

Strategy, Part 1

Making Sense of the Work Under Way

Strategy 101 is about choices: You can't be all things to all people.

—Michael Porter

Sonya, the superintendent of Moorwood Public Schools, held the glossy, colorful strategic plan in her hands, marveling that the six-month process had finally come to an end. The community meetings, the conversations within and outside the school system, all the efforts to define the most important work on behalf of student learning, to hear stakeholders' voices, to synthesize them and then set the direction for the system. Thumbing through the plan, Sonya was excited to review the final report. As she read each goal, she could feel the energy escaping from her body, like air from a balloon. She started to count each goal on her fingers. She felt some mixture of relief and horror when she got to the last goal and her last finger. Pulling her chair closer to her desk and feeling the tension rise in her body, she started counting: 10 major goal areas, 64 strategies, 198 initiatives.

Dropping the plan on her desk, Sonya leaned back in her chair and sighed, wondering to herself, "How in the world are we going to do all that?" Her second thought was, "Which of the things listed in the plan are the most important things to do to improve student learning?" Before Sonya could consider her last question, her assistant appeared in the doorway to remind her of her next meeting and to hand her messages from the school board president, the chief financial officer, and a community leader looking for answers. Sonya pushed herself up out of her chair, leaving the plan face down on her desk.

WHAT IS STRATEGY, AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Schools and school systems are noisy places. Crises, big and small, come one after another. Local, state and national politics (with all the interests they represent), add to the din. Many systems live in a persistently reactive mode to these external stimuli. We reassure ourselves that we are being responsive (usually a good thing), while in fact we are driven to distraction. We see it in the vignette above, where the superintendent spends an inordinate amount of time attending to the pressing interests of board members and various community leaders in a system that has just expended a great deal of effort on an unwieldy and not-at-all-strategic plan. It's reflected in the principal who spends all morning responding to the never-ending stream of requests, calls, and e-mails, never making it into classrooms to observe, although his morning schedule is blocked out for just that purpose. And it's reflected in the central office department that agrees to pilot a new student assessment simply because someone else is willing to pay for it, even though it is not the best tool for the system and will take instructional time away from students. We know there are compelling reasons for this behavior. Yet the results of all this distraction are predictable and unacceptable. Improvement efforts are fractured, disconnected, incompletely implemented, and never assessed.

Strategy is about filtering this noise. It's about deciding what the systems and the individuals in them must do on behalf of students and their learning and then putting that decision into action. It provides a focus based on data and beliefs about what will be most effective in helping students learn. By committing to and pursuing strategy, we have a calm center from which to act clearly and deliberately. Crises don't magically disappear, but we approach them differently and we don't bounce from one crisis to the next. The crises don't all get our immediate attention, because they don't all warrant it. We have work to do that is more important to ensure student learning.

Still, strategy is a tricky word. It is suggestive of something powerful and deliberate, and it can be just that when it helps an organization hold steady on a clear purpose. However, it can also be the catchphrase we attach to a multitude of well-intentioned but disjointed plans and initiatives. When invoked too loosely, it becomes just a word. For our purposes here, and indeed for the work of schools, we find our colleague Stacey Childress's definition very helpful. She explains strategy as "the set of actions an organization chooses to pursue in order to achieve its objectives. These deliberate actions are puzzle pieces that fit together to create a clear picture

of how the people, activities, and resources of an organization can work effectively to accomplish a collective purpose.”¹

Developing strategy requires us to identify a few high-leverage ways to improve instruction and student learning. So, for example, a system might conclude that one of its few strategic objectives (ideally no more than five) will be this: Hire and retain effective educators. The specific “set of actions” directed at this goal might include initiatives such as these: work with institutions of higher education to tailor teacher and principal preparation programs and offer comprehensive induction programs for new teachers and principals. The articulated strategic objectives and the initiatives designed to accomplish them become the foci for the system’s work, defining how policy is made, what is measured, and how staffing and financial resources are deployed.

