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ABSTRACT

Some baseline information is offered in this study to help determine the ends to which the strategic planning processes are being put and the outcomes that are being pursued. A conceptual overview of planning models and the role of planners are presented. The complete study comprises a two-stage process of data collection. First, strategic plans were collected from districts throughout the country, and second, a survey/questionnaire was sent to those districts submitting plans. The survey consisted of 16 items on a 5-point Likert scale and 10 questions requesting short narrative responses. One-hundred twenty plans were received from school districts in 30 states, and 85 (71 percent) of these districts responded to the questionnaire. The responses to each of 16 questions are presented in graphic form along with a discussion of the significance of the response pattern. Following the analysis of the questions, the results from 10 narrative responses are presented. The evidence suggests that strategic planning seems to be working well in those districts that responded to the study, and that educators combine a number of planning paradigms when they conduct strategic planning. (70 references) (MLF)

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Strategic Planning in America's Schools: An Exploratory Study

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Background

The emergence of strategic planning as a technique for school districts is a relatively recent development. Although it has been practiced widely in the private sector during the past twenty years, strategic planning was not utilized to any significant degree in education before the early 1980s, and has only become common as a planning tool for school districts during the past seven years (Clark, 1990).

There is little research that documents the arrival of strategic planning in education. Studies conducted in the seventies (Colucciello, 1978; Goldman & Moynihan, 1975) and as recently as 1983 (Schmelzer), indicated that intermediate and long-range planning had not reached a formalized level in most districts, and that there was a lack of understanding among educators regarding the scope and complexity of intermediate and long-range planning (Bozeman & Schmelzer, 1984). The term "strategic planning" does not appear in educational publications much before 1985.

It can be hypothesized that the application of these techniques has resulted in part from the perennial interest in private sector techniques shown by public educators, combined with increasing pressure for reform, revitalization and restructuring of American education.[1]

There is ample evidence, however, that numerous school districts have adopted strategic planning during the previous five years as their primary means of analysis, improvement and goal-setting. McCune (1986) estimated that

[1] Examples from the mid-eighties of the call for fundamental change include: A Nation at Risk (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983); Goodlad (1983) Tomorrow's Teachers: A Report of the Holmes Group (1986); Time for Results: The Governors' 1991 Report on Education (1986); Cohen (1987).

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approximately 500 of the nation's 15,500 school districts were engaged in some form of strategic planning in 1986. In most cases it replaced an ad hoc system of short-range objectives and general long-range plans.

It is one of the first attempts to employ one planning model for the entire organization. It has not been unusual for formal planning to occur around operational dimensions of school districts, particularly capital improvement projects and new construction which lend themselves much more to linear planning and for which highly-developed planning models exist. It has been employed less frequently in the instructional arena.

Although districts have long relied on formal student evaluation programs to provide a picture of their progress on certain instructional criteria, and often developed improvement goals to increase test scores, these goals were usually set at the central level for dissemination to principals and schools. They tended to be isolated from practice: they simply specified an outcome and did little to ensure the strategies or tactics of schools were refocused to enhance goal achievement.

Even in situations where program was reshaped to support goals, for example when mastery learning might be installed to support an increase in reading scores, it has occurred in relative isolation from the rest of the instructional program and organizational structure.

Strategic Planning in the Educational Context

Strategic planning techniques, as applied in education, seek to place goal-setting in a broader context, so that key stakeholders inside and outside of the organization are involved in the goal-setting process. This creates greater awareness and ownership of the goals that result. All employees and constituencies are then able to align their behavior with the goals to enhance their achievement.

The proponents of strategic planning also present it as the best, perhaps the only, method that school districts can use to restructure. The literature promoting strategic planning for schools links its use with restructuring and fundamental change consistently.[2]

Beginning in the mid-1980s, several consultants emerged at the national level who began working with many school districts on the development of strategic plans. Foremost among these consultants were Bill Cook and Shirley

[2] The best examples of this can be seen in McCune (1986), and Cook (1988).

McCune. Cook, working as a private consultant, established a relationship with the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), and conducted workshops throughout the nation under their sponsorship.

McCune, from her position as Policy Services Director of the Mid-Continent Regional Educational Labs (McREL), worked extensively with midwest districts, and published in 1986 a book that translated strategic planning into the language of educators. This book, Guide to Strategic Planning for Educators, was distributed widely by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD). ASCD also contributed significantly to the spread of strategic planning as a planning model for curricular renewal and school improvement, in addition to district-level goal-setting. Its executive director, Gordon Cawelti, conducted workshops and applied the concepts in many of ASCD's projects.

This endorsement of strategic planning by many prestigious national educational leaders, and the national workshop method of dissemination, made strategic planning attractive to districts commonly identified as "lighthouse" districts in their state or region. These districts tended to be among the first to employ strategic planning. This provided an added credibility to its use and hastened its adoption by other districts.

As mentioned previously, most of the early training in strategic planning was offered by Cook and McCune. It is worth reviewing briefly the philosophy, premises, and goals of strategic planning as identified by each of these consultants. In addition to conducting numerous workshops, each has served as a process consultant to many districts, has sponsored "training of trainers" workshops to enable others to facilitate strategic planning processes, and has been centrally involved in the development of many of the early strategic plans.

Bill Cook was initially a strategic planning consultant to private sector companies. His involvement in strategic planning in education came about through the National Academy for School Executives (NASE), sponsored by AASA. Through the academies, over 400 educators from nearly as many educational organizations have participated in detailed, intensive training on strategic planning. For many of these educators, this training served as the impetus for them to pursue strategic planning, and provided their conceptual framework and reference point for defining effective strategic planning.

Cook's book, Strategic Planning for America's Schools (1988), outlines the rationale for strategic planning by any organization, then considers its

application to schools in particular. He contends that the increasing popularity of strategic planning with educators "is a clear indication that strategic planning is an idea whose time has come in public education."

Cook states that with the increasingly rapid rate of change only one type of leadership will be able to survive and prosper: "In short, it's the kind of leadership that plans strategically," and that incremental change in education won't work any longer: "(W)hat is required is a fundamental change in the business itself.... If public education is to survive into the next century, it must recreate itself from the inside out..."

Clearly, Cook is creating a scenario in which the need for change in education is both urgent and compelling. His mechanism for managing and guiding this process to bring about fundamental change in public education as an institution is strategic planning.

If school districts subscribe to these arguments, it becomes clear that it is critically important to study and understand the strategic planning process and its impact on school districts. Any attempt that the American educational system makes "to recreate itself from the inside out" (Cook, 1988) bears close scrutiny.

What, then, is strategic planning for America's schools? Cook offers his definition. He describes what strategic planning is not; not a model, not a process, not an academic exercise, not a prescription, not an edict, not a political manipulation, not a budget. He then proceeds to explain what it is:

> (S)trategic planning is an effective combination of both a *process* and *discipline* which, if faithfully adhered to, produces a plan characterized by originality, vision, and realism. The discipline includes the vital ingredients of the plan itself; the process is the organizational dynamic through which the vital ingredients are derived. Both the discipline and the process are aimed at *total concentration of the organization's resources on mutually predetermined measurable outcome.* " (p. 93) (italics from the original)

In Cook's view of strategic planning its central purpose is "the identification of specific desired results to which all the effort and activity of the organization will be dedicated....(T)he success of any plan is determined only by the results it produces."

The components of the definition offered by Cook outline an approach that entails a fundamental redistribution of decision making responsibilities, particularly in the area of basic policy development. He believes that planning is

a simultaneous top-down, bottom-up process, and that people at all levels of the organization are equally qualified to participate in the planning process.

Shirley McCune, in her book Guide to Strategic Planning for Educators (1986), echoes many of Cook's sentiments, and presents an approach that is similar to Cook's in many ways. She does offer some cautions, however: "Experience with strategic planning suggests that it may have either minimal impact on a district or be a catalyst for district transformation." She sees the power of strategic planning in its ability to go beyond a series of planning procedures, to "create dissonance in people, upset old views, identify new possibilities, and pose new questions." Not only is strategic planning a rational planning process; it is an activity that has "strong psychological effects on an organization and the people involved in the process."

She differentiates between long-range planning which typically begins with the assumption that the organization exists in a stable environment, and strategic planning which attempts to establish the organization's role within the context of a larger society that is changing constantly, based on data collected internally and externally.

Her definition of strategic planning emphasizes its use as a tool for transforming schools:

> Strategic planning is a process for organizational renewal and transformation. This process provides a means of matching services and activities with changed and changing environmental conditions. Strategic planning provides a framework for the improvement and restructuring of programs, management, collaborations, and evaluation of the organization's progress. (p. 34)

There are other views of the ability of strategic planning to reshape public organizations. Bryson and Roering (1988) in a study of the initiation of strategic planning by governments emphasize the difficulty of planning strategically in public entities:

> The deliberate attempt to produce change is probably the greatest strength and weakness of strategic planning as a process. Changes in organizations normally occur through disjointed incrementalism or "muddling through" (Lindblom, 1959; Quinn, 1980). Any process designed to force important changes, therefore, can be seen either as a highly desirable improvement on ordinary decision making or as an action doomed to failure. Indeed, whatever the merits of strategic planning in the

abstract, *normal expectations have to be that most efforts to produce fundamental decisions and actions in government through strategic planning will not succeed*....Further, because of pressures for public accountability, decisions ultimately are likely to be made at the highest levels (Hickson,Butler,Cray,Mallory, & Wilson, 1986)(pp. 117, 203), while political rationality dictates that top decision makers not make important decisions until forced to do so (Benveniste, 1972; 1977; Quinn, 1980). (italics from the original)

These varying perspectives on strategic planning contain within them a number of questions of fundamental importance to educators who apply strategic planning techniques to their school districts. Is it the most appropriate planning technique for public entities? Is the process more important than the product? Can it be used to point the way toward fundamental change, or are incrementalist tendencies too strongly ingrained in educational organizations?

Public education is now at a point nationally where strategic planning is being employed by ever-increasing numbers of school districts, and is being espoused by a growing cadre of trainers and consultants.

At the same time, there is little evidence to support or refute the use of strategic planning by school districts. In fact, there is little information about the results of the application of strategic planning concepts to the more than 500 school districts nationwide that have plans in place. (Clark, 1990)

Robert Slavin (1989) writes convincingly about the dangers of what he calls "faddism" in education. He suggests that educational innovations move through a series of steps from being proposed and piloted, to being introduced in innovative districts and elevated to "hot topic" among staff developers, through a period of rapid expansion before controlled evaluation begins. At this point innovative districts move on to something new, complaints about the innovation begin to surface, and preliminary evaluation results are disappointing. Developers then claim this is due to poor implementation. Interest in the program then flags, about the time the first controlled evaluation studies are published.

DiMaggio and Powell (1983) contend that organizations in a structured field, such as education, "respond to an environment that consists of other organizations responding to their environment, which consists of organizations

responding to an environment of organizations' responses."[3] This leads to a standardization of practice and increasing bureaucratism.

Is strategic planning another case of organizations responding to an environment of organizational responses? This study offers some baseline information to help determine the ends to which the planning process are being put, and the outcomes that are being pursued. Such information helps identify present trends and provides a benchmark against which future implementation can be measured.

The timing is particularly critical, since strategic planning is spreading from the so-called "lighthouse districts" who adopted strategic planning first, perhaps in a genuine attempt to respond to the environment, to the second group of districts, who, according to DiMaggio and Powell (1983), may be simply conforming to a practice that is rapidly becoming generally accepted as a management technique. In that sense, it may represent a response to organizational responses, rather than an attempt to focus or refocus the organization toward future goals. In addition, several states have adopted requirements that all districts develop strategic plans. This study investigates this question, and other related ones. The next section offers a conceptual overview of planning models and paradigms, and a consideration of the role of planners within various models.

Planning Models and Paradigms[4]

Friedmann and Hudson (1974) identify four major intellectual traditions in planning theory. These include: Philosophical Synthesis; Rationalism; Organizational Development; and Empiricism. Planning is seen as a process to link knowledge with action. It is both professional activity and social interaction and serves to link knowledge and authority, to translate concepts, ideas, and information into practice via organizational implementation processes.

Philosophical synthesis encompasses the work of Etzioni (1969) and Friedmann (1978; 1984) who view planning as a social process primarily. The philosophical synthesis perspective "seeks insights into the social, economic, and

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[3] The quote is a paraphrase by the authors from Schelling (1978).

[4] This section draws from Adams, D. (1991). Planning Models and Paradigms, and Hamilton, D. An Alternative to Rational Planning Models. In R. V. Carlson & G. Awkerman (Eds.), Educational Planning: Concepts, Strategies, Practices (pp. 5-47). New York: Longman; and Benveniste, G. (1989). Mastering the Politics of Planning. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

ethical conditions as well as the environmental contexts of the institution or sector for which planning is being undertaken" (Adams, 1991).

Rationalism has been the dominant approach to planning theory, with its view of people as a utility and human relations as an instrumental process. Rationalism assumes that the world is a comprehensible environment and that complex, often contradictory conditions can be understood by reducing them to manageable simplifications, often based on data. Rational planning models are based on temporally-based cycles which emphasize development of goals and action plans, followed by the systematic implementation and regular evaluation of these plans to determine progress toward stated goals.

Organization development traditions in planning are concerned with how to bring about change in organizations. Here people are valued and the human relations dimensions of interaction are emphasized. Planning focuses upon "innovation and attention to change in management style, employee satisfaction, decision-making process, and the general health of the organization" (Adams, 1991).

Empiricist planning methods rely to a greater degree upon the analysis of data and the consideration of systems behavior as primary frameworks for understanding planning needs. Empirical approaches are less concerned with issues of planned social change than with systematic problem solving within the bounds of structured rationality. Empirical planning is often conducted by policy scientists or political leaders, and employs systems analysis, cost-benefit analysis, and decision theory. It relies on programming, budgeting, and evaluation of management through methods such as management by objective to control the implementation process.

