Education Elements

Strategic Planning Prioritization Guide

You are engaging in a strategic planning process and may be gaining confidence in a strategic direction to guide your district for the next 3-5 years. Maybe you have identified themes, articulated concrete goals, or even created a portrait or journey of a graduate to help bring the future into focus for your team of planners. Now it is time to determine how you will act on your ideas and make decisions about the highest priority items to address first.

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Why Do We Recommend Prioritization?

At this point, we often hear that teams are so excited about their new direction that they want to dig in immediately with new projects, initiatives or activities. As a long list of new items pop up, so does the need to get everyone aligned to build new processes or tools to support and document everything so that you can monitor and measure the changes. Managing too many individual initiatives quickly becomes overwhelming and/or redundant. So it becomes increasingly important to "right-size" the number of initiatives - you don't want to take on too many things in order to ensure you execute effectively, but you also don't want to take on too few things and risk stagnation or apathy.

How Should I Prioritize?

We recommend taking your team through a prioritization activity that will help everyone get aligned on:

1. what exactly the initiative is;
2. how it will impact your district and bring you closer to achieving your goals; and
3. how easy or difficult it will be to turn from an idea into reality.

This activity will also help shed light on which initiatives should be undertaken first, how many initiatives to tackle at once, and how to complement quick wins with multi-year change-heavy initiatives.

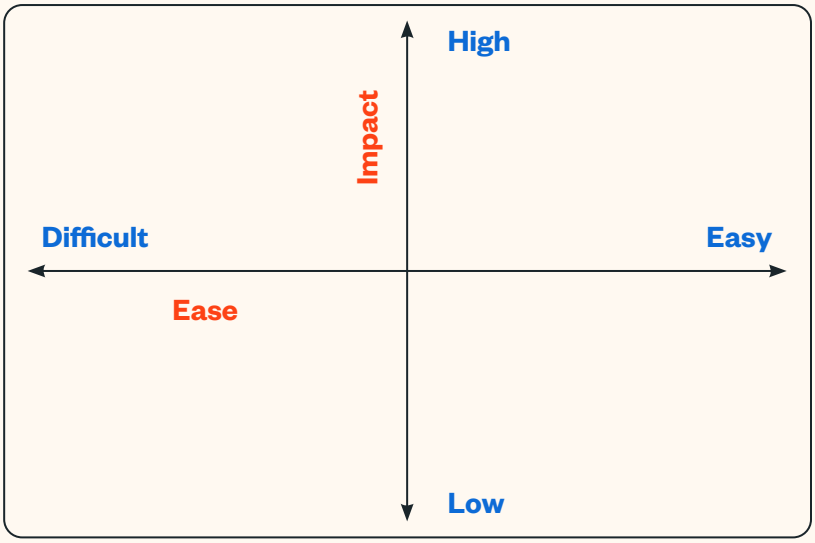
Note on Responsiveness: Our belief is that a strategic plan is a guiding document that can be used as a north star, and isn't just created once but rather is able to support ongoing planning and adjustments as new learnings and needs arise. Therefore, while strategic plans are usually designed to last 3-5 years, we encourage organizations to are the highest priority with the most known information before tackling items that are one or several years down the line.

Our Framework

We encourage teams to plot new and old initiatives based on their feasibility and impact.
The descriptions below will help you understand our approach.

There are two criteria we use when determining priorities:
EASE and **IMPACT**. How you define what is easy or what has high impact will depend on your context. Factors that inform your definition are:

- District/Organization size
- Total organization budget
- Current initiatives, systems, and structures
- Strategic planning guides: focus areas, vision, mission, or values



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Determining Ease and Impact

Impact

Impact refers to how likely an initiative is to help the district achieve one or more of its identified success metrics or goals. Consider the following criteria to make your decisions more tangible.

Strategic Alignment:
How will this initiative support a variety of strategic priorities?

Student Impact:
How might this initiative directly drive outcomes with our students?

Return On Investment:
How will this initiative provide benefits beyond those directly impacted?

Flexibility:
Are we able to adjust our course with new information?

Ease

Ease refers to how readily initiative can be implemented based on the district's existing structures and available resources, taking into account the current level of support and potential strain on people, time, and funding. Consider the potential ease of implementation based on the following criteria.

Feasibility:
How do our existing structures support this initiative?

Risk:
How certain are we in our ability to implement this initiative?

Resource Availability + Support:
Does our staff have the capabilities necessary to accomplish this initiative?

Cost:
How will this initiative impact our bottom line and can we absorb the budget projections?

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Evaluating Priorities

We suggest you dig deeper into the meaning of impact and ease by rating individual sub-categories. You can then average where your indicator falls within each subcategory to assess the overall level of ease and impact.

Impact

High

Low

Strategic Alignment	Student Impact	Return On Investment	Flexibility
Highly aligned across multiple pillars or focus areas of plan	High potential for growth within student groups identified for support within plan	Broad estimated benefits for community beyond school district	Highly responsive to change
Alignment concentrated in one focus area	Generalized impact across the student population	Estimated benefits for singular school or program	Not at all responsive to change

Ease

Difficult		Easy
Does not fit current systems and infrastructure	Feasibility	Fits current systems and infrastructure
Untested initiative with high level of uncertainty	Risk	Previously tested with evidence of success
Not currently available or need to hire	Resource Availability + Support	Resources or staff available now
High cost over many years (hits a threshold determined by organization)	Cost	No cost $0

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Plotting Initiatives

High

Strategic Investments

These high-potential initiatives that could drive significant success but will require new structures, heavier resources, or more change management. Consider taking on 1-2 initiatives from this category that really embody the change you want to see in your organization.

Strategic Wins

These initiatives that are strongly aligned with success metrics and district goals and are relatively easy to implement with existing structures and manageable resource strain. Consider how many you can take on once you determine your strategic investments.

Difficult — Easy

Pause and Reasses

These ideas may not meaningfully advance district goals and could place strain on current resources and structures. Consider whether they are essential at this time, or if they can be set aside to focus on higher-impact efforts.

Localized Opportunities

These ideas are likely easy to implement in the current structure of your district. Consider whether they need to be included in your strategic plan or can be left to other decision-makers to determine importance based on sub-communities (school, programs, departments, etc.).

Low

Next Steps

You will be tempted to plan for multiple years but we encourage you to plan for year one first. You will build in checkpoints and retrospectives along the way to guide the remaining years as new data and information come in. Once you have determined this, build out the details and get to work!

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From Prioritization to Microplanning:

Once your team has clarified its strategic direction and used the prioritization framework to identify high-impact and feasible initiatives, the next essential step is microplanning. Prioritization helps you identify which initiatives to take on first—those that are not only aligned to your vision but are also actionable based on available resources, existing systems, and anticipated outcomes. Microplanning picks up where prioritization leaves off. It shifts the focus from selecting what to do to planning how to do it—at a local, granular level.

Think of microplanning as "little s, little p"—smaller plans nested within the larger strategic framework. It is the process of translating system-wide goals into actionable plans that reflect the unique needs and context of individual schools, departments, and communities. For example, if a district's strategic plan prioritizes equitable access to quality instruction, microplanning might involve an elementary school creating a targeted literacy intervention schedule, or a central office team building a professional learning calendar focused on inquiry-based learning. In Michigan City, a strategic objective around student voice and opportunities led to the creation of school based Student Leadership Advisory Board.

Microplanning ensures that the excitement of strategic planning and prioritization doesn't get lost in the complexity of implementation. It's where strategy meets execution—where each team gets clear on their role in advancing the district's vision, and where bold ideas become coordinated, measurable change on the ground.