good governance but doesn't typically contribute much of substantive value.

Planning Goes to School

When schools undertake strategic planning, they encounter not just the flaws and fallacies inherent in the process itself but an additional critical challenge: relevance. Strategic planning was born in the corporate sector, where "strategy" is always preceded, implicitly if not explicitly, by "competitive." The whole purpose of strategic planning is to secure competitive advantage—outsell the competition, increase market share, improve the bottom line, and so on. These kinds of goals can be measured concretely. They are not entirely beside the point for schools, but, as I have previously argued,[8] corporate models, measures, and methods rarely fit schools well because schools differ from corporations in four key ways:

- *mission*—education is a developmental undertaking, not a service sold or a product manufactured. Its purpose is to help raise the young. A school needs "customers," but "customer service" is a poor model for raising the young (unless the goal is to foster entitlement). A school must be sufficiently businesslike to survive, but it is not about the bottom line. Its tasks and functioning closely resemble those of a family or a religious institution; the daily work of teachers—instructing, advising, coaching, counseling—is most like that of parents and pastors.

- *accountability*—a school's "value-added" is very difficult to measure. The strongest predictors of student success have always been non-school factors, such as parents' level of education, the wealth and stability of the family and community, and so on. This makes sense for many reasons, not least because students spend only ten percent of their lives in school between birth and graduation. And

teaching, as anyone who's ever done it knows, is not just the delivery of a standardized set of "best practices" but a highly fluid, interactional craft that is deeply dependent on what students bring with them to school.

- *people*—educators differ sharply from those who choose corporate careers. They typically prefer to spend their days with children or adolescents. They have a strong service ethic. They want to be adequately compensated, but money is not nearly the motivator for them that it is for their corporate counterparts. And though they certainly want their students to do well, few have a competitive thirst to make their class outscore another teacher's or another school's.

- *focus*—schooling is a backward-looking enterprise, not an entrepreneurial one. This may sound unflattering; it is not. A school can only prepare children for the future—the unknown—by teaching them what is known. Much of its curriculum is slow-changing and most of the values it promotes are enduring. It demands patience for the unfolding of development as much as stimulation to accelerate performance. Continuity is thus a bedrock of school life.

These characteristics are, for the most part, ideal for raising the young, but they complicate the process of innovating. Although schools live in the same context of dynamic change as do corporations, it is often less immediate for them and they are in any case less well suited to respond. By their very nature, they are, like a family or a house of worship, far better adapted to a context of gradual change. Innovation inevitably proceeds at a slower, more incremental, uneven pace in schools than it does in corporate settings, no matter how bold the strategic plan. In fact, the unique nature of schooling intensifies some of the problems inherent in planning and creates new ones.

These begin with control—that is, the lack of it. A school has much less influence over its "inputs" than a factory does over its raw materials or a company does over its customers. Schools' leverage on students, for whose outcomes they are held responsible, is far more limited than most educational critics (and even many educators) believe. It's not just that school occupies barely ten percent of students' lives, but that the influences that dominate the other 90 percent are increasingly undermining the habits and values schools seek to teach and depend on to function well. Schools everywhere report declines in students' behavior, language, respectfulness, and work habits.[9] So, too, it is not just that schooling's specific value-added is inherently hard to measure, as noted above, but that schooling is an *important but minority influence* on the lives and

learning of most children. Every school's strategic plan that I have ever seen assumes just the opposite.

Also problematic for planning in schools is the matter of growth. It is axiomatic that corporations must "grow or die"—a key reason for strategic planning. For schools, this is much less true. There are those that wish to increase enrollment, but schools, *per se*, are not routinely looking to expand. It is now common to suggest that non-profit organizations do face a growth imperative, but one that is about quality, not quantity, about getting better, not bigger. A good school will emphasize growth for all its constituents, including staff. Indeed, there has been much talk and writing in recent years about schools as "learning communities" where everyone, adult and student alike, is always learning, developing, growing. Much effort has been invested in organizing teachers into peer groups where they read and discuss professional articles and books, observe one another's classes, discuss new ways of teaching and of organizing their work, design new interdisciplinary projects, and so on. In schools where these efforts take hold, the impact on teachers' engagement, self-reflection, and collaboration can be dramatic. But this approach to growth is the antithesis of strategic planning. It is bottom-up, not top-down; organic, not structured; designed by practitioners, not trustees and administrators. And its results are very difficult to measure quantitatively.

The learning community's focus on teaching and learning dramatizes perhaps the most profound flaw in most schools' strategic plans: they rarely address directly the core function of schooling: instruction. Most plans are about *supports for* excellent teaching and learning—facilities, finance, salaries, and so on—but they take that excellence for granted. I often find this surprising because in a number of independent schools I visit (especially secondary schools) the actual teaching seems pedestrian—not poor, but not superb.