Clearly, this is a complex, multistep process. In the next several chapters, we hope to provide you with a foundation for beginning or continuing this work in your system. This chapter is an introduction: what strategy is (and isn’t), why it is important, and why school systems typically don’t “do” strategy well. It is also about taking stock—what are we currently doing, and is there any discernable pattern to the individual pieces of work under way? Do they align, and if so, to what? By identifying and analyzing initiatives, we can unearth important information, both implicit and explicit, about the work and the choices it reflects. In this way, we may learn something about existing, emerging, or potential strategy in that system. Our goal in this chapter is to help you more deeply understand the relationship between strategic objectives and initiatives, and the power of strategy to focus and amplify a system’s efforts to improve learning and teaching.

STRATEGIC PLANNING VERSUS STRATEGY

The word *strategy* is most commonly used in the context of strategic planning—an exercise of setting direction and prioritizing work that systems undertake every three to five years or with the arrival of each new superintendent. The vignette that opens this chapter, drawn from a real system strategic planning process, brings this dilemma into sharp focus: Too often, strategic planning is about creating a laundry list of goals and discrete tasks and repackaging programs to which the system has become attached or is already committed. Imagine being responsible for enacting the plan in the vignette. While everything on the list generally relates

to students and their education, the sheer number of goals and initiatives proposed makes it impossible to work in concert toward their overall purpose. This lack of focus translates into dozens of disparate initiatives that do not fit together into a clear, deliberate, overall strategy. The distance between many of the initiatives and the work in classrooms makes it unclear how implementation will lead to improved outcomes for students. As a result, strategic planning in many systems tends to lead to one of two outcomes. Either the cumbersome plan sits on a shelf collecting dust, or the system functions much like the organizational equivalent of a chicken that has lost its head: Staff members run in a million directions, working hard rather than smart, exhausting themselves with only little pockets of success to show for it. Student learning suffers when the system is unable to be precise, agile, and intentional about giving students what they most need to succeed.

Figure 1.1 outlines some of the most salient differences between strategic planning as it is typically carried out in many school systems and strategy development.

Strategic planning is intended to be the vehicle for developing strategy. In high-performing organizations in education and in other sectors, it is. Yet, as the grid suggests, in many school systems strategic planning has devolved into a compliance activity, something done for the school board, or the state or the community. Systems march through the steps of planning, without a clear vision of why they are doing it, what they want to get out of it, or how to design the process to realize meaningful results. Planning is often approached as a community-building activity, which tends to be an attempt to respond to everyone's interests rather than an attempt to organize people on a common vision for the work. Both the compliance and the community-building orientations leave systems with plans that tend to be broad, shallow, and not very useful as in the vignette.

The static nature of many plans relates, in part, to issues of "planning fatigue" and a tendency to deemphasize implementation. After six months of strategic planning, there is a collective sigh of relief once the plan comes back from the printer. "Strategic planning" is checked off the organization's to-do list. While the strategic plan may be passed out at chamber of commerce luncheons and attached to every grant proposal submitted over the next five years, implementation is often reduced to mechanically pursuing the work plans listed in the appendix with annual reports of accomplishments. The reality of how systems improve is much more dynamic, unlike the neat chart of roles and responsibilities published in the plan. Without a structure and various mechanisms in place for discussing strategy

FIGURE 1.1

**STRATEGIC PLANNING VERSUS STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT:
TYPICAL CHARACTERISTICS IN EDUCATION**

