



BEST PRACTICES IN DISTRICT LEADERSHIP STRATEGIC THINKING

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overview

A Hanover Research (Hanover) member district currently seeks to understand and refine best practices in district leadership strategic thinking, specifically amongst its Executive Cabinet. The cabinet is prioritizing moving from short-term problem solving to long-term success. The goal is to think strategically by focusing on decision-making that promotes lasting growth and innovation.

To support this effort, the member has partnered with Hanover to review secondary literature, with the specific goal of identifying strategies for district leadership strategic thinking. This research brief and discussion guide will review best practices and include prompts to guide conversations around this work. This research will be used by district leaders as they plan with the future in mind, and moreover, take those ideas and ensure they are translated into viable operating plans.

- **Section 1:** Defining District Leadership Strategic Thinking
- **Section 2:** Using Common Language for Strategic Thinking
- **Section 3:** Guiding Questions to Support Planning and Implementing Strategic Thinking

Audience

This toolkit is designed to support Executive Cabinet leaders as they identify strategies to support district leadership regarding strategic thinking.

How to Navigate This Document

The different sections of this research brief and discussion guide (and their respective sub-sections and tools as described above) can be accessed by clicking on the [Table of Contents](#) beginning on the next page. You may click on the section's, sub-section's, or tool's name or page number to be taken to the corresponding content.

A listing of endnotes cited throughout the document is also accessible through the Table of Contents. You may access individual endnotes by clicking the endnote number presented. You can return to the content corresponding to each endnote by clicking the endnote number presented before the endnote information.

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DEFINING DISTRICT LEADERSHIP STRATEGIC THINKING

Understanding Strategic Thinking versus Strategic Planning

As education develops on the national level, the term “strategic planning” is referred to on a much larger scale and more often than before. The reasons schools are investing in strategic planning include but are not limited to the following:

- Ensure expected results and goals align with the planned activities or actions;
- Identify the resources necessary for better results without overextending resources; and
- Make choices through a balanced decision-making process.¹

Critical analysis of the district and education system are necessary before planning so that decision-makers understand internal dynamics, external factors, and how these may affect the overall results of specific goals.² Further, as the education system changes and develops, educational leaders must then adapt to the changes and development, including identifying common goals to help school districts and schools meet these changes.³

Simply put, strategic planning is the ability to plan. More specifically, strategic thinking is the “capacity to prepare strategies and conjure ideas that will both cope with changing environments and consider the various challenges that lie ahead.”⁴ Strategic thinking is therefore the backbone of strategic planning, the “process by which an organization maps out its strategy for obtaining its objectives.”⁵

It is important to make the distinction between strategic thinking and strategic planning because thinking strategically allows leaders to critically review and adjust goals on an ongoing basis (short-term goals) within a traditional five-year plan (long-term goals).⁶ This type of thought process supports the Executive Cabinet’s goals of focusing on decision-making that promotes lasting growth and innovation, especially while navigating both “external and internal exigencies that weren’t anticipated.”⁷ The following chart highlights the differences between strategic thinking and strategic planning.

STRATEGIC THINKING VS. STRATEGIC PLANNING

← Strategic Thinking	Strategic Planning →
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leverages variety and divergent thinking in the name of creating value • Capitalizes upon instability and uncertainty • Continuous cycle of learning • Prefers strategies characterized by simplicity, clarity, and focus • Executes “road map” (vision of destination and proposed routes) by developing five or so 12-month priorities • Notes 24-month and 36-month goals, but places them in a planning parking lot for successive R&D consideration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Combines two fundamentally different ways of thinking into a single process • Needs stability/predictability • Driven by calendars and events • Produces plans rather than actual strategies • Executes plan by publishing document and implementation schedule wedded to a three- to five-year cycle • Fixed and inflexible goals sometimes fail to reflect changing conditions and priorities

Source: National Association of Independent Schools⁸

Strategic thinking allows leaders to think practically, especially when thinking more broadly about the overall success and strategy.⁹ As the roles of school leaders are becoming more complex, the Executive Cabinet must therefore think strategically to successfully lead and effectively manage a district in ways that are dynamic, interactive, and iterative.¹⁰

DEFINING DISTRICT LEADERSHIP STRATEGIC THINKING



The video, "[What is Strategic Thinking?](#)", provides a quick visual when defining how strategic thinking includes "developing plans and methods of management that helps us engage with problems, establish goals and achieve results."¹¹ This video will be addressed in the discussion guide following this section.