Most planning models are based upon some combination of objective and subjective social paradigms. The objective paradigm incorporates positivistic assumptions from the physical and social sciences: the subjective paradigm is built around the concept that individuals create their own subjective reality, and that reality must be understood from the perspective of the individual (Adams, 1991). To distinguish between these two paradigms, the terms *rational* to describe models based on the objective paradigm, and *interactive* to describe those derived from the subjective paradigm will be employed. An understanding of this distinction between rational and interactive planning models is central to understanding the differing ways in which school districts have approached strategic planning, and the resultant satisfaction participants express with

strategic planning. In some ways the choice of planning paradigms, however unconscious, insures substantially the outcomes of the process.

Rational models are based on positivistic assumptions, including the following offered by Hamilton (1991):

- Effective planning depends on the articulation and attainment of clear organizational goals.
- The development and subsequent assessment of planning success can most effectively be undertaken from a systems theory perspective in which the organization is treated as the primary unit of analysis.
- The planning process requires the planner to serve in an objective, value-free and apolitical role. The planner provides technical expertise in the development, implementation, and evaluation of all planning initiatives.
- There is a direct and systematic link between planning and subsequent decision-making processes to ensure that all realistic and feasible options are considered. (p. 24)

In contrast, the interactive perspective assumes that "planning is first and foremost a social and political activity" (Hamilton, 1991). In this context, technical procedures and methods are not necessarily ignored, but are recognized as tools with certain inherent potentials and limitations. It is the job of the planner to match the proper tool with the appropriate applications within the planning process: no tool is automatically the right one. The ways in which people interact with the application of the planning tools affects the results of the planning process. Attention to the social processes inherent in planning provides coherence to the use of various technical planning strategies. This helps counteract the tendency for people to reify the organization or become swept up in the illusion of rationality that many planning techniques generate. Moral issues, in particular, cannot necessarily be overlooked as easily when an interactive approach to planning is employed. Malan (1987) describes this social dimension and its uses in the planning process:

> Educational planning can also be analyzed as a social process, during which the techniques and methods used are subject not only to discussion and to methodological and theoretical choice, but also to debate and may be put to political and pragmatic uses. How these techniques are used reveals the consensus and divergence, as well as the cooperation and conflict, that exist between actors whose systems of action reflect the issues at stake in the struggles for influence between the social and

occupational groups concerned with educational policy and management. The use of these techniques is not neutral: it depends on the context, on the place of the different actors involved, and on the strategies that they pursue in the decision-making processes. (p.12) (cf: (Hamilton, 1991)

In this approach, human beings are assumed to have personal constructions of reality that guide their behavior and decisions. Universal laws to explain organizational behavior are inherently limited by the fact that organizations are nothing more than a collection of individuals whose collective versions of reality constitute "the organization." Planning, then, is not merely a series of sequential activities designed to lead in linear fashion to collective activity, but a continual process of "interaction-interpretation-decision-further interaction-reinterpretation, etc." (Adams, 1988) designed to provide greater meaning to the individuals who comprise the organization.

Within a social-political understanding, planning can serve a variety of individual and collective purposes depending on frames of reference. To one person, involvement in planning may be a way of keeping informed about latest issues and trends. To a second person, participation in planning might provide an understanding of the interpersonal dynamics between major decision makers within the senior administrative ranks. To still another person, active involvement may be viewed as a fast track to promotion. Not all purposes, however, may have positive implications. For example, involvement in planning may be perceived as a ritualistic rite, a hindrance, or a meaningless exercise. Nevertheless, the different meanings and the different purposes that people ascribe to planning will influence how they interrelate and how they arrive at decisions about specific issues. (Hamilton, 1991)(p. 34)

Benveniste (1989) identifies six theories of planning that share much with the analysis of Adams and Hamilton. These are comprehensive rational planning, advocacy planning, apolitical politics, critical planning theory, strategic planning, and incrementalism. Benveniste focuses on the role of the planner within each of these theoretical systems. The planning process is assumed to be inherently political. The planning process takes any one of many different directions based on how the role of the planner is defined, and the assumptions the planner has about that role, and the purposes and potentialities of the planning process.

Benveniste begins with a discussion of the comprehensive rational approach, and describes it as having early dominated planning thought. It is defined as:

> a set of procedures whereby the planner clarifies goals, conducts systematic analysis to generate a set of policy alternatives, establishes criteria to choose among these alternatives, and, once choices have been made and implemented, monitors the results. (p. 57)

This approach to planning contains a systems view, with the planner serving to clarify the goals of the system, identify alternative actions based on extensive analysis, then choose the best action to achieve the goals. In this model the expert knowledge base of the planner provides legitimacy for the planning recommendations, and these recommendations can override the more parochial interests or perspectives of groups within (or outside of) the organization. Expert claims or advice, however, can be divorced from the realities of those required to implement the plan. Additionally, many problems simply do not lend themselves well to comprehensive technical solutions.

Advocacy planning carries with it a concern for the client and is interested in the distribution and, by implication, redistribution of power within systems as a result of the planning process. Advocacy planning is

> a perfected form of bottom-up comprehensive rational planning. The advocate takes into account the goals and options of the underprivileged that might otherwise neglected. In that perspective, advocacy planning involves the ability to learn about the needs of clients; it becomes a humanized form of design (Burke, 1979; Jenkins-Smith, 1982; Perin, 1970). (Benveniste, 1989)(p. 67)

The advocacy planner is a change agent, actively attempting to improve the status of those not empowered by the system. One inherent conflict in the role of the advocacy planner is that the expertise and expert knowledge possessed by the planner separates her or him from those for whom she or he is advocating. The advocacy group is at the mercy of the planner in many important respects. Advocacy planning has forced planners to stop hiding behind data and the illusion of impartiality and confront the social implications of their behavior.

Apolitical politics is a planning theory that tells us that "since planners are seen as technicians, they must therefore appear to play the role of technicians." (Benveniste, 1989, p. 68). This approach to planning uses technical

knowledge primarily to achieve political or managerial compromise. The planner is not a part of the political dimension of planning, and the political role of the planner does not serve as a form of legitimacy. By being apolitical, the planner is in the paradoxical position of being able to influence the process; thus the term apolitical politics.

Many planners prefer this apparently detached role, unsullied by the politics present in any organizational environment, yet able to influence behind the scenes or at a distance. The empirical data confirm that planners play a political role (Vasu, 1979), whether as technician, political actor, or a combination of both (Howe, 1980; Howe & Kaufman, 1979; Kaufman, 1985).

Apolitical politics can be dysfunctional, since it creates confusion, and the confusion has the following consequences:

- Planning is perceived as mystification.
- Planners are not prepared, and are not given the necessary resources, to play a political role.
- Managers or politicians distrust them.
- Planners tend to disregard implementation.
- Planners blame their failures on politics and management.
- Planners are not clear as to their professional role. (Benveniste, 1989, pp. 72-73)

Critical planning theory "is concerned with the distribution of power in society and the extent to which planning reflects this distribution of power." Planning, in this perspective, is not a professional or technical activity, but a "mask" by which those in power justify their goals and their hold on power. Critical planning theory always asks whose interests are served by a given plan? Ideally, critical planning provides communication channels so that all participants in the process have an opportunity to be heard. Critical planners do not begin by assuming they stand separate or aloof from the political process; they are centrally concerned with how their actions impact the status quo. Critical planning theory draws upon the concepts of phenomenology and social construction of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Giorgi, 1985; Luckmann, 1978; Thines, 1977) as important ways to understand the ability of the individual to search for and employ useful knowledge as a tool for personal action. The ability to understand how people see their position in the organization or society provides insight into how to adopt strategies to achieve goals consonant with the motivation structures and world views of participants.

Knowledge, then, is an important planning tool when shared widely toward the goal of having each individual determine the impact of any potential plan in broad terms. Benveniste (1989) summarizes the contributions of critical planning theory to planning practice:

> Critical theory provides important lessons to planning thought. It emphasizes the pursuit of knowledge that can become a catalyst for action. It encourages planners to take an active role in bringing about change. It asks them not to hide behind the mask of technocracy but rather to actively search for, and then hold fast to, the truth. (p. 77)

Strategic planning was developed first in the corporate environment, then applied in large governmental agencies, such as the Department of Defense. It moved into the public arena through county and city government and higher education. One of its defining characteristics is its use of broad questions about the organization's current state internally, and in relation to the external environment.

Strategic planning attempts to deal with the unpredictability of the future. It can be distinguished from comprehensive planning by its ongoing nature, and its selective focus. Awareness of environmental forces and their potential impact is a defining element of this planning approach. To be successful, strategic planners must ask the right questions: What is crucial? What might make or break the organization? Where might action best be taken and activity focused? How best can the organization restructure to meet changing environmental forces? Which issues should receive the most attention? How should priorities for action be established? (Ansoff, 1980; Below,Morrisey, & Acomb, 1987)

Benveniste (1989) contrasts the role of strategic planners with that of comprehensive long-range planners:

> The claims to expertise of strategic planners differ from those of comprehensive long-range planners. Where the latter can claim the attention of the Prince, his lieutenants, and the stakeholders because they have an overall systems view that can provide a rational basis for selecting the best course of action, the former do not have such a view. Strategic planners rarely attempt a comprehensive, long-term view. Their contribution relies on their presentation of eventualities and their ability to point to the need for organizational integration and coordination to cope with these eventualities. If comprehensive long-range planning tends

toward a unitary plan and a specified set of objectives, strategic planning is far more concerned with opportunities and contingencies. (pp. 79-80)

The literature on strategic planning tends to focus on the importance of the CEO as the most important player, since in corporate environments, the CEO is presumed to be able to move the organization to implement a plan. The role of stakeholders in private sector strategic planning models is downplayed. The recent introduction of strategic planning into the public sector has resulted in significant alterations of the model, particularly in regard to the role of stakeholders relative to the CEO in the development of the plan's priorities and focus. In private sector models, planners act to facilitate or coach the process in order to make it possible for the top management team to do its task. Planners are competent support people, charged with management of the logistics of the planning process, and provision of information to top management.

Incrementalism, described by Lindblom (1959) as the "science of muddling through," assumes that decision making in reality is based on a limited number of choices within a rather narrow range that defines the organization's comfort zone of change. Incrementalist approaches to planning have one apparent advantage: agreement on goals is not necessarily a prerequisite to action; agreement on policy is all that is needed. Incrementalism allows situational responses to pressure or interest groups even if overall goals are not clear. Past practice confines and defines the range of options among which a choice is made.

Mutual adjustment is much easier with an incremental approach, since participants in the organization will likely be familiar with both the range of options and the specific action strategy adopted. Predictability is enhanced, uncertainty reduced. New roles take time and energy to learn. Incrementally recasting old roles may be more efficient and effective, so long as the changes required can be accommodated incrementally. And since it is functionally impossible to develop a view that is truly comprehensive enough to serve as the basis for policy formulation, incremental accommodation and adaptation is more pragmatic.

Incrementalism allows informal processes to be validated and considered as legitimate. Such informality can counteract outdated rules and roles more quickly than a formal planning process. Incremental changes actually precede formal organizational acceptance of the changes, and may be institutionalized before policies are changed to acknowledge this reality. This can cause conflict

with those in formal leadership positions, particularly those who believe they must approve all departures from established rules and procedures.

Benveniste (1989) uses as an example of incrementalism the professionalization of teaching by teachers who assume leadership roles in the absence of new policies to validate this or clear definition of these new roles. This is a bottom-up approach to changing the norms and roles within educational institutions, and occurs gradually, almost imperceptibly as teachers begin to develop and run more and more programs, and take more responsibility for policy issues within the school. Lindblom (1969) argues that leaders are often the least able to make difficult decisions, and can bring themselves to make such decisions easily and quickly only after incremental changes have removed much of the risk of error or political conflict from the decision.

This model is "non-planning as planning." There is no formal role for a planner, since everyone and no one is a planner. This strategy works best in relatively stable environments where there is adequate time for the incremental process to play itself out. It should be noted that not all incremental adaptation is necessarily good for the organization. Many small adaptations can remove an organization's ability to respond to major environmental shifts, or to capitalize upon opportunities. This approach to planning also tends to create an organizational culture with a cynical view of formalized planning approaches.

The State of Research on Strategic Planning Generally, and Strategic Planning in Education More Specifically

Planning has long been regarded as necessary and desirable in the private sector. Knezevich (1975) reviewed the writings of eight authorities on administrative processes and functions, beginning with Fayol in 1916. He found planning was listed as an administrative function on all but one of the writers' lists.

The research that has been conducted on long-range and strategic planning in the private sector is copious.[5]

This research has limited application to education, for a variety of reasons. Hatten (1982) identifies difficulties with the application of the corporate model of strategic management to not-for-profit organizations:

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[5] See for example: Henry (1967); Cleland (1976); Ghym and Bates (1977); Ang and Chu (1979).

The major goals of a not-for-profit organization are not so directly evident as the profit making organization's all-encompassing and measurable goals of increased profits or sales or market share....

Other goals which might characterize not-for-profit organizations are not so directly measurable as the financial survival goal....

Further complicating the determination of goals and the measurement of their achievement in a not-for-profit organization is the difficulty of determining precisely the recipients of the organization's service....

Perhaps the most important factor limiting the identification of the not-for-profit organization's current business and goals stems from communication difficulties among the organization's strategy makers.

There are many authors who contend that strategic planning can be of benefit to any organization.[6] Hatten (1982) concludes that even given the difficulties faced by not-for-profit organizations in their application of concepts of strategic management, it is a desirable and potentially attainable goal:

(I)t is tempting to say that strategy making and testing for consistency is impossible in the not-for-profit organization and that these managers must simply muddle along as best they can, moving from crisis to crisis. Yet a more effective method of handling the issue of consistency must be found if effectiveness and efficiency in the services provided by not-for-profit organizations are truly important to effective use of national and regional resources.

Consistent and effective strategy making is possible for the not-for-profit agency in the same way it is for the corporation....This task may be more complex...but it is not impossible.... (pp. 102-103)

Little research on strategic planning in education has been conducted up to this point. What has occurred most often are discussions of the relative merits of strategic planning, implications for its use, and various models. This is consistent with its recent introduction into education, and with the tendency of educators to adopt an innovation before a research base has been established (Slavin, 1989).