<i>Strategic planning</i>	<i>Effective strategy development</i>
<i>Status quo:</i> tends to focus on organizing current work; often approached as a compliance activity	<i>Innovation:</i> draws on research and best practices and pursues new, promising ways of accelerating improvement; builds organizational conviction
<i>Emphasis on external audience:</i> written for external stakeholders and serves as the public document outlining the system's work	<i>Emphasis on internal audience:</i> developed to drive how the system focuses the work of its staff and deploys its resources
<i>Broad and incremental:</i> responds to a wide array of needs; there's something for everyone; focuses on slow and steady improvement	<i>Deep and intentional:</i> focuses on doing a few things well; aims for a mix of incremental improvement and growth realized in leaps and bounds
<i>Discrete:</i> includes a series of distinct initiatives that have limited relationship to one another and can each be pursued and measured independently	<i>Interdependent:</i> integrates a few key initiatives that require cross-functional team collaboration; when executed together, they yield powerful results
<i>Easy fit:</i> fits within the current organizational structure and ways of doing business	<i>Demands change:</i> requires organization to function differently to execute; the focus is on being intentional and working together to do something big that no single person or department can do alone
<i>To-do list:</i> lists initiatives and activities with timelines that, if tracked, are checked off as things "done"	<i>Ways of thinking and being:</i> develops the capacity of staff to think systemically, plan intentionally, track and evaluate work in light of data, reflect on experience to learn, and continuously look for ways to innovate and improve
<i>Static:</i> completed at a moment in time; revisited for the purpose of reporting on progress but seldom in response to new learning or data	<i>Dynamic:</i> developed on the basis of the best information available at that time; continually reconsidered and adapted in light of new learning and research, implementation experience, and qualitative and quantitative results

implementation, learning from it, and refining the strategy accordingly, the effects of the work are diminished and the plan becomes irrelevant. The answer is not to abandon strategic planning. Instead we must ensure that planning is driven by a clear understanding of strategy, is focused on strategy development, and is simply one step in building the system's capacity to act in a focused and coherent way to improve student learning.

WHY IS STRATEGY HARD?

Picture the school system that decides it's going to simultaneously implement new English language arts and math instructional materials K–12, as well as a new formative assessment system that includes organizing and reporting data to inform teachers' instruction. Moreover, a big high school initiative is under way that is about changing instructional methods from didactic to a more student-centered approach. Executing these initiatives is daunting both from the perspective of the central office staff responsible for designing and supporting them and for the teachers and principals who must implement them. It's not hard to imagine how this will go. Central office staff will be so pressed to get the initiatives rolled out to schools that the work will be siloed. Plans will be half-baked when they hit the schools, and the new materials and assessments will not be intentionally aligned to illustrate how the initiatives mutually reinforce one another and can be used together by teachers to guide instruction. At the high school level, the opportunity to weave the three initiatives together and show how the new instructional materials support student-centered pedagogy and how the assessments can be used in a way that engages students in monitoring their learning will likely be lost. Teachers will experience each initiative as a discrete thing to be done, not understanding the purpose behind each and the relationship between them. Their implementation of the initiatives will be similarly fragmented, creating a disjointed learning experience for students. In the end, student learning will suffer, which is the exact opposite of what the system intends.

Developing a tight, coherent strategy requires a clear vision for students and their learning and the few high-leverage things we can focus on that will get us there. As the image above illustrates, most school systems pursue more initiatives than any organization could ever hope to implement well. Even when the quantity of initiatives looks okay on paper, school systems tend not to sequence the work

and not to clarify connections across initiatives, so that the intended coherence of the work is clear to people beyond the senior leadership team. Systems often layer initiatives on top of one another in part because people are not confident of the best thing to do. Many systems have limited data available about the effectiveness of work already under way and a disinclination to use the available data to systematically identify what work shows promise and should be scaled up or accelerated and what work should be stopped. (We delve into these issues of data more fully in the chapter 2).

Systems also tend to be fairly insular in thinking about improvement strategy, failing to tap the research and promising practices ongoing in other systems (traditional districts or charters), although these practices are already delivering strong results for students. When we do explore other promising practices, we often compromise our learning. We invoke the “those kids are different from ours” mantra, which immediately shuts down learning even when the practice itself has much to teach us. Conversely, we don’t pay enough attention to the context and conditions—size of the system, the demographics of its students, its history, the capacity of teachers and principals, the organizational culture, the expectations of parents and the community—that helped make the initiative successful and would help us to determine how we might replicate the conditions or adapt the initiative to our own conditions.