Identifying the importance of Strategic Thinking

It is important for the Executive Cabinet to see the value in thinking strategically before planning because it will help ensure it does not get sidelined by strategies, actions, and rubrics, which can often begin to become the focus of the work.¹² Strategic thinking can also help the Executive Cabinet best proceed in this shifting educational landscape as strategic planning involves remaining in a strategic mindset at all times.¹³ Specifically, regarding the changing educational environment, school leadership can still achieve their goals "by adapting to the changes in their environment...[and] by strategic management that will enable them to survive in the long term."¹⁴ Further, strategic thinking keeps leaders engaged in rational thought processes that can help lead the district to the main focus of improving outcomes.¹⁵

By focusing on strategic thinking, the Executive Cabinet will not just focus on efficiency and standard practices but will embrace creativity, responsiveness, and learning during the leading process.¹⁶ It also shows the importance of insightful ways for all Executive Cabinet members and other stakeholders to contribute to the district's priorities as strategic thinking becomes part of everyone's job no matter their role or responsibility.¹⁷ Leaders who utilize strategic leadership characteristics (noted later in this section) are more likely to strengthen others' organizational commitment.¹⁸

Part of planning for change is understanding that leaders are therefore not planning for perfection. Strategic thinking, therefore, involves responsiveness, adaptability, and sophistication, which is noted in the Characteristics of Strategic Leaders chart on [page 7](#).¹⁹ The following table highlights specific avenues where strategic thinking is vital for successful leadership.

WAYS STRATEGIC THINKING BUILDS SUCCESSFUL LEADERSHIP

Recognition of themes, trends, and data applications regarding big ideas or goals

The ability to envision the organizational consequences of the strategic choices they are considering.

Strengthen pattern recognition which accelerates the development of strategic thinking

Identify best ways to effectively use resources

Help identify potential challenges and avoid missteps

Improve overall decision making processes

Source: Multiple²⁰



 **Discussion Guide: Strategic Thinking vs. Strategic Planning**

Directions: Review the chart on [page 4](#) comparing strategic thinking and strategic planning along with the video, "[What is Strategic Thinking?](#)" Discuss the following questions as an Executive Cabinet to best understand strategic thinking and its importance when leading the district.

Each question is followed by space to write in answers.
When viewing the "Strategic Thinking vs. Strategic Planning" chart, what other items would you consider listing under strategic thinking?
When viewing the "Strategic Thinking vs. Strategic Planning" chart, what other items would you consider listing under strategic planning?
Are there any lingering questions regarding the difference between strategic thinking and strategic planning or why it is important to distinguish strategic thinking?
After viewing the video, "What is Strategic Thinking?", what additional points do you feel are important to note regarding how the Executive Cabinet should apply strategic thinking to its leadership?

Source: Hanover Research

Identifying Characteristics of Strategic Leaders

One valuable characteristic of a strategic leader is viewing strategic planning as a process to improve student achievement, thus embracing strategies and mindsets to develop focused, brief plans that provide consistent monitoring and evaluation.²¹ Strategic leaders must therefore think in ways that include calculated anticipation of potential challenges or vulnerabilities, thus involving forward-thinking.²² Another way to view strategic leaders is to see strategic leaders as enabling “short-term objectives to be met while concurrently building capability and capacity for the long-term.”²³