Research on strategic planning in higher education, where it has been employed more broadly for a longer period of time, tends to be exploratory,

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[6] See for example: Steiner,(1979); Barry (Barry, 1986); Bryson, Freeman, and Roering (1986); Bryson, Van deVen, and Roering (1987).

whereby one or several techniques such as case study, interview or survey are employed to identify the state of strategic planning in an institution or group of institutions.[7]

There has been some exploratory research on strategic planning in public education. Valentine's (1986) study was designed to examine the feasibility of implementing strategic planning in public schools, but did not examine actual implementation of the process.

Beach and McInerney (1986) considered the planning practices employed by 218 school districts. They concluded that "(a) major problem in assessing the state of educational planning is the scarcity of empirical studies from which to generate information on the planning practices in school districts (Waltman, 1980)," and that "(t)he discipline of educational planning is not...well-defined."

Lease (1987) conducted what he described as "an exploratory investigation" into superintendents' thinking about strategic planning and environmental scanning.

This lack of a national "snapshot" of strategic planning is an important limiter, both for the discussion of the role of strategic planning in education, and for researchers who plan to study planning efforts of individual districts.

Methodology

The complete study comprises a two-stage process of data collection. First, strategic plans were collected from districts throughout the country, and, second, a survey/questionnaire was sent to those districts submitting plans. This paper reports the results from the survey/questionnaire.

Locating school districts that had developed strategic plans was problematic. There is no agency that might be expected to have a central listing of districts with strategic plans, in part due its recent introduction into public education. Therefore, several strategies were employed to locate districts that had developed strategic plans.

The National Center for Strategic Planning, a bureau within the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), provided a list of over 400 individuals who had participated in strategic planning workshops sponsored by AASA. Letters were sent to all individuals within school districts in the United States. The letter requested a copy of the district's strategic plan, if one

[7] See for example: Scharfenberger (1986); Coleman (1985); Dixon (1986); White (1985); Matheny (1985); Harris (1987).

had been developed, and any other information necessary to understand the planning process. It also informed them that a questionnaire would be forthcoming.

After this initial group was solicited, the state departments of education in all states were contacted. Letters were addressed to the chief executive of the state educational agency, requesting their help in identifying districts in their state that were involved in strategic planning. Thirty-five states replied, providing information of varying degrees of specificity. Most sent the names of several districts known to be active in strategic planning. Some sent directories of all schools in their state. Others indicated that there was some form of requirement for strategic planning (Utah for example) and indicated that essentially all districts would have plans. Letters were sent to districts deemed most likely to have produced a plan. To date, 120 plans have been received and more continue to arrive irregularly.

Plans are being analyzed along dimensions identified from a review of the literature on strategic planning, with particular attention being paid to the structure of strategic plans being developed in educational settings (Barry, 1986; Below et al., 1987; Bryson, 1988; Cook, 1988; Kaufman & Herman, 1991; Lease, 1987; Mauriel, 1989; McCune, 1986; Scharfenberger, 1986; Valentine, 1986; White, 1985). A review of public education planning models revealed the following general categories present in some form or another in most recommended strategic planning templates for educators: vision statement or mission statement; guiding principles or core beliefs; external scan; internal scan; strategic issues or directions; action plans. These elements comprise the general dimensions for plan analysis.

Content analysis of plans is being performed to identify trends and characteristics present in each of these elements. The frame of reference for this analysis looked for factors such as the implicit assumptions of the planning process, the use of external and internal data to shape decision making and the apparent linkage between data and actions taken, the degree to which plans focused on incremental improvement ver. . ı fundamental changes of some sort, the degree to which planning is represented as essentially a rational and linear process, and the specific content of the action plans themselves, what elements of the organization they addressed, their linkage to student learning, the likelihood of their being implemented successfully. The results of the analysis will be presented in a separate report to follow.

A two-part survey/questionnaire was designed based on issues identified from a preliminary review of the plans and from the literature on strategic planning. The methodology employed paralleled Bryson and Roering (1988). In that study the authors were able to develop a series of analysis schema for eight governmental organizations that participated in strategic planning. A follow-up questionnaire was also employed. The questionnaire was developed as the analysis of the plans was conducted. The authors concluded that it was necessary to proceed with an analysis of the plans before a questionnaire could be developed in full.

The survey/questionnaire was reviewed by an informal panel of practitioners and researchers with interests in and knowledge of strategic planning. The review was conducted primarily to address broad issues of reliability and validity, as well as to ensure clarity of language. No formal tests of reliability or validity were conducted, due in part to the difficulty in obtaining a test group that did not overlap the study sample.

The survey consisted of sixteen items on a five-point Likert scale, and ten questions requesting short narrative responses on the reverse side. All districts that submitted plans were sent a survey/questionnaire with an accompanying letter explaining the purpose of the study, asking the recipient of the letter to determine who in the district would be most qualified to complete the survey, and requesting that they forward the survey to that individual. One-hundred twenty requests were mailed: eighty-five responses were received, a 71% return rate. No follow-up mailing was attempted.

This methodology is consistent with policy research generally, which operates from an empirico-inductive approach, rather than the more traditional hypothesis-testing model (Majchrzak, 1984). Utilizing policy research for the purpose of defining emerging or existing problems so that they might be studied in greater detail is described by Weiss (1977) as the "enlightenment function" of policy research (cf: Majchrzak, 1984). This approach to constructing meaning as data are collected has been labeled the "grounded theory" approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations. The sample itself may or may not be representative of strategic planning in American schools. There is no way to know if plans were only sent by school districts that had positive experiences

with the planning process. Moreover, the sample does not include districts that attempted strategic planning but did not complete a plan, nor does it contain information from districts that investigated strategic planning, but decided to select another form of planning instead. To understand the appropriateness of strategic planning more fully it would be necessary to ensure that plans were obtained from a cross section of districts with various reactions, positive and negative, and that the study contained information from districts that had conducted strategic planning but not developed plans as a result of the process, along with districts that had chosen to pursue another form of planning.

The results of the survey/questionnaire are limited since it is impossible to determine if the individual who completed the survey was, in fact, the person best qualified in the district to do so. In order to preserve anonymity, there was no request made for the position title of the respondent; therefore, it is not possible to know the respondent's position within the district, nor any personal motives, experiences or perspectives related to the planning process that might influence their responses.

The fact that the survey/questionnaire was addressed to central office administrators exclusively, and that, in all probability, a high proportion of the instruments was completed by such administrators also influences the results. If the perspectives of other constituencies, such as board members, teachers, site administrators, and community members were included the reactions to planning might be different. Site visits where it would be possible to interviews various constituent groups and to determine the perceived meaning and effects of planning in the district would have served to strengthen the ability to draw conclusions from the data analyzed in this study.

Results

A total of 120 plans was received from school districts in 30 states in time for review and inclusion in the study. Their geographical distribution is as follows:

Alaska	3	Connecticut	1
Arizona	1	Florida	1
Arkansas	1	Georgia	14
California	8	Illinois	7
Colorado	5	Indiana	1

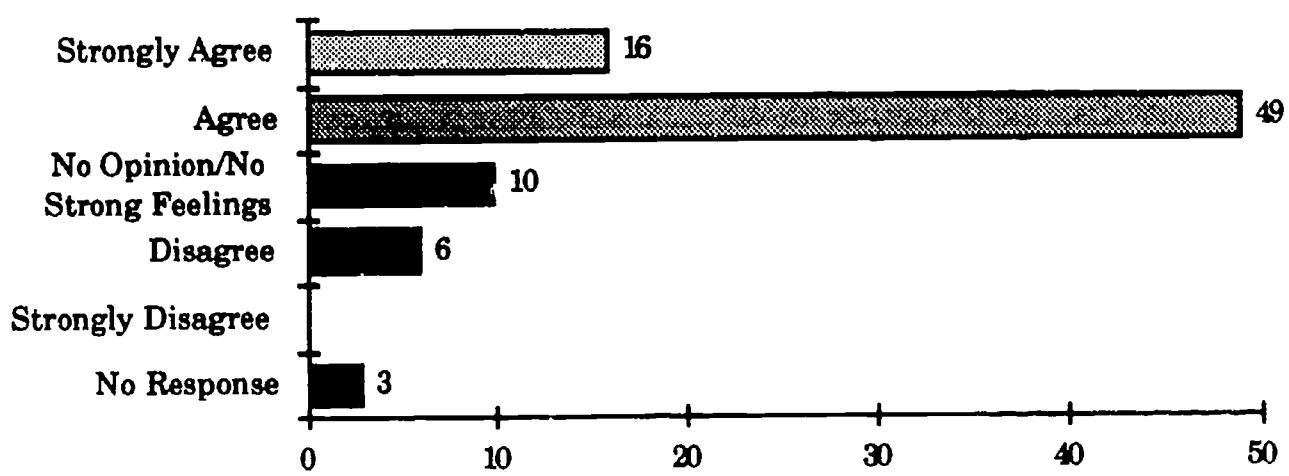
Iowa	2	Ohio	9
Kansas	1	Oregon	3
Kentucky	1	Pennsylvania	1
Michigan	3	South Carolina	1
Minnesota	2	Tennessee	1
Missouri	17	Texas	7
Nebraska	1	Utah	14
Nevada	4	Vermont	1
New Hampshire	1	Virginia	1
New Jersey	2	Washington	1
North Dakota	2	Wisconsin	3

The following section presents in graphic form the responses to each of 16 questions and discusses the significance of the response pattern. Following the analysis of the questions, the results from 10 narrative responses will be presented.

The survey/questionnaire yielded what can best be described in general terms as overwhelmingly positive reactions to strategic planning. For each question the results and implications of the responses will be discussed briefly, and a graph summarizing responses will be displayed.

Question 1. The overall effect of strategic planning on the district has been positive.

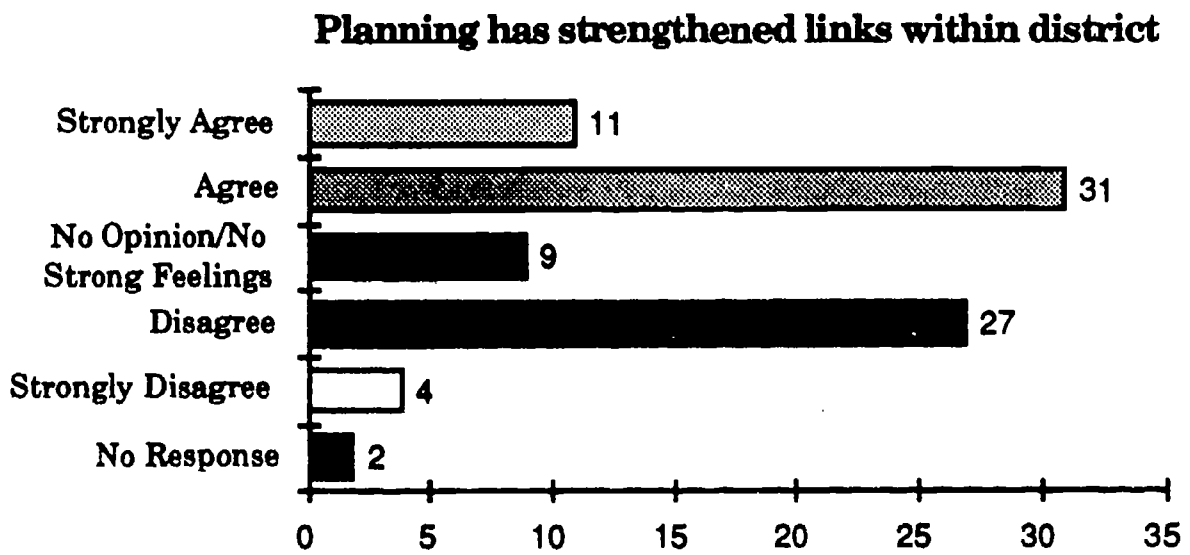
Overall effect of strategic planning positive



The response to this initial question reveals a highly positive reaction to strategic planning. It was somewhat surprising to discover that the vast majority (77%) felt so positively about the planning process. Given the relative difficulty

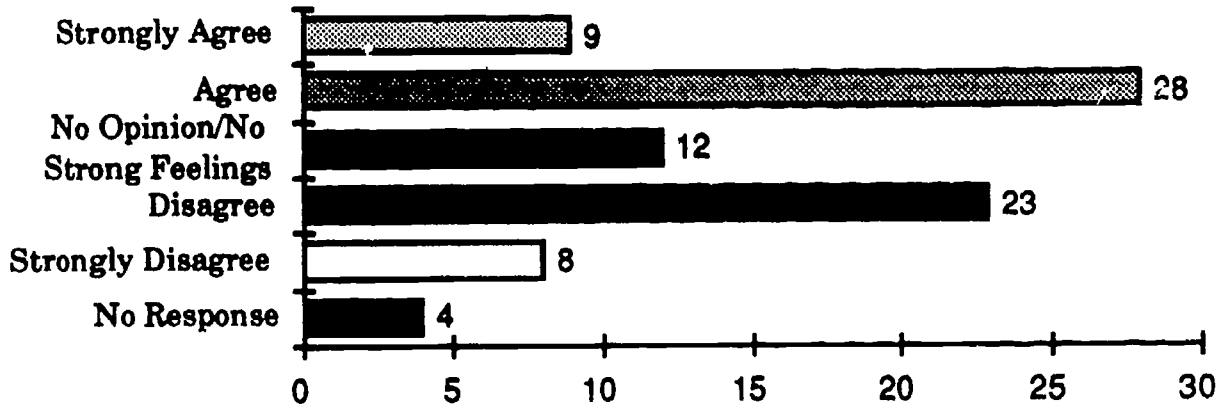
of strategic planning, the high level of skill needed to conduct such a process successfully, and the potential for political problems when many constituencies are invited into the arena of organizational priority-setting, it is remarkable that there was not greater diversity of response. While an argument could be made that those who had a negative experience might be expected to be less willing to complete a survey on this topic, contacts by the author with a random selection of districts that submitted plans did not indicate this was occurring.