The tendency to think of strategy as synonymous with strategic planning (something defined in a three- to five-year plan with little opportunity for revisiting or revising it) makes the work feel high-stakes, but for some misguided reasons. We think we need to make all the right decisions up front because we’re going to invest heavily in them and not make any adjustments as we go. Once it’s on paper, it’s the plan. All of our decisions *are* high-stakes; they may or may not make a difference for children. That means the burden is on us to be as thoughtful and knowledgeable as we can be (an ongoing process we’ll continue to explore throughout this book). The reality of improvement work is that even when we are very clear about what we are trying to achieve, have researched the best ways to go about it, and have chosen just a few things to do deeply and well, at the end of the day, we make our best bets. Inherent in making bets is the possibility that we will be wrong. Because the current approach to strategy provides little opportunity to redirect as a result of experimentation and learning, it makes perfect sense that systems hedge their bets, spreading resources thinly across a wide array of initiatives and, predictably enough, realizing weak returns.

STARTING WHERE YOU ARE

While there are multiple ways to develop strategy, in this chapter we start with what systems are already doing. Every school system we know is doing things. Those endeavors may not yet reflect a robust strategy, with the puzzle pieces fitting perfectly together, but examining the work currently under way will at a minimum make explicit the system's values and commitments. By understanding its present efforts, a school system will also determine whether it has any strategy—from a mere kernel to a full-blown, robust strategy—embedded in current activities. Currently, most school systems tend to fall into one of three categories with regard to strategy: In a relative few systems, there is a clear and deliberate relationship between a strategy and much of the system's work. The system is working to ensure the coherence of the strategy and pursues an iterative process of aligning activities and strategy, implementing, learning from the work, and refining the strategy according to work accomplished and organizational learning. Some systems have the beginnings of a strategy. They are beginning to focus their work on a few high-leverage things, but there are still lots of other activities under way that don't relate to the nascent strategy. Finally, many systems have no clear strategy at all. There are a variety of initiatives under way in the system, but the relationship of one initiative to another is vague. Further, there is no apparent overarching goal or strategic objective driving those initiatives. The system may or may not know what a strategy is, or that it needs to have one. The system probably has no idea what a system driven by a tightly focused strategy looks like. Whatever its current state, a system can benefit greatly by taking a close look at the programs and initiatives that comprise its daily work. This powerful process helps to assess the coherence, focus, and synergy of the system's strategy or implicit values and commitments, while also revealing the degree to which they are aligned with work currently under way.

We have developed a protocol and accompanying rubric to guide systems through this process. A senior leadership team can use the protocol to make sense of the work under way. Individual departments and schools can use it to understand how and how much their work reflects the system's work and to do a more fine-grained analysis of their own ongoing work. The process has the team brainstorm all of the initiatives under way in the system and then group initiatives that have a similar emphasis, for example, professional development or technology infrastructure. Once the initiatives have been grouped, the team uses a rubric (described later in the chapter) to assess the extent and quality of a system's strategy. This

FIGURE 1.2

FIRST STEP OF UNDERSTANDING YOUR SYSTEM'S CURRENT WORK: BRAINSTORM



process is described in detail in “Making Sense of the Work Under Way Protocol,” in appendix B. The full process takes three to four hours. To give you a sense of how it works, we will now walk through how the senior leadership team from the Moorwood Public Schools used the protocol. The superintendent, Sonya, arranged for an external facilitator to manage this process so that she (the superintendent) could fully participate.

1. Brainstorm

The team completed the first step, which asked team members to brainstorm all the initiatives under way in the system, write each one on a sticky note and post them on the wall (figure 1.2). An initiative is defined as something the system is doing on its own or in collaboration with partners and which is focused on improving some aspect of how the system functions. It may directly involve a set of schools or all schools. It might be a pilot program or a full-scale implementation. It may focus on some aspect of the central office’s work. The team began this meeting by reading the sticky notes posted on the wall.

