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# STRATEGIC PLANNING: A WISE POLITICAL INVESTMENT

*Posted on August 1, 2015*

Strategic planning has powerful and often unanticipated political outcomes, many positive and some negative. Historically used mainly to lay the ground work for a capital campaign, it is now used increasingly to develop a model for long term financial sustainability. Few realize that the process of strategic planning is also potentially an important tool for averting the governance crises that continue to plague our schools.

Outlined below are three examples of schools where the planning process revealed messages, information and directions that the leadership of the School may not have expected, but that became crucial to ensuring healthy board governance as well as mission clarity and stability.

## **I. A Unique Finding: A Surprise**

One very successful Preschool to 8th Grade Montessori School launched a strategic planning process by having the Consultant first interview the entire board and management team and then meet with small groups of parents, students, alumni, staff, feeder schools and receiving schools.

At the workshop that followed the interviews and focus groups, the participating Board members and administrators considered the 40 possible challenges facing the School that those interviewed had raised most frequently. They were surprised that one of the topics mentioned multiple times was the lack of a high school.

The focus groups revealed a deep seated parental anxiety about transition and change from a Montessori program that families clearly love to the largely unknown world of the traditional high school. The current middle school parents do not like the anxiety and pressure of applying for admission to private high schools in their very competitive urban market, especially to those that they perceive as not offering the creative curriculum to which they have become accustomed. Early childhood and lower elementary parents find the idea of a high school appealing as well. They imagine a unique Montessori high school that would be community based, potentially in the City's bustling cultural and university hub.

Although very surprised by the apparent high degree of parent support for the idea of adding a high



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school, the workshop group voted to make this one of the School's top seven strategic priorities to explore further. Before developing potential action plans around this goal, the Board asked this Consultant to conduct additional focus groups to determine the depth of support for the concept and to begin to envision what the high school might look like and deliver programmatically.

It was suggested that the new School could also offer the IB, possibly the most logical high school curriculum to follow the Montessori, child-centered exploratory approach. The disciplined IB appeals to these parents looking for a rigorous academic program with measurable outcomes that has some nontraditional aspects as well. Adding to the uniqueness of the experience would be the School's possible location in a different area of the City offering unique cultural and research opportunities to supplement and enhance the classroom work.

Whether this School actually develops a high school or not, the very process of discussion and exploration has reinvigorated and excited the parent body, Board, staff and inspired everyone, including the Head, to think at a higher level. One of the expected outcomes of the planning process had been a decision to renovate the existing plant. Instead this Board engaged in real, "generative" discussions. The investment in strategic planning reaped far more benefits than this School had ever imagined.

## **II. Avoiding Political Fallout in Head Transition**

In this K to 12, day school of about 800 students, a new Head of School has inherited a somewhat sleepy culture. She follows two long term heads, both of whom remained actively involved with the School either directly or indirectly. Their ongoing influence had encouraged the School culture to be even more resistant to change than most schools already are.

Yet this School has complex physical plant needs that represent massive change. These needs are forcing serious consideration of whether the entire School should move to a new campus; close down one; or invest in the modernization of the lovely but "tired" flagship campus.

The new Head is not from the region and thus not completely attuned as yet to its local values and traditions. One of her first tasks is to hire a new Division Head. She believes that she has found the ideal candidate, also not from the region. She is confident that she will be able to form a senior management team that will reflect her vision for the School and help lead it in new important directions.

The new Division Head has a fast-paced decision-making style that causes the faculty to miss the preceding Division Head even more. A new Head of School and a new Division Head, both from out of the area and with a different leadership style, was simply too much for this culture to handle. When this consultant arrived to lead a strategic planning process, it was clear that morale was low



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and that the new Head was taking the heat for it.

The strategic planning process helped to bring to the surface the Board's deep support for the new Head. This was extremely gratifying for her to hear. While she acknowledged the fact that the new Division Head was not a fit for the School by not renewing his contract, she was also able to point out through the planning process, the exciting opportunities that the Board and the School community had been reluctant to consider.

In sum, the strategic planning process began at a moment of political vulnerability for the new Head, but resulted in these outcomes: it strengthened her position with the Board; and it opened the Board up to new knowledge about prior patterns of leadership and traditions within the Division and within the School as a whole. These patterns and adherence to tradition were standing in the way of progress on several fronts and potentially undermining the School's ability to raise money for important necessary initiatives.

Had this process not taken place when it did, the new Head might have found herself among the almost 80% of school heads who do not make it beyond their first three to five years, mainly due to transition issues or the lack of planning for them.

### **III. Strategic Planning That Opens Enormous Doors**

In this large international School, the Head and Chair wanted to employ a unique approach to strategic planning. They were both very clear about the five key goals that would set the course for the School's near future. They wanted to explore how a cross-section of constituents would respond to these potential goals. On the other hand, the Chair and Head were clearly open to considering other ideas that might come forward powerfully and consistently from these groups.

Thus the process unfolded with perhaps 20 focus groups of faculty and staff, parents, alumni, students and the full Board. More than 150 individuals were interviewed. From the hundreds of pages of this Consultant's notes came interesting, creative and mostly supportive reactions from the constituents. The feedback confirmed that the community felt that at least four of these five suggested priorities were clearly ones of great importance for the School.

Starting from a very "directed" top down approach, this process then opened up when about forty of the focus group participants were invited to attend a strategic planning workshop. The workshop was structured around the five priorities. A discussion group co chaired by a trustee and an administrator and made up of a mix of staff, board, students, parents and alumni was assigned to each priority.

After the initial workshop presentation of community findings and attitudes, the five "teams" then



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continued their work for the next several months. In these follow up meetings, the trustee/administrator partnership helped to keep the Chair and Head informed closely of the dialogue and to ensure that the dialogue did not move from appropriate constituent input to micromanagement. These set the stage for community "buy in" BUT also set clear boundaries for the separation of those ideas that were welcome, from those that were associated with operations, management and policy, all of which clearly lay within the purview of the Administration and the Board.

Ultimately, the five strategic priorities on which everyone agreed led to unique and creative campus planning opportunities, outreach, and the launching and completion of one of the most successful annual fund raising campaigns in any school's history. That campaign has laid the foundation for additional fund raising and community support.

So, what began as a clear vision, articulated first by the Head and Chair and grounded in participation and input from the full Board and 40 other constituents, has now taken shape as a blue print for an exciting future. But now the vision also has a massive following that has translated into very impressive results on several levels. Powerful stuff, all around.

#### **IV. Summary**

The strategic planning process can be politically liberating but also politically dangerous, if not managed properly and scheduled at the right time in the life and culture of a school.

Littleford & Associates helps schools assess both the timing for this process and which of our Firm's strategic planning models may be best for the School, given the current health of the board, the head/board partnership, the faculty culture and its overall financial picture. Assessing the value/cost proposition that parents place upon the school's product is an important part of any strategic planning process, and Littleford & Associates excels at helping schools find and market that value proposition effectively.

Schools that do undertake planning, and all must at periodic points in time, should realize that from it will come information that may have been unanticipated. But from that information may come the ability to mobilize the constituents of the School in ways that will energize it for a healthy future.

John Littleford  
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