Question 2. Strategic planning has strengthened the links between different units within the district.



While viewing planning as positive in overall terms, respondents were less decisive in their views on whether strategic planning strengthened organizational linkages (50% agree, 43% disagree). This question was designed to determine if strategic planning helped align the organization: did it cause units to feel more a part of an integrated whole? Given the political dimension of planning in the public sector, it was hypothesized that the simple process of planning itself would enhance communication and, perhaps, linkages. By talking about goals, visions, mission, strategic directions, etc., and by seeing one's role in the broader context of the organization, linkages might become more apparent. The power of the "loose-tight coupling" notion of educational organizations may also be at work here. It is possible that at a time of increasing decentralization of decision-making, respondents were indicating that planning enhanced the ability of different units in the organization to make their own decisions to a greater degree. Data presented later will suggest this may be the case.

Question 3. The strategic planning process has helped focus the attention of district administrators on what is important for the district's future.

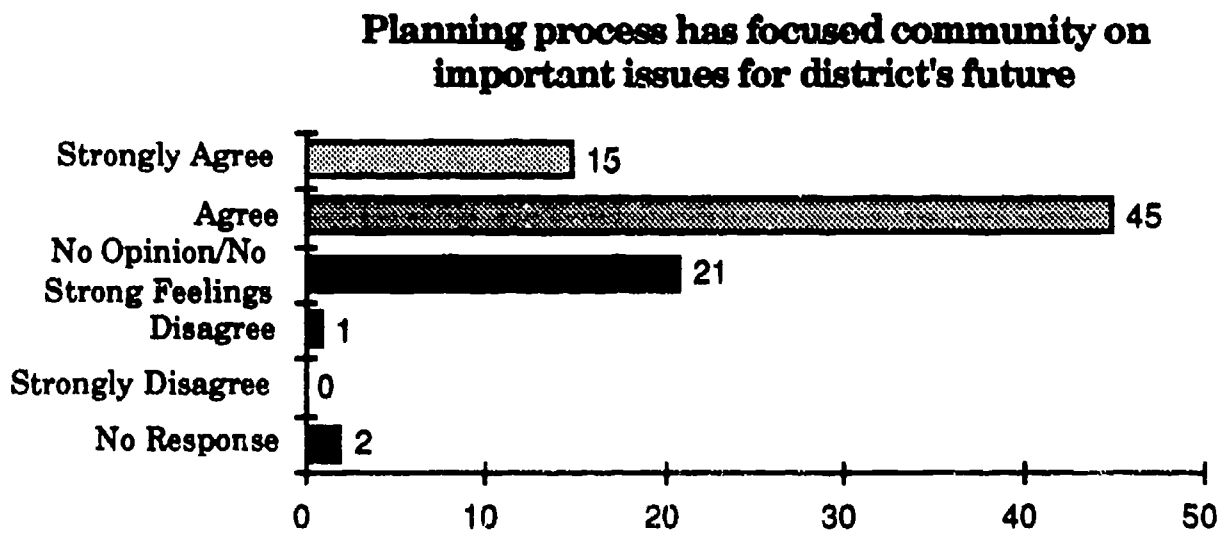


Sentiment on this point was relatively equally divided, with 44% agreeing that strategic planning helped administrators focus, and 37% disagreeing. This is somewhat surprising, once again, given the tendency of strategic planning to provide an open forum where data from external and internal scans can provide a framework within which discussions of values may take place. In such an environment it might be reasonably assumed that the administrators would be able to come to some greater agreement on what issues were most important to the district's future. A sizable number of districts seemed to be unable to do so.

If strategic planning is to be valued primarily as an interactive planning model, rather than for its rational dimensions, then it should lead to greater focus on issues of general importance to the organization. If, however, it is basically a rational model, where the implementation of the action plans is more important than the process of making meaning, then it would not be unlikely that the process would not focus administrators as a group on key issues for the district's future, since their role would be primarily to implement the action plans that result from the planning process.

The response pattern probably indicates some resistance among administrators. Some evidence presented later suggests that part of this reaction or resistance may come from principals.

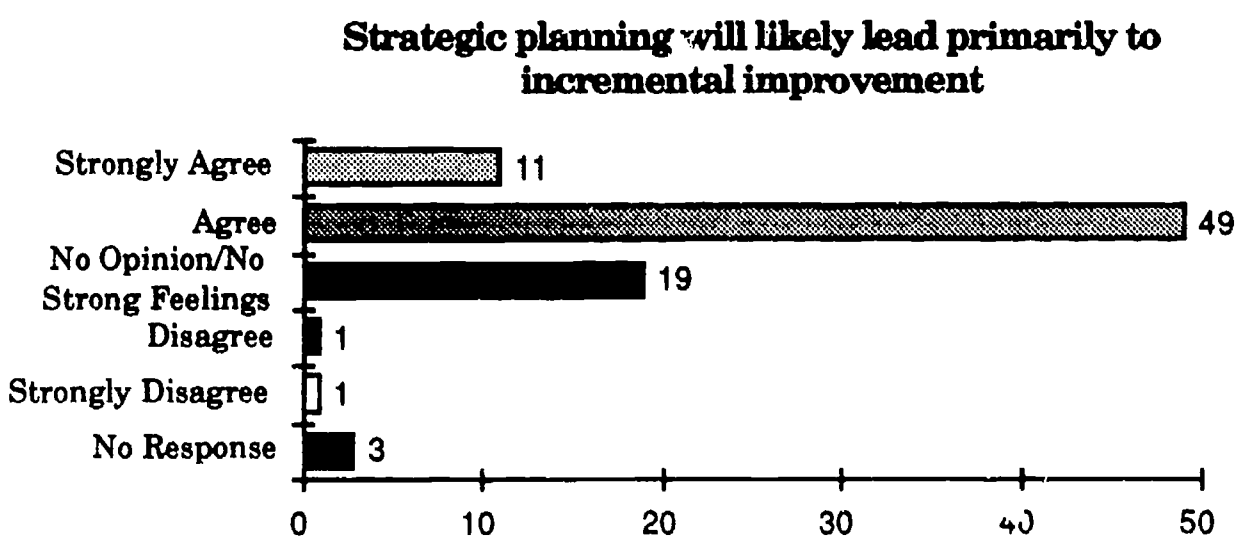
Question 4. The strategic planning process has helped focus the attention of key community decision makers on what is important for the district's future.

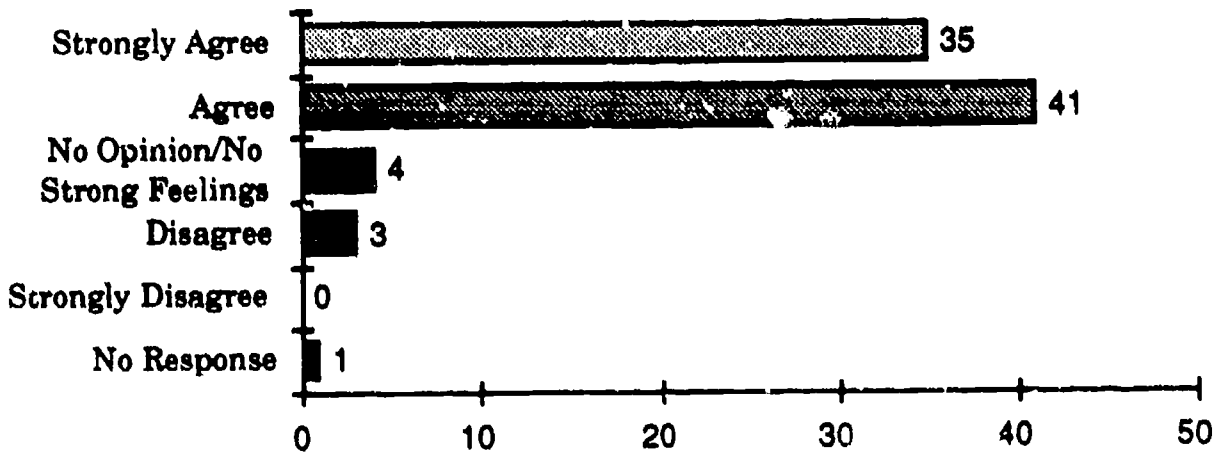


Responses to this question indicate a high degree of agreement (71%) that the planning process helped decision makers in the community to focus. In the case of those responding to the survey, the planning process apparently created new opportunities for community leaders to become more involved and informed regarding issues of importance to educators. Having a plan to use when talking with community members about district priorities would also seem to be a positive outcome of the process. There is evidence from the narrative responses to be reported later that in a number of cases strategic planning helped address very specific issues such as funding, facilities construction, and technology acquisition to enable the district to secure more resources.

Question 5. The strategic plan will likely lead primarily to incremental improvement in practice, rather than restructuring of the district.

Question 6. The strategic plan will likely lead primarily to restructuring of the district, rather than incremental improvement in practice.





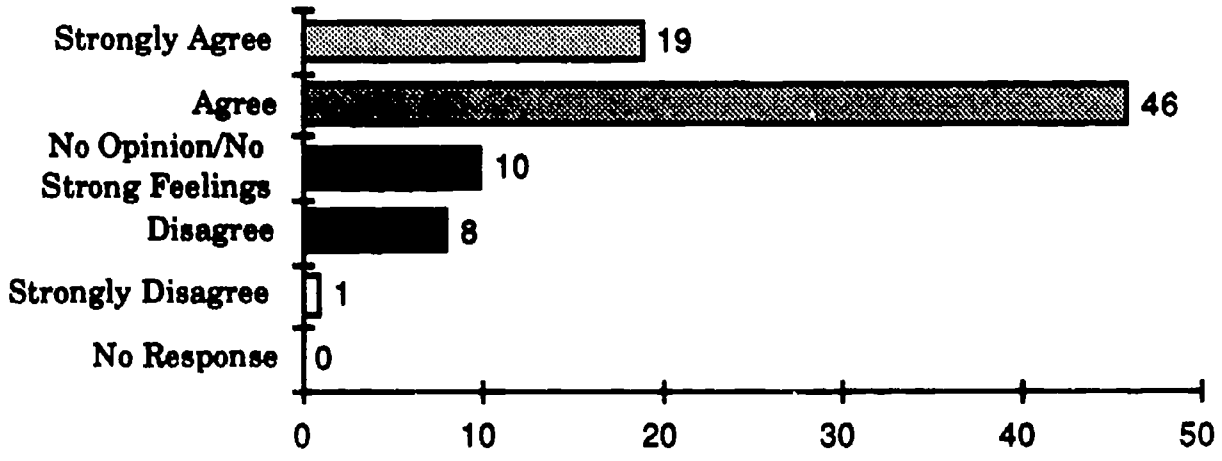
The responses to these two questions are seemingly incongruous. The questions were worded in an attempt to force respondents to determine if strategic planning were a vehicle primarily for the incremental improvement of practice, reflecting to some degree the incrementalist notion of planning and organizational improvement, or for the fundamental restructuring of the district. The respondents apparently felt that it was a vehicle for both, though indicating stronger feelings that restructuring would be a primary outcome.

Strategic planning has been promoted by many consultants (Cook, 1988; Kaufman & Herman, 1991; McCune, 1986) as a means to restructure current educational practice, so it is not surprising that an overwhelming majority of respondents would feel that it would lead to restructuring. A large number also believed that it would cause incremental improvement in practice to occur simultaneously.

This raises the interesting possibility that practitioners may hold more than one planning paradigm in their minds simultaneously, though implicitly, as they select a planning model and adapt it to their needs. Restructuring may be a strategy for long-term organizational relations, or innovative projects and programs; incremental improvement will need to occur continuously, whether restructuring is attempted or not. If this is the case, then it is important to develop planning models for education that employ means to address both levels simultaneously, or to separate consciously the two types of change activities, incremental improvement and restructuring.

Question 7. The process of preparing employees and patrons for strategic planning was successful.

Employees, patrons prepared successfully for planning



Strategic planning is a complex process, difficult to explain, containing many steps and procedures, and subject to adaptation by local districts. From a perspective of planning as a rational process, it may not be easy for participants and stakeholders to understand how the process functions. From a perspective of planning as a political process, it may be difficult to gain agreement on why the process is being employed in the first place. There can be suspicion regarding the motives of those who initiate strategic planning, almost always the superintendent, Board of Education or a central office administrator. Rarely does the impetus come from teachers or parents. Therefore, the process may be viewed with suspicion. Strategic planning requires preparation for participants and non-participants alike to function successfully. In the responding districts it appears as if they were able to prepare constituent groups successfully.