2. Sort

Once everyone had read the sticky notes, it was time to try to group them, putting like things together and categorizing them. Team members developed a rhythm as they quietly moved sticky notes around on the board. In less than ten minutes, the team had created eight clusters of sticky notes. Talking through the initiatives and how they were grouped together helped the team label the clusters. In the process of naming categories, several sticky notes moved from one cluster to another and others were listed in several categories to reflect that they related to more than one category. Two initiatives were dubbed “orphans,” not fitting into any of the categories defined; those sticky notes were moved to the edge of the chart paper. The results of the team’s work are shown in figure 1.3.

When the facilitator brought the group back together and asked what people noticed, the highlights from the conversation included these:

- We’re doing so many things. They’re all important, but we can’t manage it all.
- According to this list, teachers are supposed to engage in forty-five hours of professional development this year. If we used all the contracted professional development time for system initiatives and gave schools none, we would still be ten hours short.

FIGURE 1.3

**SECOND STEP OF UNDERSTANDING YOUR SYSTEM'S CURRENT WORK:
SORT THE BRAINSTORMED INITIATIVES**

<i>Instruction</i>	<i>Assessment</i>	<i>Curriculum and instructional materials</i>
<p>Science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) initiative at the high school level</p> <p>Middle school pedagogy initiative focused on math and science</p> <p>Pilot of "workshop" model for literacy instruction, K–5, in 15% of schools</p> <p>Pilot of direct instruction model in low-performing elementary schools</p> <p>Redesign how individual education plans (IEPs) are written and used</p>	<p>Collaboration with external partner on formative assessment system aligned to state assessment in English and math; currently serving 20% of schools</p> <p>Creating a data warehouse for all student and staff data, including assessment data</p> <p>Developing a system of formative assessments in English and math, K–5</p> <p>Developing scorecards to measure school and department performance and improvement</p>	<p>Adoption of English and math tutorial software</p> <p>Mapping curriculum to standards in all content areas, K–12</p> <p>Adopting new instructional materials in math, K–12</p> <p>Development of early childhood curriculum.</p> <p>Developing "green" curriculum for use in upper elementary grades</p>
<i>Professional development</i>	<i>Technology</i>	<i>Operations</i>
<p>Introducing two-year new-teacher induction system</p> <p>Training all teachers in instructional strategies that support English language learners</p> <p>Developing professional learning communities (PLCs) among principals</p> <p>Character education training for all K–8 teachers</p>	<p>Adoption of English and math tutorial software</p> <p>Upgrade to provide new computer labs in 40% of schools</p> <p>Upgrade schools' technology infrastructure to ensure Internet access in all classrooms</p>	<p>Upgrade schools' technology infrastructure to ensure Internet access in all classrooms</p> <p>Creating a data warehouse for all student and staff data, including assessment data</p> <p>Upgrading software used to track payroll, benefits, and earned time</p> <p>Revamping teacher hiring process</p> <p>Redesign of school budgeting process and timeline</p> <p>School safety initiative</p> <p>Creation of healthy school lunch offerings</p> <p>Closing five schools</p>
<i>Accountability</i>	<i>School design</i>	<i>Early childhood</i>
<p>Developing scorecards to measure school and department performance and improvement</p> <p>Developing new principal-evaluation instrument</p> <p>Refining school improvement planning process</p>	<p>Conversion of 20% of elementary schools to K–8s</p> <p>Conversion of two large high schools into small schools</p>	<p>Creation of early childhood program to serve 600 children</p>

- We've got a couple of different formative assessment initiatives going on. Why? Is there a plan to pick one or the other or to integrate them? Are the people who are working on the formative assessments working with the scorecard people to make sure their data are included on the scorecard?
- Aren't direct instruction and workshop really different approaches to instruction? Why are we doing them both?
- We've got a coherence problem. Trying to make sense of all these initiatives is like trying to herd cats.
- It's reassuring to see how much we're focusing on curriculum, instruction, assessment, and teacher professional development, but there isn't much continuity in what we're doing across those areas. It's a bit schizophrenic.
- I agree we're doing too much, but there are some themes; it seems like we're focused on improving the instructional core through curricular, instructional, and assessment initiatives and that we're trying to use technology to support instruction, accountability, and operational functions.
- All this stuff is important, but it's not clear what is most important, which may mean that in the end, nothing is important.