Independent schools' traditions of professional development, curriculum development, supervision, and evaluation are, with rare exceptions, notably weaker than those in the best public schools. Independent schools typically hire new teachers who have taken few, if any, education courses, and neither mandate nor provide nearly as much in-service training as good public schools do. Curriculum is often not coordinated—there are still many independent schools where the curriculum lives entirely in the individual teacher's head; when she goes it goes. And few independent schools I visit have truly effective programs to foster, supervise, and evaluate growth in teachers' performance. The result is not necessarily poor classroom practice, but a relatively narrow range of teaching methodology. Fortunately, independent schools tend to hire bright, motivated educators

who are committed to their students and their discipline, and generally enroll bright, motivated, students who are highly teachable, and they keep class sizes small. Still, I am hard pressed to see as truly strategic plans that rarely feature a *direct* focus on enhancing teachers' performance and growth.

Strategic Thinking

Critics of strategic planning generally recommend replacing it with strategic thinking—that is, actual strategy. Strategy, in their view, is less a fixed design than a flexible learning process that ultimately produces the "integrated perspective," the "not-too-precisely articulated vision of direction" that is compelling but not rigid. This perspective and vision come not from a planning exercise but from the organization's leader synthesizing all of what he learns from all sources. This synthesis depends on intuition, judgment, creativity, and the "soft underbelly" of the organization more than on quantifiable measures. Indeed, many studies have shown that truly effective leaders "rely on some of the softest forms of information, including gossip, hearsay, and various other intangible scraps of information."[10] A formal planning process may constitute one source of learning for the leader, but not usually the most important. A board may provide helpful advice and be a stimulating resource for the head of school, but it does not, through a planning exercise, generate the strategy.

This approach does not dismiss planning. However, it sees planning as a journey, not a destination; an outline, not a blueprint. It assumes that the actual results of any plan can only approximate the original aim, that there will always be unintended consequences, and that we often discover what we truly need only after we have begun searching for something else. An innovation is thus not something to roll out but an adaptable outcome "that will be modified during the process of implementation as internal and external conditions shift, data accumulate, and judgment suggests."[11]

In this view, strategy can be *deliberate* but it is often *emergent*, Mintzberg emphasizes. "We think in order to act," he notes, "but we also act in order to think. We try things, and those experiments that work converge gradually into viable patters that become strategies. This is the very essence of strategy making as a learning process."[12]

True strategic thinking favors pragmatic, flexible approaches to key challenges, approaches that acknowledge the nonrational and unplannable aspects of the world and of organizational life and the importance of being ready to respond to rapid change in both, and that rely on the judgment of leaders much more than the spelling out of action steps and the measurement of benchmarks. It favors plans that are simple, that concentrate on a very few targets over a relatively short period of time, and it anticipates the likelihood that changing conditions may call for changing targets.[13]

This approach to strategy is a much better fit for schools than the standard model. So much of schooling is non-corporate, hard to measure, situational, idiosyncratic, and dependent on relationships—so much is just plain *personal*—that schools benefit from plans that are smaller, simpler, shorter, more flexible, and that rely heavily on professional judgment, beginning with the head and including, as appropriate, trustees, faculty, and others. Before proposing a new full strategic plan, a school's head and board chair might ask themselves: Is it really necessary? How much of our last plan did we complete? What if we don't do a "Full Monty"? Do we not already know what the school's key needs are over the next few years? Often, the answers to these questions suggest the value of a strategic thinking process, which may occur over a series of faculty meetings and a board retreat. NAIS President Patrick Bassett recommends such an annual strategic thinking retreat.[14] I often suggest a periodic "state of the school" presentation by the head to faculty and to board members (either all together or separately), outlining current strengths and issues and the top priorities as she sees them. The questions and discussion that follow offer an excellent way to promote strategic thinking. The head can use the responses of faculty and trustees to inform her crafting of key proposals for the school over the next few years and then return to present these for follow up discussion and eventual adoption.

(I must interject here an important caveat. As the advantages of strategic thinking become more widely known, there is a risk of it being hijacked. I have already encountered several schools that supposedly engaged in a strategic thinking process but produced something that looks remarkably like a traditional strategic plan.)

A different alternative to traditional planning is to undertake a rolling sequence of project-based review and change, focussing each year on one or two divisions, departments, or program areas. The John Burroughs School, in St. Louis, relied on this approach, which it called "continuous rotational planning," under the successful leadership of its (now retired) head, Keith Shahan, who has long objected to the typical strategic plan (he compares its rigidity to that of the old-style Soviet five-year plans). Burroughs took a comprehensive approach—it often included parent surveys and student focus groups as part of the assessments it conducted—but by concentrating on a few targets at a time, the school found it could implement meaningful improvements as they were needed.