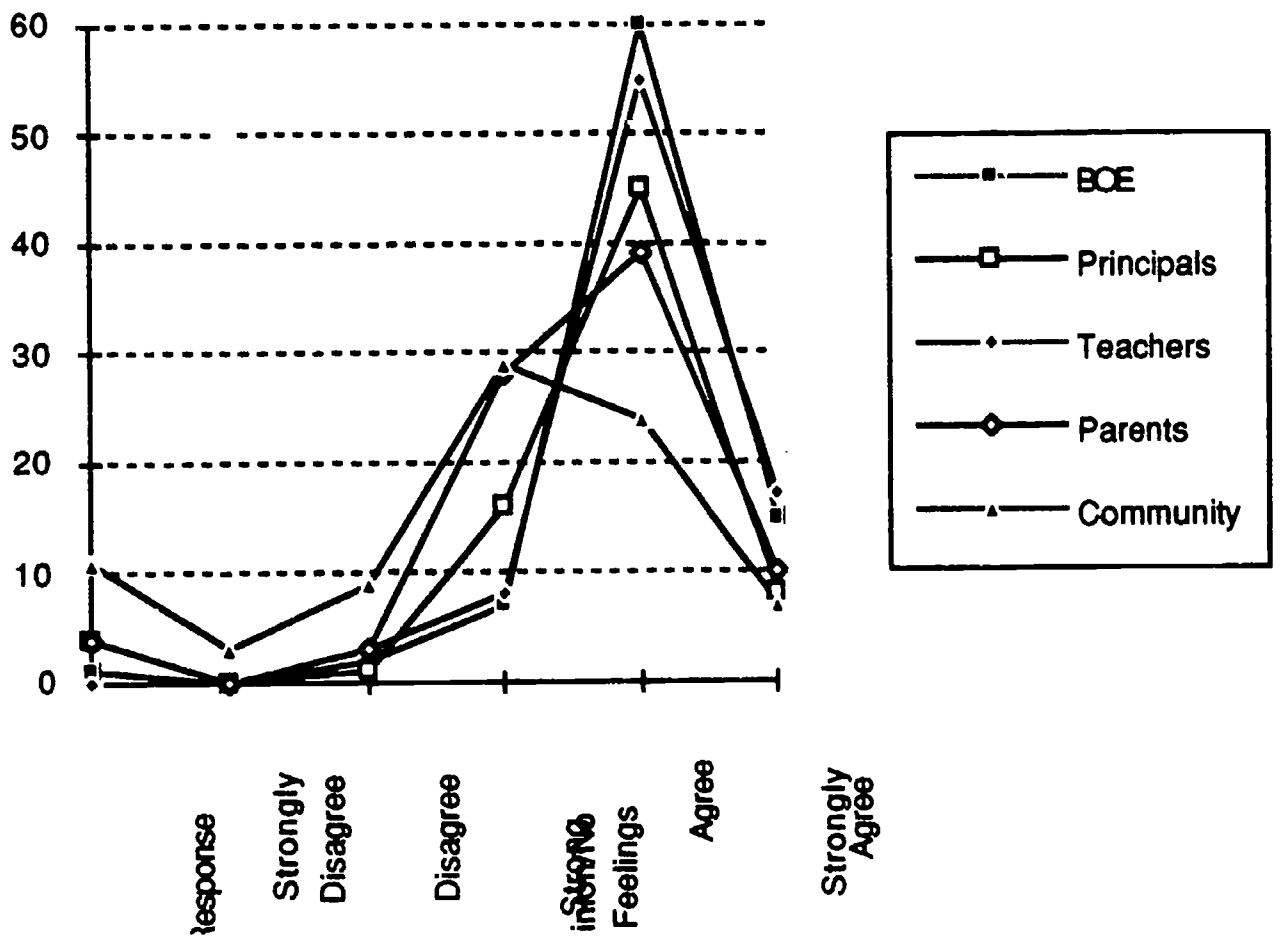
Question 8. How do you believe each of the following groups would react to the statement: The strategic planning process has been positive.

The respondent was asked to characterize the likely responses that each of several constituent groups might have to the planning process. These responses are contained in the table and graph below:

	Board of Education	Principals	Teachers	Parents	Community
No Response	1	4	0	4	11
Strongly Disagree	0	0	0	0	3
Disagree	2	1	3	3	9

No Opinion/No Strong Feelings	7	16	8	28	29
Agree	60	45	55	39	24
Strongly Agree	15	8	17	10	7

Strategic planning process has been positive



Highest positive response was noted among board members. This would suggest that they did not perceive strategic planning to be a threat to or usurpation of their power and decision-making prerogatives. It also suggests close communication between the strategic planners and board members, and board participation in the planning process as members of the planning team.

Respondents indicated that teachers had the second-most positive perspective. They were perceived to be more positive than principals in their reactions. This may seem a bit counterintuitive, unless strategic planning is serving to open up the decision-making process in ways that teachers perceive as enhancing their ability to influence organizational goals and strategies and

personal working conditions. These results may also suggest that teachers desire some sort of overall organizational direction of the sort provided by a strategic plan, to validate their own decisions and help them determine the likelihood that decisions they make or initiatives they take will be supported by the organization.

Principal support was perceived to be less than teacher support by a relatively substantial difference (teacher support = 85%; principal support = 63%). It may be that strategic planning as practiced by many school districts may let teachers and community members into the decision-making arena in a way that principals do not find comfortable. Generally few principals are included on strategic planning teams, which may contribute to a feeling by some that they are excluded. In addition, some principals may be cautious of any effort that is designed to provide centralized direction for the district that will result in action plans for which principals will almost certainly have considerable responsibility.

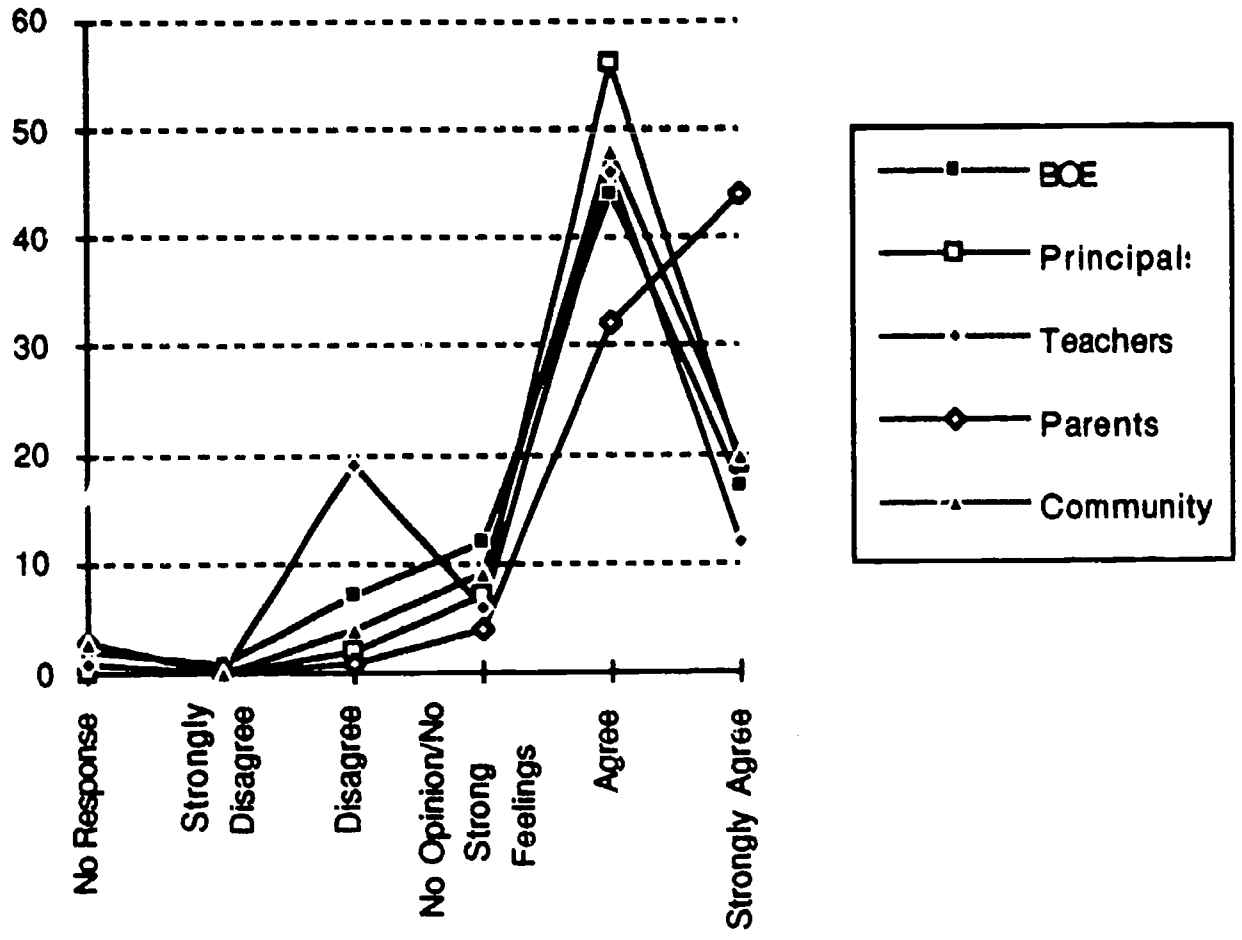
Respondents appeared to be less certain of the perceptions of the community at large and of parents, although 58 percent indicated positive parental perceptions were the result of planning.

Question 9 asked respondents once again to tell what they believed to be the reaction of these same groups to a similar question, but one designed to assess perceptions not of the process, but the product of planning.

Question 9. How do you believe each of the following groups would react to the statement: The strategic plan is likely to lead to significant improvements in the school district.

	Board of Education	Principals	Teachers	Parents	Community
No Response	2	0	1	3	3
Strongly Disagree	1	0	0	0	0
Disagree	7	2	19	1	4
No Opinion/No Strong Feelings	12	7	6	4	9
Agree	44	56	46	32	48
Strongly Agree	17	19	12	44	20

Strategic planning likely to lead to improvement

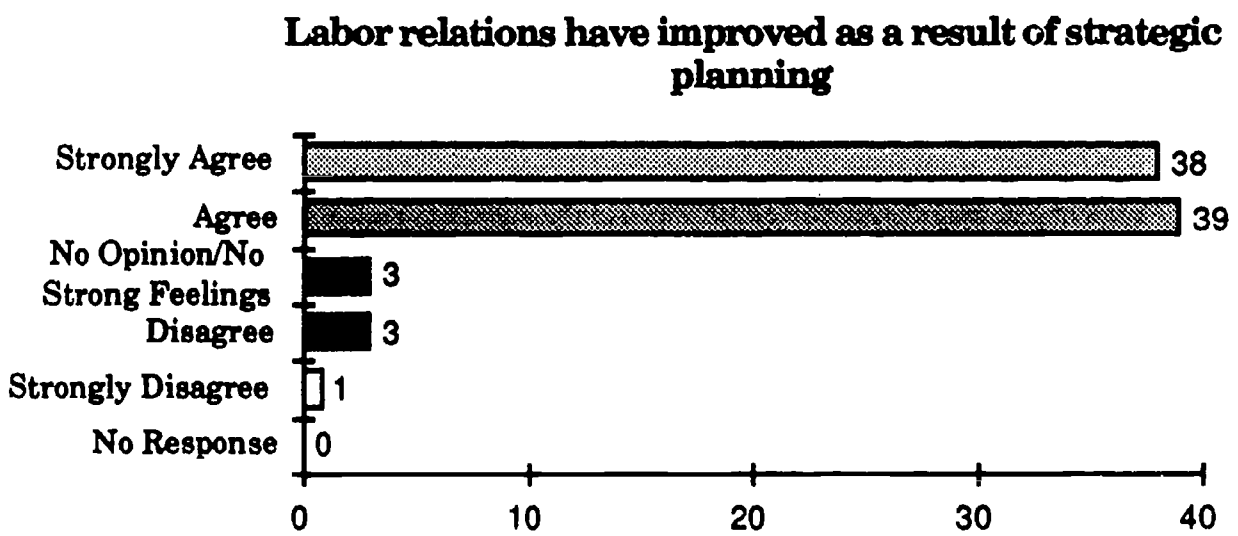


While respondents expressed the belief that all groups felt the plan would lead to significant improvement, they felt most strongly that parents believed that strategic planning would lead to an improved school district. Just over half strongly believed this, and a total of 90 percent agreed with the statement. Apparently districts have been able to inform parents of the outcomes of the planning process in a way that leads parents to be more positive in their perceptions of the district's future. Many of the planning documents that were submitted for this study were in the form of brochures that had obviously been widely distributed within the school community. The strategic planning process seems to provide a vehicle for the promotion of the district's future plans and needs in a way that parents can understand, and to which, apparently, they respond positively.

Also interesting to note is the high agreement among principals that the plan would lead to improvement, but without the emotional commitment implied

by a "strongly agree" reply to the question. This response, in combination with the less than totally enthusiastic perception of the planning process that many principals apparently hold, may indicate that principals are somewhat reticent players in many districts; they can see the plan will probably lead to improvement, but do not necessarily feel high ownership or emotional involvement in it. If this speculative conclusion is correct, there are significant implications for the successful implementation of action plans that require participation or ownership by building level administrators. Given the importance of the principal as an initiator and facilitator of change at the building level, the perceptions that site administrators hold of strategic planning bear further investigation.

Question 10. Labor relations have improved as a result of the planning process.



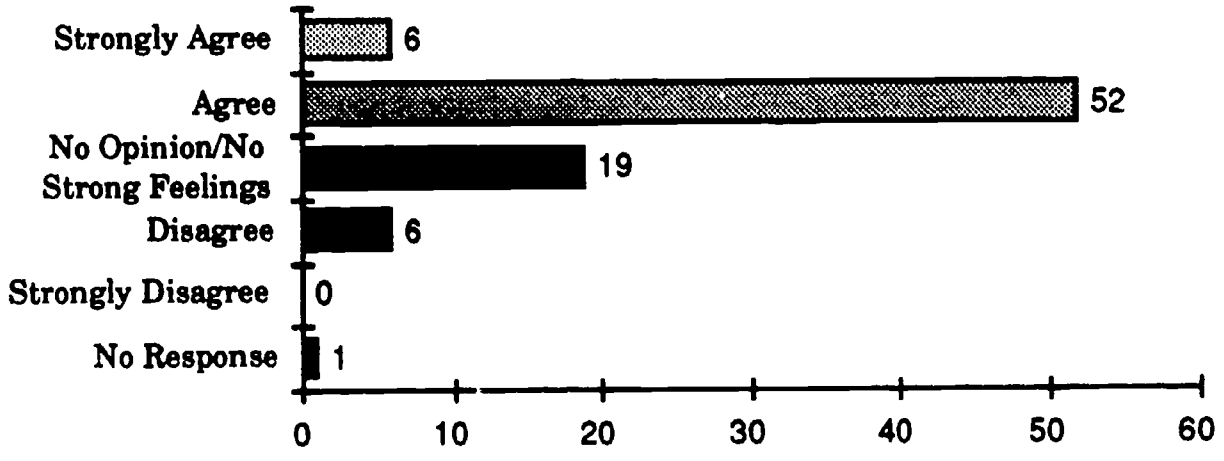
The overwhelmingly positive response to this item indicates that strategic planning apparently provides a forum outside of the traditional labor relations arenas where teachers and administrators can communicate and attempt to find common cause and purpose with one another. Not only was there a high percentage of agreement, the intensity of agreement was very high, with 45 percent strongly agreeing that labor relations have improved.