3. Assess

Team members' comments reflected their initial analysis of the categories and initiatives. They were beginning to see that initiatives indicate something about the system's level of focus and the coherence of its work. This conversation led naturally into the third step of the protocol, which asks the team to assess the initiatives and their organization using the "signs of strategy" rubric in figure 1.4. This rubric is built upon four fundamental principles of effective strategy, which can be helpful in assessing an existing strategy, a strategy in development, or the work a system has under way. Using the rubric, participants rate the extent to which the categories and initiatives they identified earlier in the exercise reflect these principles of effective strategy on a four-point scale (4 = high; 1 = low). So, for example, a system with an effective, coherent strategy will score at least a 3 or 4 on all criteria; the work for this team will be to revisit the strategy to ensure it is achieving outcomes for students. A system with mostly 3s and 4s and one score of 1 or 2 is a system that has some very specific work to do to ensure the integrity of its strategy. If a system's scores are primarily 1s and 2s, this indicates that the system has a variety of initiatives under way but no overarching strategy. Those systems need to build a strategy that has integrity and is focused on the most important work of improving student learning.

FIGURE 1.4

THIRD STEP OF UNDERSTANDING YOUR SYSTEM'S CURRENT WORK: "SIGNS OF STRATEGY" RUBRIC

Principles of effective strategy	Level of impact (4 = high; 1 = low)				
	4	3	2	1	
Instructional core	All strategic objectives* and initiatives target improving student learning and teaching quality. Operations areas are leveraged to support improving student learning and teaching quality.	Strategic objectives and initiatives focus primarily on improving student learning and teaching quality.	Some strategic objectives and initiatives focus on improving instruction.	Strategic objectives and initiatives focus primarily on operations and student support.	
Focus, coherence, and synergy	Strategic objectives are tightly integrated, complementary, and high leverage, focusing on improving student learning and teaching quality.	There are three to five strategic objectives that are interrelated and focused on improving student learning and teaching quality.	There are more than five strategic objectives. Some are related. Others are in conflict or competition.	There are a lot of discrete initiatives.	
Both visionary and problem solving	Pursuing the strategy addresses identified problems, leads to realizing the system's vision, and transforms student learning results.	Pursuing the strategy addresses identified problems and leads to realizing the system's vision.	Initiatives focus on solving identified problems without pursuing the vision, or are visionary but don't address identified problems.	The relationship between the strategy, the system's vision, and its current conditions and activities is unclear.	
Ownership and enactment throughout the system	Everyone, from board members to teachers to community partners, understands the strategy and talks about how their work relates to it. Decision making at every level of the system is aligned to the strategy.	All department and school leaders can describe the strategy and their role in its implementation. Board members, families, and community partners know and talk about the strategy.	Key leaders in the system talk publicly about the strategy, but others in the system don't talk about or clearly understand the strategy.	There is no strategy, or there is a strategy but people in the system don't know about it.	

*Strategic objectives are the main levers or key areas in which the system is placing its bets about how to achieve desired results. In the "Making Sense of Work Under Way Protocol" in appendix B, the categories that initiatives are grouped into can be considered the strategic objectives. You will further refine these throughout the process of developing strategy.

For this phase of the protocol, we suggest using the rubric to guide a discussion of the principles, one at a time, using evidence to guide the rating. We now rejoin Moorwood as it builds its understanding of the principles of effective strategy and works through the rubric.

Instructional Core?

The heart of a school system's work is often described as the instructional core, drawn as a triangle and symbolizing the complex interaction of teachers and students in the presence of content. Strategy and all its components must address the instructional core by supporting high-quality teaching of rigorous curriculum, answering the question "How will this improve the quality of student learning and teaching?" This is an easy test to apply to the part of the strategy that is clearly about teaching quality, student readiness to learn, curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Yet the question is fundamentally the same when looking at the operations side of the house. How can the design of the new building most effectively support student learning and improved teaching? How can new procurement practices make the process easier for principals and free up more time for supporting teachers and improved instruction? Every school system we know that is rapidly improving student learning places its bets on strategic objectives and initiatives with direct connections to the instructional core.