While strategic leaders realize the importance of shifting directions based on the present climate versus the potential future needs, they continually focus on the future. Leaders, in this sense, make strategic choices, involve others in strategy, set goals, and link strategy and action, which are noted in more detail in the table below.²⁴

STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP ACTIONS

Leaders make strategic choices:

- Reflect on the information, insights, and inspiration they have gained
- Think about possible future scenarios
- Assess all the options and their risks
- Determine what is the right thing at the right time

Leaders involve others in strategy:

- Conceptualize what a new way of operating would look like
- Create rich pictures of the future that energize people
- Use frameworks, maps, or models to build understanding and commitment
- Lead the school community in processes to define how to get there
- Help others to become more strategic

Leaders set goals:

- Has knowledge of goal-setting theory
- Identify what goals to set
- Makes decisions about the relative importance of various learning outcomes
- Envisions and expects achievement of more challenging goals
- Demonstrates how goals are credible, timely, and attainable
- Identifies and listens to barriers and strategizes solutions

Leaders link strategy and action:

- Spend as much time on the how as the what
- Link the desired outcomes to the moves required to realize them
- Identify the best thing they can do now, given the capabilities and constraints, to advance the strategy
- Focus on strategic ends but adapt when circumstances change
- Address barriers

Source: Ministry of Education²⁵

Strategic thinking skills are a highly sought-after leadership trait because of the tremendous impact they can have on a district's success.²⁶ While the above table noted specific strategic leadership actions, the following image highlights six characteristics of strategic leaders.



DEFINING DISTRICT LEADERSHIP STRATEGIC THINKING







CHARACTERISTICS OF STRATEGIC LEADERS



Source: Multiple²⁷

The chart below provides further depth to the characteristics of strategic leaders. These characteristics will be viewed during the discussion guide on the following pages.

IMPACT OF STRATEGIC LEADER CHARACTERISTICS

Characteristics	Importance of Each Characteristic
 Research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensures decisions are well-informed by thorough research • Stays abreast of current literature and findings
 Analytical Thinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assists in analyzing a range of factors when creating and evaluating strategic plans and their successes • Evaluates feasibility and effectiveness of potential strategies
 Innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embraces the future and new possibilities • Stays open-minded • Accepts that risks can be scary and works through concerns • Pitches innovative ideas and solutions
 Problem-Solving Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifies and defines problems from a strategic point of view • Addresses challenges that arise during strategic planning • Understands the challenges before implementing strategies to address challenges
 Communication/Leadership Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensures all complex ideas are shared with internal and external stakeholders • Builds consensus, when necessary • Aligns all members on each topic • Works towards shared goals
 Planning and Management Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implements stages of discussion and planning to bring together the larger picture of the scope of work • Works effectively and efficiently to plan and meet goals • Understands that achieving major outcomes requires significant time to plan and work

Source: Multiple²⁸



 **Discussion Guide: Identifying Characteristics of Strategic Leaders**

Directions: Review the Characteristics of Strategic Leaders on [page 6](#). Discuss the following questions as an Executive Cabinet to consider which characteristics are most valuable as an individual member of the Executive Cabinet and as a team.

Which strategic leader characteristic do you feel is most valuable to you as a leader? Why do you choose this characteristic?

Overall, what characteristics do you feel will significantly enhance the quality of leadership of the Executive Cabinet? Explain the impact of enhancing this strategic leader characteristic.

Are there other characteristics you feel should be identified when discussing strategic leaders? Why is this characteristic important to include?

Source: Hanover Research

USING COMMON LANGUAGE FOR STRATEGIC THINKING

Strategic Thinking Glossary of Terms

Effective communication includes developing a shared vocabulary because there must be an agreement on the accepted definitions of terminology.²⁹ Share vocabulary is also a characteristic of high-performing organizations and teams.³⁰ The following terms can be used by the Executive Cabinet when discussing strategic thinking.