Leadership and Realism

I am not naïve enough to imagine that most readers of this article will immediately abandon strategic planning. And there are some situations where a full process, appropriately modified for schools, can still make good sense. Chief among these would be major transition points, such as after a new head follows a long-serving predecessor, or when there has been significant turmoil in the school or a serious downturn in morale, enrollment, or finance. Also, when a school needs to change or improve its "market position," a full plan may be indicated. Many schools feel that an official strategic plan provides a strong case for a capital campaign. But whether a school moves toward strategic thinking or stays with traditional planning, its ultimate success is likely to depend more than anything else on leadership and realism.

Strategy begins with leadership at the conceptual level and ends with leadership at the implementation level. It is not too far fetched to say that a head's major role is to be the school's strategist. Strategic thinking (and, for that matter, strategic planning) cannot succeed unless the head has earned the confidence of both faculty and trustees. Both groups must know that the head *knows*: that he/she is fully engaged in the school, attuned to its realities and constituencies, able to see it in both its immediate and its larger context. The board, for example, must be able to trust the accuracy of what he reports to them about the school's people and programs and about trends in education. (I have consulted in too many schools where this was not the case and where trustees were using a strategic planning process—in vain—to prod or restrain a head about whom they had real doubts.) If head and board and head and faculty are not on the same page, this is the immediate task to address before effective planning or strategizing can begin. As one head told me, "Nothing is more important to strategy than a shared understanding between me and my board and my faculty about the key areas we're going to concentrate on and who's responsible for what."

Even with good leadership, no strategy can succeed if it overreaches, promising—as so many mission statements do—all things to all people. Given schooling's ten percent window on students' lives, it is vital to concentrate energy and resources, especially when these are scarce. The question is not, "What are *all* the worthy goals we embrace?" but, "Which *few* matter most right now?" Being truly strategic means being clear about what I call *purpose* and *conduct*. Purpose can be summarized as "what really makes us, us;" it captures the essential core values that define the school. Conduct can be summarized as "the minimum non-negotiables of membership here;" it captures the ways the core values apply to all the school's constituents, the norms and expectations that make the school a community.[15] Purpose and conduct require clarity about what the school is and what it isn't, about whom it's good for and whom it's not good for, about what it can—and can't—become. Nothing could be more strategic.

This kind of clarity is especially vital for the majority of independent schools that are small. Smallness presents a classic strategic dilemma: it combines a strength—small means "personal"—with a vulnerability—small means "limited." All learning is personal and depends on human connection. In good small schools students can be truly known. They can make real connections to good teachers and participate in a true community. At the same time, small schools are limited in resources, population, range and variety of program, and so on. Thus, when they proclaim a strong commitment to racial diversity despite minimal funds for financial aid, or when they admit students with learning disabilities despite not having trained faculty to teach them, they are fudging a fundamental strategic challenge.

Wise leaders know that the strategy they craft will need to be emergent and adaptable if it is to cope with dilemmas like these. They know that the longer the plan, the more it promises, the more numerous and detailed its objectives, the less strategic it is—and the less likely to succeed. Wise leaders tend to prefer simplicity and brevity to detail and breadth. They hold fast to core values but are ready to be flexible about how to fulfill these. And throughout, they seek to keep the school focussed on a few key essentials at a time, and to pursue these with maximum energy and skill.

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References

1 Schmoker, Mike. "Tipping Point: From Feckless Reform to Substantive Instructional Improvement," Phi Delta Kappan, 85, 6 (Feb. 2004), pp. 424.

[2] Mintzberg, Henry. "The Fall and Rise of Strategic Planning." *Harvard Business Review*, January-February, 1994, pp. 108.

[3] Vaill, Peter. Managing as A Performing Art. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1989, pp. 88-89.

[4] Mintzberg calls the three fallacies "prediction, detachment, and formalization."

[5] Mintzberg, p. 110.

[6] Mintzberg, p. 111.

[7] Vaill, 1989, pp. 88-89.

[8] Evans, Robert. "Why A School Doesn't Run—or Change—Like A Business." *Independent School*, Spring, 2000.

[9] See Evans, Robert. "Changing Families, Changing Schools." *Independent School*, Winter, 1998.

[10] Mintzberg, p. 111.

[11] Evans, Robert. *The Human Side of School Change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996, p. 15.

[12] Mintzberg, p. 111.

[13] Such noted management experts as John Kotter, Gary Hamel, James Kouzes and Barry Pozner, and James Collins have all made recommendations of this kind.

[14] Bassett, Patrick. "Good to Great: Eight Strategic Planning Steps to Making Sense of the Future." http://www.nais.org/About/article.cfm?ItemNumber=144807&sn.ItemNumber=4181&tn.ItemNumber=142453. Accessed: 7/4/07. Bassett proposes a summer leadership retreat (trustees, administrators, along with some faculty and parent leaders) to develop" five or so 12-month priorities" and consider 24-month and 36-month goals to be kept in a "planning parking lot for [future] consideration."

[15] For more on purpose and conduct, see Evans, Robert. *Family Matters: How Schools Can Cope with The Crisis in Childrearing*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004.