The Moorwood team gave itself a 2.5 on the instructional core, unable to agree on a score of 2 or 3. At first the team felt quite good about its ongoing work in relation to this principle. Four of the nine categories that the team came up with during the sorting step—instruction, assessment, curriculum and instructional materials, and professional development—related to instruction, and 50 percent of the initiatives fit into those four categories. When the team examined the noninstructionally focused categories and initiatives, it saw that some of the initiatives—e.g., data warehouse, upgrade school technology—supported instruction. Yet there were questions about both the potential for many of those initiatives to *actually* impact instruction and the extent to which they were deliberately designed to do so. For these reasons, the team settled on a 2.5, knowing it hadn't earned a score of 3 and thinking it had done better than a 2.

Focus, Coherence, and Synergy?

Individuals and organizations can only ensure deep, sustained attention on a few things at any given time. Therefore, effective strategy consists of a few, high-leverage

ways to improve instruction and student learning and create strong coherence in the system's work. They are complementary and mutually reinforcing, creating a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. A strategy of improving instruction, developing a student assessment system, and creating a comprehensive student support system is a good example of a strategy that is focused, coherent, and synergistic. A comprehensive assessment system provides teachers with valuable information about student learning; this information then informs how teachers use the curriculum, the instructional materials, and their training to maximum effect. The student support system adds to the sense of focus and coherence as it is entirely focused on students' physical, social, and emotional health and creating the conditions to support student learning. There are only three big ideas in this strategy. Each supports the other. To take one out of the equation would diminish the effectiveness of the other two.

The Moorwood team's conversation about the instructional core surfaced the issue of focus, so making sense of this principle was easier. The team quickly rated itself a 2 on focus, coherence, and synergy. The team members couldn't help but notice that within categories (particularly those related to instruction), there was a lack of coherence and alignment: competing instructional priorities, different assessment systems, and several math and science curriculum and instructional initiatives that were not integrated. The idea of synergy really captured the team's attention. The disparate math and science initiatives seemed like a missed opportunity for synergy, and the team talked about the effort it would take and what it would look like to integrate those initiatives.

Both Visionary and Problem Solving?

Picture a system that has trouble hiring teachers early and efficiently. Technology has not been used to its full potential to make the process fast and easy. Applicants are treated in a way that makes them feel unvalued. The system can't compete for the best teachers and ends up hurrying to fill positions in August with less-qualified teachers. This is a problem that needs to be fixed. At the same time, the system has a vision aimed at improving teaching quality, professionalism, and career opportunities. It includes an induction system for new teachers, differentiated treatment for high-performing teachers, and robust support and accountability for mediocre teachers.

The school system's vision can't be realized without fixing serious problems. But solving problems is helpful to the extent that it helps move toward the vision. A

compelling vision suggests possibility, encourages innovation, and empowers people, things that are particularly important in school systems where expectations for students and adults in the system have been allowed to sink to a low level and mere survival seems like the goal for many of these systems.

Understanding that the goal is to be *both* visionary *and* solve problems was a new way for the Moorwood team to think about the work. The facilitator helped the team look closely at an individual initiative to make the principle more concrete. Looking at the developing formative assessment initiative, the team first identified the impetus for the initiative as the excessive time teachers spent analyzing the annual, summative state assessment, which they found pretty useless. Because of the delay between when students took the test and when results became available, teachers were looking at performance data for students they no longer had. Add to this the reality that the information provided by the summative data wasn't very fine-grained and was hard to use to guide daily instruction and differentiation. The team's initial consensus, therefore, was that the initiative was all about solving those problems.