STRATEGIC THINKING GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Term	Definition
Accountability	The demonstration or proof to external constituencies that the programs, services, and management are responsible and effective
Action Plan	Lists the specific actions that must be taken, by whom, and by when in order to achieve an overall goal or implement a strategy
Analytical Skills	The act of analyzing a variety of factors and inputs to create a strategy that aligns with the current reality facing the organization
Benchmarking	The comparison of similar processes across organizations and industries to measure progress, identify best practices, and set improvement targets
Cause and Effect	The way perspectives, objectives, and/or measures interact in a series of cause-and-effect relationships demonstrate the impact of achieving an outcome
Communication Skills	The ability to communicate complex ideas, collaborate with internal and external stakeholders, build consensus, and ensure everyone is aligned and working toward shared goals are all central to strategic thinking
Core Values	Representing an organization’s deeply held and enduring beliefs, often embedded in the vision
Expected Outcome	A specific and desired benefit that occurs following the application of intentional action, generally phrased in terms of the changes in knowledge, skills, attitudes, behavior, condition, or status that are expected to occur in the participants as a result of implementing the action
Goal	An observable and measurable result having one or more objectives to be achieved within a fixed timeframe
Initiatives	Directly support an organization’s strategic objectives, often organizing people and resources and dictating which activities are required to accomplish a specific objective by a date
Issues (strategic)	Important challenges that must be faced, often in the forms of limitations of the organization and pending threats to the organization
Outcome	Describe the benefits that result as a consequence of an organization’s investments and activities
Perspective	Each perspective represents various stakeholders, internal and external, critical to achieving an organization’s vision and mission
Planning and Management Skills	Involves bringing together all aspects of problem-solving including data analysis, problem identification, and solution
Problem-Solving Skills	Requires leaders to first understand the problem and potential solutions
Strategic Goals	Fundamental issues the cabinet must address, giving direction for accomplishing the mission, contain specific and meaningful planning challenges, and result from previous analysis

USING COMMON LANGUAGE FOR STRATEGIC THINKING

Term	Definition
Strategic Thinking	An intentional and rational thought process that focuses on the analysis of critical factors and variables that will influence the long-term success of a business, a team, or an individual.
Strategy	The way an organization seeks to achieve its vision and mission; a forward-looking statement about an organization's planned use of resources and deployment capabilities
Strategy Plan	A visual representation of an organization's strategy and the business objectives that must be met to effectively reach its mission; often used to communicate, motivate, and align the organization to ensure successful execution
Task	Details activities or tasks to be carried out to achieve each initiative capturing information like resources, time, constraints, risk, budgets, milestones, and duration to complete the tasks

Source: Multiple³¹



 Discussion Guide: Strategic Thinking Glossary of Terms

Directions: Review the Strategic Thinking Glossary of Terms on [pages 8-9](#). Discuss the following questions as an Executive Cabinet to add or modify the glossary of terms in ways that are most beneficial to serve the cabinet.

What do you consider the most important benefits of creating a shared vocabulary regarding strategic thinking?

Are there terms you want to modify? If so, which terms? How would you modify the definition?

Term	Modified Definition

Are there terms missing from this glossary that you feel are important to include when developing a shared vocabulary regarding strategic thinking? If so, which terms? How would you define them?

Term	Definition

Source: Hanover Research

IMPLEMENTING STRATEGIC THINKING







Strengthening Strategic Thinking

The Executive Cabinet can move from innovative thinking to strategic thinking by encouraging colleagues and other leaders to think both strategically and practically. For example, the Executive Cabinet can utilize frameworks and tools to facilitate strategic thinking, use forums and other group dialogues to gather potential strategic possibilities and organizational implications, emphasize strategic discussions “by exercising conscious awareness of the implications of strategic choices,” and involve all levels of district leaders when implementing specific strategies.³²

It is important the Executive Cabinet makes time during and outside of meetings to think strategically and to invite various perspectives into the conversations which may involve some levels of dissent. Allowing all members of the Executive Cabinet an opportunity to share ideas will ensure that the cabinet is opening itself up to convergent thinking where members are using deeper levels of analysis, logic, and reasoning when problem-solving.³³ The following are ways the Executive Cabinet can strengthen its strategic thinking skills.