However, responses to a similar question on the narrative portion of the same form produced quite different results. The question asked what effect on labor relations the process had. Here respondents indicated it had little effect. Their comments indicated they were responding specifically to changes in the collective bargaining arrangements and other aspects of formal labor relations. Those elements apparently had changed little.

If these seemingly contradictory responses are to be reconciled it suggests that participation in the process was a positive experience, increasing communication and participation in decision-making, but that it has yet to have much impact on more formal labor relations.

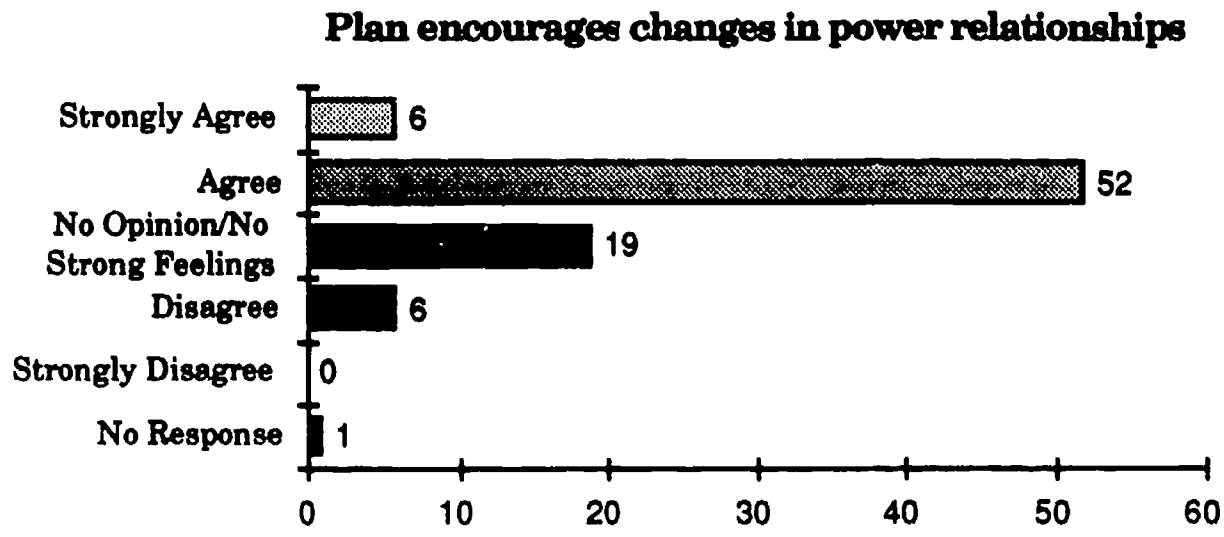
Question 11. The strategic plan embodies new or different values for our district.

Strategic plan embodies new district values



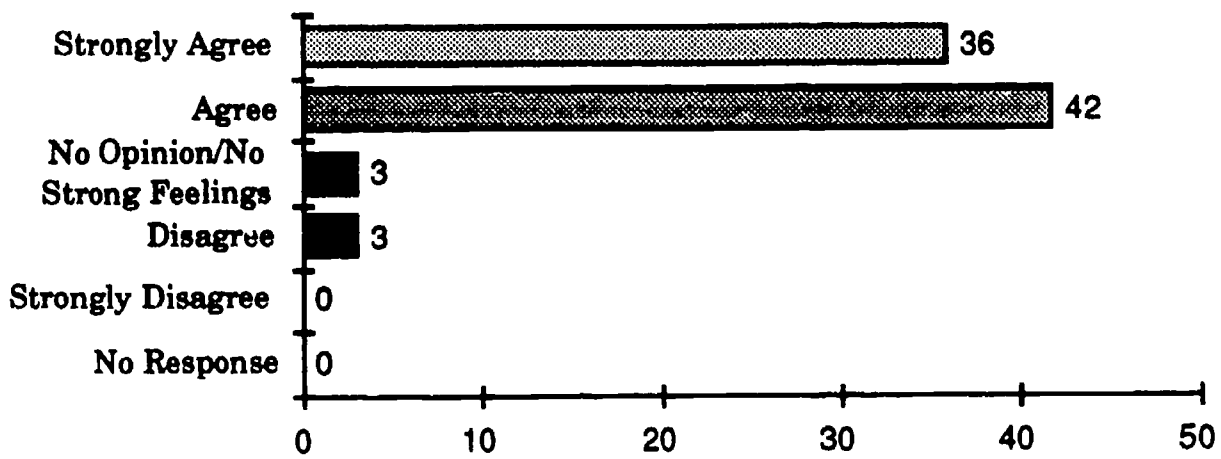
Sixty-nine percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, with most of these (62%) expressing simple agreement. This would indicate that planning is addressing social/interactive dimensions, rather than functioning strictly in a rational fashion, and that elements of the philosophical/ synthesis model of planning were also reflected in participants' concern with issues of values and beliefs. Participants are using planning as an opportunity to reassess district values as well as goals, objectives and procedures.

Question 12. The strategic plan will encourage changes in power relationships within the district.



This item also reflects the political impact from planning. Not only is the organization to be improved, but this is to be accomplished, at least in part, by changes in power relationships. Data from the narrative portion of the instrument indicates that strategic planning was linked as an element of the district's decentralization strategy, that the plan identified the core vision and direction of the district in order to allow individual school sites greater latitude in developing specific means to achieve site and district goals. If this is the case, strategic planning will have undergone a major adaptation from its use in any other organizational setting. In other settings, it is used to provide centralized direction under the guidance of a management team. With the possible exception of some institutions of higher education, there does not appear to be much precedent for using strategic planning to empower local work sites to make major decisions regarding methods and organizational structure in the absence of close scrutiny by central management. If this is true, then strategic planning is serving as the "glue" that can enable school districts to decentralize, yet remain a cohesive organizational whole.

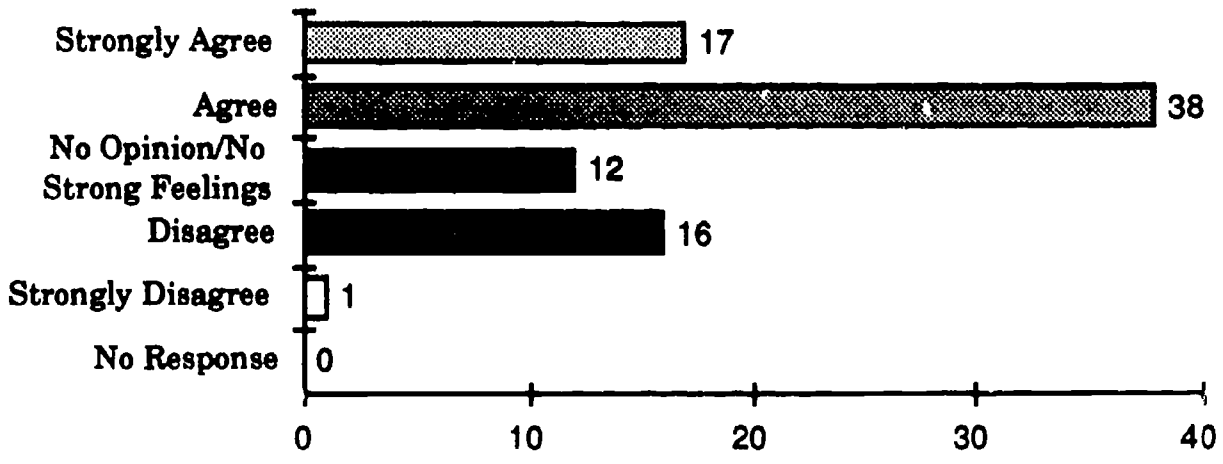
Question 13. The strategic plan will lead to significant changes in instructional practice.



One of the concerns raised about every method of educational improvement is whether it will have an impact on what happens in the classroom. Questions 13 and 16 address this. Responses to Question 13 indicate a very high degree of belief that the results of strategic planning will be reflected in altered instructional practices. This indicates that strategic planning is perceived not merely as a tool to deal with operational and management issues, such as funding, new facilities, etc., nor is it limited solely to general statements of values and beliefs. From the perception of these respondents, strategic planning will result in changes in classroom practices of teachers. Examination of the content of action plans will provide insight into the reasoning behind these opinions, and provide examples of how this linkage is accomplished.

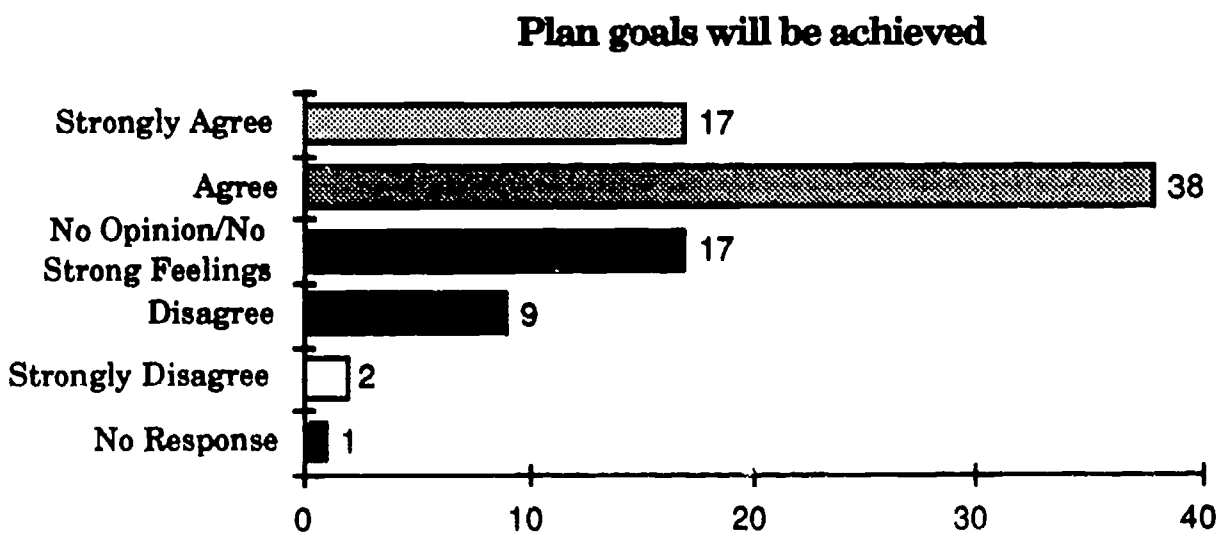
Once again it is interesting to observe the apparent top-down, bottom-up nature of strategic planning in these districts. Even though decision-making and power are decentralizing (or perhaps because they are), respondents believe that change at the classroom will result from the plan.

Question 14. The district perceives planning as a rational process which helps reduce a complex future into a set of manageable tasks.



Is strategic planning a rational or interactive process? Results to this point suggest more interactive than rational, as practiced by districts. At the same time, 63 percent believe that it is rational and will help the district respond to the uncertainties of the future, while 20 percent believe otherwise. The planning process itself emphasizes the rationality of planning and often uses rhetoric to suggest that the primary purpose of planning is to accomplish precisely the goal identified in the wording of the question. Apparently a sizable proportion of respondents also believe this to be true.

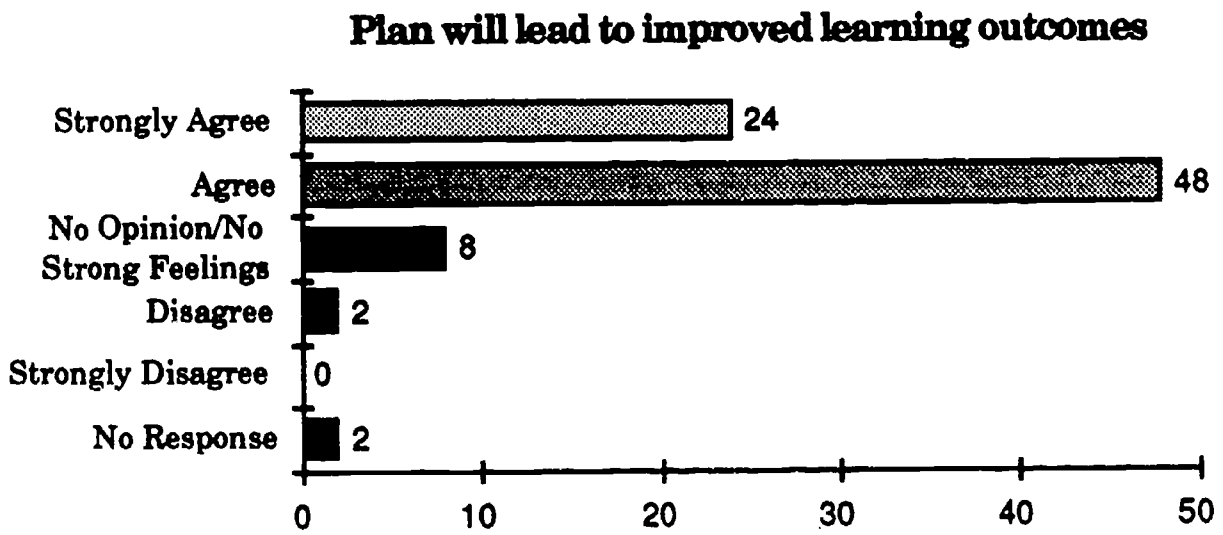
Question 15. The goals set forth in the plan will be achieved within the allotted period of time by employing strategies stated in the action plans.



High agreement (65%) exists that the action plans will be implemented in a timely manner that leads to achievement of program goals, although confidence is not as high here as it is when predicting the impact on instruction the plan will have. Perhaps this response could be characterized as "cautious

optimism." At the same time, many of the respondents were centrally involved in the development of the plan and have a personal stake in its success. It is worth noting that respondents do see planning as a means to an end, not merely an end in itself. Planning is not engaged in simply to enhance communication or provide a forum for various points of view. It is the action planning and achievement of goals that are also important.