Yet as the conversation continued, the focus shifted to how, given the need to ensure that all students finish high school college-ready, teachers need to know much more about what kids are learning, what they are struggling with, and how they learn best, and the teachers need to have this information much more quickly. Suddenly, team members started thinking about the assessments as a new tool in teachers' toolbox to support monitoring students' learning and adapt teaching in response to it. This shifted the teachers' focus from what they taught to what students learned, which felt kind of revolutionary to the team. With a better understanding of the principle, the team looked at a few more initiatives and realized that although the system often developed initiatives simply to address problems, the initiatives sometimes built visionary potential as they were implemented. Yet there wasn't a clear orientation toward trying to balance the two ideas. The team gave the system a score of 2.5 on the question of whether strategy is both problem solving and visionary, reflecting that it sometimes balanced both aspects, but that this balance has been more accidental than intentional.

Ownership and Enactment Throughout the System?

The fastest way to know if a system has a strategy is to ask members of the senior leadership team what the strategy is and ask them to give some examples of it in

action. The clarity and consistency of response (or lack thereof) is telling. You can assess how well the strategy is understood, owned, and driving practice by asking a teacher, a community partner, and a school board member what the strategy is, what it looks like in action, and how they support its implementation. Strategy is enacted when all the people throughout the organization, as well as outside partners, understand what it is, know what their responsibility for implementing it is, and carry it out.

The Moorwood team quickly realized that this fourth principle asks the question “To the extent that there is a strategy, does it primarily exist in the heads of a few of the most senior members of the system, or do staff members and partners understand it and have they internalized it and use it to guide their actions?” The team initially struggled to score this principle because the scores on the other principles prompted them to question the extent to which the system had a strategy to own or enact. The final assessment was that because the team itself wasn’t clear on the strategy, it was unrealistic to think that anyone else in the system was. Having finished step 3 of the protocol, the team listed its scores on a piece of chart paper.

1. Instructional core: 2.5
2. Focus, coherence, and synergy: 2
3. Both visionary and problem solving: 2.5
4. Ownership and enactment throughout the system: 1

4. Synthesize

Using the rubric gave members an understanding of strategy and a language for talking about it. They were full of ideas about the kernel of a strategy that lay buried in their list of categories of work and initiatives. This last step of the protocol gave the team a chance to synthesize learning from the exercise and begin to think about what it suggested as good next steps. The score on instructional core suggested a place to start. The system’s thinking about how to improve student learning and teaching was embedded in the categories and initiatives related to the instructional core. The team was clear that it needed to use data to inform this process. It was less clear regarding the most pressing problems it was trying to solve. The team members noted that the system’s unintentional tendency to try to solve problems and pursue its vision was worth highlighting and making consistent and intentional. The team realized that the sheer number of categories and initiatives was a

problem they would need to take on, figuring out what could be done to identify the most essential work, integrate it to maximize its impact, and eliminate nonessential work.

Stepping away from Moorwood's experience, let's look at this example in the context of where other school systems tend to fall on the continuum of not having a clear strategy to having one that is incredibly explicit, understood by everyone in the organization, and used to drive all of the system's work. Exploring the four fundamental principles of effective strategy (and the extent to which their work reflects them) is helpful to systems everywhere on the continuum. For systems with no strategy, the fundamental principles help define what strategy is, the role it plays in an organization, and how to go about developing it. For systems with the beginnings of a strategy, the principles illustrate the importance of focus and clarity, what makes a strategy effective, and how to align the system's work to the strategy. For systems that already have an explicit strategy, the four principles demonstrate how strategy evolves over time in response to organizational learning and progress made. These principles also help the system tune its strategy over time, as conditions and personnel change and strategy revisions may become necessary. As teams revisit this process multiple times, they deepen their understanding of both the principles and the system's facility with them.

Wherever a system falls on this continuum, there are deliberate steps senior leaders can take and conditions they can cultivate to develop effective strategy or refine existing strategy. It is the rare school system that starts from scratch. The entry points to strategy building are varied and context driven, but the necessity of strategy to the improvement of learning and teaching is absolute. Throughout the next several chapters, we will explore prerequisite steps—critical processes that provide the foundation for a system's strategy and contribute to its successful execution.