WAYS TO STRENGTHEN STRATEGIC THINKING SKILLS

 Ask Strategic Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ask questions that relate to overall challenges, opportunities, and goals while assessing the options and their potential risks• Apply questions to leadership roles and responsibilities so others can act
 Observe and Reflect	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Observe and reflect upon the current situations, ensuring any potential strategies are grounded in fact• Gather as much information as possible to use when crafting potential strategies
 Consider Opposing Ideas	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Question any assumptions and consider potential opposition to strengthen the logic skills necessary to communicate and execute strategies• Question one's own perspective to consider potentially overlooked possibilities
 Involve Others in Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Create future plans and opportunities that energize others• Engage in formal and informal strategic conversations with others to generate discussions and encourage strategic perspective

Source: Harvard Business School Online and Ministry of Education³⁴

By strengthening strategic leadership, the Executive Cabinet will therefore affect the overall success and progress of the school district. Again, strengthening strategic thinking skills puts future thinking at the forefront and ensures leaders are keeping up with the ongoing changes which are inevitable in our society and schools.³⁵

The discussion guide on the following pages will allow the Executive Cabinet to individually reflect on their current strategic thinking mindset as well as discuss potential ways to strengthen their strategic thinking skills.

IMPLEMENTING STRATEGIC THINKING

Discussion Guide: Reflecting on Strategic Thinking Mindset

Directions: Before the Executive Cabinet considers actions necessary to strengthen their strategic thinking, individual members should first reflect on their strategic thinking mindset. Each member should answer the following questions and then discuss them as a group.

REFLECTING ON YOUR STRATEGIC THINKING MINDSET

Use the space below each question to write down your answers regarding embracing a strategic thinking mindset.

Where do you stand right now?

Where do you want to be next year and the year after that?

What skills do you need to get there?

How can you practice those skills?

How can you increase your chances of success?

How can you use your time effectively and maximize it for impact?

Who can help you validate your ideas and give you feedback to expand your thinking?

Source: TechTello³⁶



IMPLEMENTING STRATEGIC THINKING

Discussion Guide: Strengthening Strategic Thinking

Directions: Review the Ways to Strengthen Strategic Thinking Skills on [page 13](#). Discuss the following questions as an Executive Cabinet to consider ways to build strategic thinking skills and how this will build upon the Cabinet’s future endeavors.

Of the four strategies listed in the chart, which strategies are the Executive Cabinet successfully utilizing regarding strategic thinking? How is the Cabinet doing this?

Of the four strategies listed in the chart, which strategies should the Executive Cabinet begin to utilize more regarding strategic thinking? How will this support the Cabinet?

How can embracing a strategic thinking mindset and incorporating strategic thinking practices enhance the Executive Cabinet’s leadership?

What next steps do you envision the Executive Cabinet taking regarding strategic thinking and its role as leaders in the district?

Notes

Source: Hanover Research



ENDNOTES

¹ Adapted from: Chang, G.-C. "Strategic Planning in Education: Some Concepts and Methods." *International Institute for Educational Planning*, April 2013. p. 1.

² Ibid.

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⁶ Driscoll, M. "Strategic Planning or Strategic Thinking?" Think Strategic for Schools, October 17, 2014. <https://thinkstrategicforschools.com/strategic-planning-or-strategic-thinking/>

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⁸ Table slightly modified from: Ibid.

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¹⁰ Da'as, R. and N. 'Ali. "In the Face of Sociopolitical and Cultural Challenges: Educational Leaders' Strategic Thinking Skills." *London Review of Education*, 19:1, March 2021.