Question 16. The plan will lead to improved student learning outcomes.



Perhaps the most important question of all to ask regarding strategic planning is: what will be its impact on student learning? Respondents once again agreed overwhelmingly that strategic planning will lead to improved student learning outcomes. This indicates, at least, that the focus of planning was on student learning in many plans, and goals and outcomes of the plans were stated in terms of student learning gains. Such an emphasis on outcomes specified broadly at the organizational level can permit increased autonomy at the work site level to allow administrators and teachers greater flexibility in determining how best to achieve the learning goals set forth in the plan. The review of the content of action plans will expand on this theme, along with the narrative responses that indicate whether schools were allowed to modify plans at the site level, and whether the plan led to greater centralization or decentralization.

The next section examines the responses to ten narrative questions. These questions were designed to obtain insight into several dimensions of the planning process along with the immediate results planning has had on labor relations, decision-making, site autonomy and decentralization. Respondents were asked to provide a brief response (several words, 1-2 sentences), and were guaranteed anonymity for their responses. Categories were developed and

responses were coded into these categories. The succinct nature of the responses tended to make categorization less ambiguous, though some responses were coded into multiple categories. Some questions lent themselves to yes-no answers with elaboration; others offered many more possibilities. Each question is presented with a table, where appropriate, detailing responses by category, a brief discussion of the implications of these responses, and, where appropriate, verbatim statements from respondents to illustrate points.

Narrative Response 1. What were some of the difficulties and unexpected problems your district faced in preparing for and conducting this process?

Categories:	Responses:
Power/leadership issues	20
Communication/involvement	19
Time	17
Process/procedures	14
Fiscal-related	9
Community perceptions/participation	7
Other	3

Many respondents indicated that leadership changes during the process affected their ability to plan successfully. In other cases, there was adamant opposition from one or more constituent group, often based on a lack of trust that planning was going to be conducted in an open and honest manner. Some feared that outcomes were already determined, and planning would simply serve to endorse these predetermined outcomes. Several quotes illustrate these concerns:

"The unilateral planning that went on between planning meetings."

"Resistance to change within district administration."

"New board was elected opposed to strategic planning. Initially board refused to confront issues."

"Change of leadership; Superintendent, board members changed after the plan was adopted."

"Teacher union's desire to control the process and product of planning."

"Conflict with board decision-making process and the planning process."

Strategic planning as conducted in the public sector is an inclusive process. This creates problems of involvement and communication among all constituent groups. Respondents indicated this was a difficulty for them in at least 18 cases. Types of concerns raised included problems involving all segments

of the community or of key individuals, the wide variety of opinions regarding what should be happening with the process, the large amount of information needed by the planning committees. and problems communicating with the general public.

To do strategic planning effectively is difficult procedurally. It is a complex process that demands both a great deal of time as well as extensive preparation and training. Its terminology is unfamiliar to many educators and community members. The distinctions among "mission," "guiding principles," "core beliefs," and "vision," for example, can be difficult for many people to make. In some cases, the costs of strategic planning were a burden, particularly for smaller districts. Respondents cited these issues in various forms:

"The time required to communicate the plan to all stakeholders. The need to train and supervise action plans, team leaders."

"Excessively long preparation time."

"Conflicting schedules made getting community leaders together regularly a problem."

"For a financially strapped district, this process was costly."

Narrative Response 2. Was the planning process adapted to meet the unique needs of your district? If so, how?

Yes, process adapted	55
No, process not adapted	23

The large number of districts that adapted the process to their needs is a testimony to the flexibility of strategic planning as a planning model, as well as to the different interpretations of it by different consultants. Respondent comments indicate that essentially every dimension of the planning process was adapted by at least one district. It is not possible to summarize the types of adaptations into categories, since many respondents simply answered "yes." Some representative comments include:

"Timelines were expanded. Training was intensified. Administrators were not team chairs."

" Increased membership on the planning team. Changed reporting procedures."

"Several steps in the process were consolidated."

"A combination of models/processes was used."

"Timelines were extended."

"Piloted with two schools...before using at district level."

"Incorporated components of strategic planning into the existing planning process."

"Teacher input was sought more than expected."

"We had more staff and community participation in generating ideas about what our schools might become."

Responses also indicate that there are a number of models of strategic planning being employed, combined, grafted onto one another, adapted by school districts and consultants to the community context and organizational culture of a particular district. At some point the question must be raised: What precisely is strategic planning compared to other planning models? At what point does it become something else? The plans submitted by these respondents provided a cross-check to ensure that the outcome of the process, at least, were reported in a manner consistent with the basic elements of the model.

Narrative Response 3. Was an external or internal facilitator employed? If an outside facilitator was used, would you make the decision to use one again? Why or why not?

External facilitator used	48
Internal facilitator used	35
Both internal and external (These are included in the external and internal totals above, as well)	11

The support for use of an external facilitator is high. Of those who used an external facilitator and responded to the question asking whether they would use one again, all but three indicated they would. Many expressed very positive opinions about the value of an external person:

"Non-participating leadership was crucial to our process."

"Pulled no punches."

"Better able to confront key blockers."

"Most helpful to focus on process without getting invested in products, goals."

"Facilitator's thorough knowledge of planning components as well as his ability to keep the team 'focused' helped to make optimum use of planning sessions."

"A fresh, unbiased view of situations and existing programs was helpful."

Those employing an internal facilitator generally cited the cost factor, the person's knowledge of the district and community, or the person's high skill level as the reason for employing internal personnel for the process.

A number of districts indicated they used a combination of external and internal facilitators for different elements of the process, or in different roles during the process. They gave several interesting reasons that highlight some unique advantages to this strategy:

"The ability of the external person to ask 'tough' questions of the team kept the internal facilitator from being seen in a negative role."

"Utilize an external facilitator to 'take the arrows' with him when he leaves."

"External for first session, internal thereafter. External could push on power structure."

Narrative Response 4. Why was strategic planning undertaken? Where did the impetus come from to begin with?

Categories:	Responses:
Superintendent	42
Focus district; provide direction	21
Board of Education	17
Change/adapt/improve district	15
Other (Improve student learning, state law)	10

Superintendents and boards of education seem to be the prime initiators of strategic planning. They are attending workshops on it, are reading about it in the professional literature, and are more likely to have encountered or experienced it in some other context. They provide the leadership for the initiation of the process. They are the ones whose decision-making prerogatives would tend to be threatened by a planning process, so it is logical that they would want to have influence over that process. In other words, it is less likely that strategic planning could be initiated at a district level in the absence of superintendent and board support. And while a number of districts did indicate that strategic planning was initiated to improve or adapt district practices, this was not the dominant reason stated by respondents. Districts began planning because the superintendent and board wanted to, generally in order to provide more direction and focus to the district. Some responses illustrate the range of reasons for undertaking strategic planning:

"Set a direction for the district."
"Impetus began because our district was experiencing a tremendous change in demographics and our old planning process had bogged down."
"Superintendent was seeking goals for education from community leaders. He strongly advocated the process."
"Reading done by district administration (was responsible for process being undertaken). Viewed as a way to create a new vision in the district, as a way to involve the community and as a way to plan carefully for the long term."
"Undertaken to help bring the district together in a cohesive fashion. (Had 10 strongly autonomous schools.) Impetus from superintendent who was an external facilitator for other districts."
"Mandated by state law; however we began one year before required."
"To help provide a guiding force for our district. A new superintendent was hired to facilitate the strategic planning process."
"Improve student learning."
"A board member suggested we needed to look at how we were preparing students for the 21st Century."
"Strategic planning evolved from the change and complexity we were experiencing as a district—we wanted to stop the reactive mode we were in."
"To reduce the operating budget by 6% to stop a precipitous decline and cuts in state aid."
"Desire to impact on student performance."
"Trying to get some rational basis for running the district established to avoid crisis reaction management."

Narrative Response 5. What effect, if any has the process had on labor relations within the district?

Categories:	Responses:
No effect	33
Positive effect	21
Slightly positive effect	11
Very little	7
Negative effect	5
Too soon to tell	3

Responses to the Likert item on labor relations were quite positive, with 64 percent agreeing that labor relations had improved as a result of strategic planning. Responses in the narrative section also indicate a positive effect, with 32 statements in the positive category. However, 40 responses indicate little or no effect. In reviewing the narrative responses it is clear that respondents were referring almost exclusively to formal union-management relations, generally as related to the bargaining process. They were indicating that this formal relationship had not changed significantly in many cases. The higher positive response on the Likert items may have been an assessment of the personal relationships and interactions that took place around the process of planning, since those questions all focused on the process more than the outcomes. It is a point that bears further investigation, however. Selected responses indicate the range of reactions and illustrate how strategic planning had an impact on labor relations:

> "No impact as yet; new contract being negotiated, strategic plan 1/2 done."
> "(Union) remains somewhat suspect especially in the area of participatory management. (Relations) remain political in nature."
> "Limited (improvement), but great hope."
> "It has been somewhat neutral to date. We have only had one round of negotiations since the implementation of the plan."
> "Labor relations on a day-to-day basis are greatly improved. Staff is beginning to trust administration. The organization is still hierarchical and there is still blocking, but the average employee feels more direction."
> "Very negative. Teachers perceived this process as excluding the teachers' association in the early phases."
> "For the first time parents, administrators, teachers, classified employees, and others were working collaboratively to write action plans, serve on the strategic planning team. Resulted in more collaborative negotiations."
> "Little, if any. Earlier in the process employees seemed very interested."
> "Positive effect—we are moving to a much more collaborative model. Labor 'union' sent representatives to the planning team."
> "Some still do not see the need, hence they oppose the direction we're moving."

Narrative Response 6. Did your district have a planning "champion," someone who took ownership for the process and worked actively to make it

succeed (other than an external paid facilitator)? If so, what is his or her position title? (There may be more than one person in this category).

Title:	Number:
Assistant/Associate/Deputy Superintendent	36
Superintendent	34
Director-level position (Director of...)	15
Board member	7
Principal	6
Other (Unspecified administrative positions)	5
Teacher	2

Bryson and Roering (1988) emphasized the link between someone on staff who is a champion for the planning process, and the increased likelihood that planning will be successful. In four case studies of successful planning in the public sector, they identified certain similarities, including the existence of a process sponsor, considered previously, and a process champion. The sponsors endorsed and legitimized the effort. Although they were not necessarily active participants they let it be known they wanted people in important roles in the organization to take the process seriously and attempt to make it work. Process champions were people who did not necessarily "have preconceived ideas about what specific issues and answers would emerge from the process, although they may have had some good hunches. They simply believed that the process would result in good answers and until those answers emerged"(Bryson & Roering, 1988)(p.20).

These responses indicate that superintendents and their immediate designees were perhaps acting both as sponsor and champion. This higher degree of involvement would be consistent with the smaller size of many districts, where it would not be possible for key decision-makers to remain aloof from the planning process. The high degree of involvement by deputy/associate/assistant-level administrators suggests a delegation of the task of moving strategic planning forward from the superintendent to a key member of the administrative leadership team. It should be kept in mind that this group of respondents indicated very positive reactions to strategic planning. This would tend to support the notion that for a complex planning activity such as this to be successful there needs to be someone in a key decision-making role who is sponsoring and championing the process.

Narrative Response 7. Can you give an example of a decision made on the basis of the strategic plan which might have been made differently in the absence of the plan?

Decision Category:	Response Frequency:
Budget-related	18
Curriculum	16
Structure of learning environment	14
Governance	11
School-community relations	8
Facilities	5
Other	5
Restructuring	5
Instruction	4
Technology	4
Program evaluation/outcomes/goals	4

Respondents were able to provide many specific examples of decision areas that were directly affected or influenced by strategic planning. Many were in the area of budgeting—decisions regarding tax elections or bond programs, as well as budget reduction plans linked to the strategic plan. There were also a significant number of examples that related to instruction in general terms (Curriculum, Instruction, Technology). In other words, strategic planning was linked to what occurs in classrooms by some significant proportion of the respondents. This is an important issue, since in many cases strategic plans seem to be dealing well with organizational relationships and priorities, and resource allocation without ever addressing student learning.

Some selected examples illustrate the range of areas where respondents indicated the strategic plan served as the basis for their decision:

"We will have a demonstration lab for emerging technology rather than a lab of networked computers for individual applications."

"Last year we cut $1 million from the budget. All decisions of where to cut the money were based on components of the plan."

"Construction of a new school."

" The plan calls for more recognition of employees and that has changed several decisions to cut back on expenses."

"All decisions were made with a broader representative group. Would have been different if just administrators."

"Hiring a full-time public relations person."

"Tax levy increase."

"District budget cuts were going to force a reduction in the staff development office. The plan kept the office full staffed."

"Focus on Outcome Education and the folding in of all planning activities into one process."

"Eliminated busing in a tight budget because it wasn't a priority like technology is."

"Infusion of Spanish in lower grade level curriculum."

If strategic planning does, in fact, provide a vehicle that allows districts to make difficult, politically loaded choices among competing interests, particularly in stable to declining resource environments, as indicated by some of the responses, it will have demonstrated itself to be a powerful tool for educators, who frequently are unable to reduce or reallocate resources in the face of interest groups.

Narrative Response 8. Can individual school sites modify or adapt the plan? If so, which elements can they adapt?

Elements:	Number:
Yes, various elements	29
Only in terms of how they implement the plan	27
No, no modification at site	19

This question investigates the degree to which districts allowed individual school sites to adapt the strategic plan. Strategic planning as practiced in other sectors generally allows little adaptation of the plan. The purpose of strategic planning in such contexts is to set organizational direction and goals and often to determine the specific actions necessary to achieve those goals. In public education strategic planning can be seen as a more iterative process, where the center may be defining values as much as direction, and the various work sites may be modifying and adapting this direction within the context of the values established. In this sense strategic planning has more to do with mission-setting than with the attainment of specific strategies and goals, except in the broadest sense. A number of respondents used the image of an umbrella—the district plan

served as an overarching framework within which individual schools created their own strategies and action plans. This ability of sites to modify plans also indicates the emergence of decentralized decision-making structures in more districts, a point that is emphasized in the next response.