¹¹ Sustainability Science Education. *What Is Strategic Thinking?* Arizona Board of Regents, Arizona State University: Biodesign Pathfinder Center, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0JQ09Ug8-sc>

¹² Kim, A. and A. Gonzales-Black. "Planning: Plan for Change, Not Perfection." In *The New School Rules: 6 Vital Practices for Thriving and Responsive Schools*, Corwin, 2018. p. 11. <https://www.edelements.com/hubfs/New%20School%20Rules/New%20School%20Rules%20Chapter%201.pdf>

¹³ Bassett, Op. cit.

¹⁴ Ucar and Dalgic, Op. cit., p. 2.

¹⁵ Adapted from: Reeves, D.B. "Leading to Change / Making Strategic Planning Work." ASCD, December 1, 2007. <https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/making-strategic-planning-work>

¹⁶ Kim and Gonzales-Black, Op. cit., p. 16.

¹⁷ Adapted from: Molloy, J. "Strategic Thinking for Leaders." Harvard Business Publishing, November 7, 2017. <https://www.harvardbusiness.org/strategic-thinking-because-good-ideas-can-come-from-anywhere/>

¹⁸ Slightly modified from: Ucar and Dalgic, Op. cit.

¹⁹ Kim and Gonzales-Black, Op. cit., p. 16.

²⁰ Adapted from: Deshler, R. "Connecting Strategic Thinking to Results: Why Leaders Must See the Practical Side of Ideas." American Management Association, AMA, 2018. <https://www.amanet.org//articles/connecting-strategic-thinking-results/> [2] Adapted from: Bowman, N.A. "How to Demonstrate Your Strategic Thinking Skills." *Harvard Business Review*, September 23, 2019. <https://hbr.org/2019/09/how-to-demonstrate-your-strategic-thinking-skills> [2] Adapted from: Molloy, Op. cit. [2] Adapted from: Hill. "Why Is Strategic Thinking Important to the Success of Business?" Chron, The Houston Chronicle. <https://smallbusiness.chron.com/strategic-thinking-important-success-business-4661.html>

²¹ Reeves, Op. cit.

²² "Glossary: Strategic Thinking." Center for Management & Organization Effectiveness (CMOE), 2022. <https://cmoe.com/glossary/strategic-thinking/>

²³ "Strategically Thinking and Planning." Ministry of Education, Te Tahuu O Te Matauranga, May 11, 2022. <https://www.educationalleaders.govt.nz/Leadership-development/Professional-information/Leadership-capability-framework/Strategically-thinking-and-planning>

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²⁵ Slightly modified from: Ibid.

²⁶ Stobierski, T. "4 Ways to Develop Your Strategic Thinking Skills." Business Insights Blog, Harvard Business School, September 10, 2020. <https://online.hbs.edu/blog/post/how-to-develop-strategic-thinking-skills>

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³¹ “Glossary of Strategic Terms.” Intrafocus. <https://www.intrafocus.com/glossary-strategic-terms/> [2] “Glossary: Strategic Thinking,” Op. cit. [2] “Glossary of Strategic Planning Terms.” Authenticity Consulting, LLC, 2008. <https://www.consultantsdevelopmentinstitute.org/resources/Glossary-of-Strategic-Planning-Terms.pdf> [2] “Glossary of Strategic Planning.” University of North Carolina Wilmington. <https://uncw.edu/irp/ip/university/documents/planningglossary.pdf> [2] Stobierski, Op. cit.

³² Deshler, Op. cit.

³³ Molloy, Op. cit.

³⁴ Slightly modified from: Stobierski, Op. cit. [2] Slightly modified from: “Strategically Thinking and Planning,” Op. cit.

³⁵ Chang, Op. cit., p. 2.

³⁶ Taken verbatim from: Bansal. “Embrace the Strategic Thinking Mindset: How to Develop Your Strategic Thinking Skills and Stay Ahead.” TechTello, September 16, 2021. <https://www.techtello.com/how-to-develop-strategic-thinking-skills/>