Illustrative examples of the variety of ways in which sites can adapt include the following:

"Each campus is required to localize depending on their students' needs."

"Each building followed the basic planning process without the more global external analysis."

"Any school can adapt the plan in our site-based leadership culture."

"Each school has developed its own strategic plan under the umbrella of the district plan."

"All school plans must align with district plan."

"The plan is a framework. Schools must find ways to make it work if it is to happen at all."

"Vision, beliefs, mission, goals, strategies are held constant. Action plans are school shaped."

Narrative Response 9. Do you believe the plan will lead to greater centralization or decentralization of decision-making in your district? Why?

Plan Leads To:	Number:
Decentralization	59
Both	17
Centralization	4

Items 8 and 9 taken together indicate that school districts are combining strategic planning with decentralized decision-making, an outcome unanticipated by many of the designers and promoters of strategic planning, who have advocated its use primarily as a centralizing tool capable of transforming organizations. Such transformation becomes much more difficult when each work site can pick and choose the ways in which they transform, and in some cases the degree to which they do so. A number of the national consultants on strategic planning have adapted their models to reflect this reality, touting it as a tool to provide a centralized framework within which schools can exercise considerable discretion. While strategic planning certainly can serve this purpose, it should be pointed out that this is a significant adaptation of the process and a reshaping of some of its basic tenets as a planning model.

When asked why they believed their plan would lead to greater decentralization, respondents provided a wide range of reasons. Some statements indicating that range include the following:

"Many of the action plans place more authority at the school site."

"Our administrators know that they can make their own decisions as long as they are consistent with our beliefs, fall within our strategic parameters, help achieve our mission, and do not fly in the face of the plan."

"We will have greater operational continuity and global educational direction with the school buildings having greater control of the how of implementation. I see less middle ground—fewer director and assistant superintendent kinds of people."

"We have agreed on general goals. Now sites will do their thing keeping these goals in mind."

Respondents indicating that the plan would result in both centralization and decentralization generally interpreted this to mean that the district would identify broad parameters and goals and schools would determine the best means to achieve these outcome. One response sums this up reasonably well:

"I believe that both site planning and strategic planning will clarify roles and responsibilities of sites and the district so that all will know which decisions ought to be made at the district (level) and which ought to be made at the sites."

Even those indicating that their plan would result in greater centralization sometimes indicated they already were in highly decentralized environments:

"In our case, the schools have incredible autonomy without accountability (which has yielded chaos in some areas and much disunity)."

Narrative Response 10. Which elements of the planning process were most valuable, least valuable? Why?

Most Valuable:			
General Elements of the Process:		Specific Elements of the Plan	
Involvement	23	Vision/Mission	12
Communication	15	Internal/External Scanning	9
Teamwork	8	Goals	7

	Other	7
	Beliefs	4
	Strategies	5
All elements:		13
Least Valuable:		
Various		17

Respondents were much more likely to provide an illustration of an element of the planning process that was valuable than one that was not. Responses in the "Most Valuable" category can be grouped into those related to the process of planning generally and those that referred to specific elements of the plan itself. Many positive comments emphasized the value of the interactions and communication, the sense of teamwork that the process engendered, how important it was to have people feel they were involved in shaping the future of the organization, setting its priorities and focusing its direction. They noted the value of an organizational mission along with the importance of data gained from a scanning process as a tool to frame the development of the plan and to identify key areas in need of organizational attention. A number of responses in the "All" category were accompanied with comments indicating that the process was very effective for them in all regards, and that they believed it was important to utilize all dimensions for planning to be conducted effectively.

There were no logical groupings to the "Least Valuable" responses. Comments in this category tended to reflect situation-specific problems; local politics, personalities, or other barriers to the process the may not generalize well to other settings. A number of these comments reflected disappointment with some element of the planning process as it occurred in their district, rather than presenting a more general assessment of a dimension of strategic planning.

Some examples of the elements respondents felt to be most valuable portray their sense of the value of strategic planning:

> "Action plan implementation and annual updates because (they resulted in) a $16 million bond election and two successful millage votes. 3 for 3!"
>
> "Setting the mission and goals, involving people and discussing intended actions have all been important in helping us understand one another and to create the 'will' to move forward."

"Mission, beliefs, strategies—these help focus our energies. With the exception of an examination of our 'competition,' I would consider every element both valuable and necessary."

"This process has created a sense of unity, direction, acceptance of groups and individuals and a beginning message that public school education in our district is focused from the school district rather than each teacher and/or building doing exactly what each prefers. All parts of the process have been valuable, (but) we are having difficulty with job accountability, management of the plan, inability or disinterest by many administrators in (getting them to refer) to the plan as new or difficult issues occur to see if there is some direction already established."

"Action plan development really produced strong buy-in for staff and parents on committee."

"The open system—allowing the district and community to establish goals—sheer impetus to succeed."

"Boiling the belief statements down into a mission statement established a sense of 'purposefulness.'"

Conclusions and Implications

This investigation was structured to pose a number of open-ended questions regarding strategic planning in public education. It was not designed to test hypotheses or reach judgments or conclusions. In that spirit, the following observations regarding the perceptions of those involved in implementing strategic planning are offered:

1. Strategic planning in public education seems to be another manifestation of the movement toward a more open systems notion of public education governance and goal-setting. Respondents offered comments in several different places about the value of the process as a means to involve many groups not previously included in decision-making, and as a way to increase the flow of information into the goal-setting process. While respondents indicated concerns about this type of broad-scale involvement, they also indicated that they believed the benefits outweighed the risks in many cases.

The ability to enable more members of the community to see themselves as stakeholders in public education and to see education as important to the success not only of students but of the community will be increasingly important as governmental agencies compete for resources during an era when tax

revenues are unlikely to grow substantially. If communities can be mobilized to plan the future of their schools and take ownership for that future, it is much more likely that the goals they establish will be achieved.

2. Strategic planning seems to be effective as a tool to limit incrementalism, although this conclusion will be supported only by re-examination of events over time in these districts. The use of data and the development of organizational mission and direction seem for many respondents to be very helpful in determining the allocation of resources and in guiding other policy decisions. The degree to which middle managers use the plan as a guide remains to be seen; however, there was evidence that districts were asking individual sites to develop their own adaptations of the plans using district mission and vision as a framework, thereby linking centralized organizational purpose with interpretation at the the site level.

In all probability it will take time for educators to adapt to a decision-making model that is not primarily incremental. Interest groups are well established and can bring substantial pressure to bear on the system. There is little reward for improvement or goal achievement that comes in any way at the expense of an existing constituency. Personal relationships continue to be important factors in determining which issues are addressed, and how they are resolve. All of these factors notwithstanding, strategic planning potentially provides many districts the first real alternative to purely political decision-making.

3. While it is still too early to ascertain whether strategic planning is a fad in the mold that Slavin (1989) has described, there is evidence that it is moving beyond the lighthouse districts and is continuing to be greeted in a very positive manner. Even in states where it has been legislated, responses were highly positive. This is somewhat surprising given the risks to boards and superintendents involved in opening up such basic decisions as district values, mission and key directions to "outsiders" like community, teachers, and even principals. It has been noted earlier that the study sample is self-selected, and this might influence results, but there is no evidence to suggest that this is the case. The highly positive responses from such a wide range of districts using a variety of strategic planning models, processes and facilitators indicates a successful adaptation to public education by these diverse school districts. Whether it will become institutionalized as a planning process or abandoned in favor of a new technique remains to be seen.

Even if this occurs it is likely that districts will have gained a great deal by having participated in strategic planning. They will have employed data to examine the way their organization functions currently. They will have involved a wide range of people in decision-making successfully. They will have set clear goals and direction for the organization. They will have committed to monitoring progress toward achievement of these goals. They will have created numerous action teams that caused many more people to consider the best means to achieve the plan's goals. All of these activities will create precedents and expectations even if strategic planning is not conducted again. The idea that some sort of systematic planning that addresses both broad framing issues and more focused implementation strategies is a legitimate element of the district's management procedures will have been established. A return to strictly incremental management techniques will be viewed differently, perhaps more critically, now that the organization's institutional memory contains another reference point. Whether strategic planning is a fad or not, it appears the initial highly positive reaction expressed by many will affect their subsequent view of what comprises adequate planning for a school district. If this change in assumptions ends up permeating public education, strategic planning will have had a profound effect even if it is no longer practiced as designed.

4. Principals may be leery about their role in the process and the impact of strategic planning on their decision-making prerogatives, and may feel excluded from the process. There were enough indications in different responses to suggest that principal involvement and ownership may be less than complete. Districts that plan to conduct strategic planning will want to consider carefully how they inform and involve principals, and how they define principals' responsibilities for implementing the plan at the building level. This issue is probably not entirely resolvable, since strategic planning by its very nature has a certain centralizing function, provisions for adapting plans to buildings notwithstanding. Unless a district allowed individual sites in essence to reject the district's mission and goals, some dimensions of the plan will always have a potential impact on school sites. Many principals guard their autonomy closely. A new process such as strategic planning where they are not centrally involved may seem threatening to their authority. Superintendents, boards of education, and central office staff might also tend to feel threatened, except that many more of them are directly involved in the planning process, and often they are the initiators and champions of the process, and have training and expertise in the

process. This establishes a different perspective within the central office, where communication can be accomplished with greater ease (at least in theory). Principal involvement on the centralized planning teams is sometimes limited to one or two principals, and, in any event, those who are excluded often feel they are "left in the dark" regarding the process. Principals also tend to see themselves as the ones who will have to implement much of the plan once it is developed, and, therefore, may worry that it does nothing more than make more work for them.

5. Strategic planning may be the "glue" that is needed for decentralized decision-making to succeed. It may emerge as the mechanism that provides the linkage between the center and the work sites, by establishing a framework within which all employees are then free to make decisions. It establishes limits, provides focus, and sets priorities. Individual sites are then free to interpret and adapt these outlines to the specific situations and problems they face.

Question 12 and Narrative Response 9 both support this interpretation. Respondents indicated changes in power relationships in one and greater decentralization in the other. Although principals may still have reservations, as indicated previously, for central office administrators strategic planning was a tool to allow decentralized decision-making to function in some sort of rational framework.

6. The process of strategic planning has been adapted extensively by educators. It bears little resemblance to the model imported from the private sector, although its elements retain much of the same nomenclature. Educators have emphasized the participatory aspects and potentialities in strategic planning, along with its use as a public relations tool and as a medium to enhance internal communication. These elements suggest strategic planning as public forum as much as rational planning model, and once again illustrate its use as a tool to move to a more open systems model. Many of the "top-down" components seen in private sector strategic planning have been tempered or eliminated. The superintendent and board of education roles in particular seem to be evolving into equal partners in decision making, rather than controllers of the process. This is not to suggest that there was not considerable resistance by board and superintendents to anything that smacked of usurpation of their authority. But at the same time there are few indicators that strategic planning functioned anything like its private sector cousin, where a management team would meet in seclusion to plan the organization's future, then return to inform

everyone in the organization what their role would be in achieving the goals established for them. The descriptions of strategic planning in education are so different from its use in the private sector as to raise the issue of whether the educational model has diverges so far that it deserves some new name.

7. The evidence suggests that educators combine a number of planning paradigms when they conduct strategic planning. They appear to be able to hold in their minds both rational and political/interactive conceptions of planning, and to do things consistent with each framework. While these models are neatly separated by theorists, it appears practitioners find no such need to separate or distinguish between them. Educational planners indicated they saw planning as a rational process to determine the organization's future in Question 14, and made many comments elsewhere that reinforced the value of strategic planning as a way to get groups to communicate, to appreciate varying points of view, and to provide general direction or focus to the district. In other words, they reinforced the value of strategic planning for both rational and political goals.

This finding helps remind those who study planning in organizations that theoretical constructs may be useful tools to make complex behavior patterns more comprehensible, but may not necessarily describe how people actually behave. Educators do not seem to be concerned about the inherent contradictions between planning as a rational process and as a political one. They were able to move back and forth between the paradigms, applying each when it provided utility and moved the process forward. Data, for example, might be valuable to create an initial framework, and the final plan might have many goals and objectives with a rationalist appearance to them. In between, however, it seems likely that a very political/interactive process ensued where rationalist parameters and the conclusions gleaned from data were set aside as the demands of various constituencies commanded attention. The structured nature of the process itself, with its rationalistic connotations, may have helped corral and direct the strong centripetal forces that threaten to shatter attempts to reach common meaning among people with diverse points of view and value systems. Educators may have been able to sense the inherent ability of the rational elements to focus these forces within an environment that is so permeated with human relations issues, and lacks the product or "bottom line" orientation present in the private sector.

8. Strategic planning seems to be working well in those districts that responded to this study. In this sample of districts that were very diverse

geographically and demographically there was a surprisingly high degree of positive response to strategic planning. Given its complex nature and the possibilities for conflict when decision-making and goal-setting is opened up beyond a select group that has had power, it is remarkable that more districts did not indicate that they had more mixed reactions. Data do indicate that in many, perhaps most, of these districts the superintendent was a believer in the value of the process, and the central office provided active support. This may explain much of the success, but should not be too surprising. It does not diminish the value of strategic planning to say that it must be supported by key decision-makers in positions of formal authority for it to be successful. The nature of the process suggests this would be true in any case.

Recommendations for Further Study

Two recommendations for further study are offered:

1. Some research at specific sites should be conducted to determine the interaction between rational and political planning paradigms, and to investigate the "texture" of strategic planning—the perceptions of the process held by the different constituent groups.

2. A follow-up study needs to be conducted one year from now to determine perceptions of strategic planning at that time, and to determine the progress in achieving the goals of the plan.

Will strategic planning lead to fundamental change or restructuring of America's schools? This remains an important, but unanswered question that also bears further investigation. Its proponents see it as a powerful tool to help bring about organizational change and improvement. Its ultimate impact will have to be examined and determined in another forum.

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