

# Strategic Leadership in PK – 12 Settings: A Multifaceted Approach to Improving Outcomes

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the past several decades, public education has experienced a gradual shift in focus from a single focus of student achievement to multidimensional foci that encompasses both accountability and school improvement (Davies & Davies, 2006; Mehta, 2014). This new focus extends into the overall operations of a school district, as well as related community and political interests. As a result of this shift, the need for a more planned and strategic approach to leadership has become more vital. For years, studies have noted that the lack of strategic thinking impedes organizational performance (Goldman, 2012). Given this, it is noteworthy that leaders in education have now begun to embrace strategy in leadership as a necessary link to success (Davies & Davies, 2006). The adoption of this mindset has become paramount, given the increased complexity of these organizations, and the performance driven and high stakes environments in which educators now lead (Caldwell, 2010).

According to Marturano and Gosling (2007), organizations need leaders with the ability to effectively collaborate and implement strategies that can respond to complex problems in environments where contexts and needs are continually evolving. Given the complex and ever changing nature of public school systems, this type of deliberate and strategic leadership is necessary in order to position these organizations for maximum goal attainment (Quong & Walker, 2010). In many PK – 12 settings, leadership entails a multifaceted approach, which requires leading through politics, change, and conflict, as well as recognizing and leveraging the power of influence, building synergy, and the provision of focus. This chapter will explore the relevance and necessity of strategic leadership in K – 12 settings, as well as discuss the aforementioned correlates as they connect to strategic leadership in education.

## BACKGROUND

### Strategic Leadership

According to Davies (2011), strategic leadership entails linking ideas and concepts from a broader view in order to view the future and evaluate outcomes. Similarly, Quong and Walker (2010) suggest that being an effective strategic leader requires that school leaders be futures oriented. They further suggest that school leaders that aspire to be effective must also be collaborative, objective, action oriented, and base leadership actions and decisions on evidence and research. This is in contrast to the more linear approach of how leadership was previously viewed (management process of analyzing, planning, implementing, monitoring, and evaluative). However, Cheng (2010) contends that strategic leadership in education can be classified into three categories: internal strategic leadership, interface strategic leadership, and future strategic leadership. Despite the varied perceptions or ideologies of strategic leadership, educational

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leaders are expected to become more tactical in their leadership, by leading more proactively, efficiently, and with a sense of urgency. This means moving beyond standard operational leadership, which focuses on a single approach or job, and becoming more strategic. Strategic leadership allows leaders to see the organization as interconnected and is often the catalyst of change (Center for Creative Leadership, 2004).

## **STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP IN EDUCATION**

As educational organizations become more complex and the emphasis continues to focus on student attainment and achievement, the debate of what makes an effective educational leader continues to expand (Liethwood & Riehl, 2003; Male & Palaiologou, 2015). Strategic leadership in education is relevant for a myriad of reasons. Eacott (2008) states “strategic leadership is a critical issue relevant to school leaders that has largely been overlooked...in current educational leadership literature” (p. 353). However, in contrast, it is noteworthy that there are some opponents to using terms and concepts from corporate America in educational leadership (Thomas, 2006). Despite this, as school systems progressively continue to extend their focus beyond teaching and learning, strategy allows for better alignment of all operations for a common goal (Eacott, 2008).

School systems now have operations that rival even some of the more mid-sized and large corporations. These organizations consist of many departments, interrelated systems, thousands of employees, as well as international influence. Given this, it is important that educational leaders begin to think in terms of a broader perspective, that extends beyond a single dimensional process approach and employs a more strategic method to leadership. This requires a mind shift. Specifically, a more strategic thought processes, which pushes leaders to become more cognizant of the organization as a “whole” versus just a single aspect or unit. The literature surrounding this concept frames strategic thinking in terms of three elements: an essential component of strategy development, perceptual, and as a perspective (Goldman, 2012). Furthermore, Davies & Davies (2006) found in a study of strategic leadership in schools, that strategic leaders involved themselves in five key activities:

1. Direction setting,
2. Executing strategy to action,
3. Developing capacity staff,
4. Determining effective interventions,
5. Developing strategic capabilities.

In approaching strategic leadership in educational organizations, the following questions should be considered:

- Where are we headed?
- How do we get there?
- What are those internal and external factors that may influence our expected outcomes?
- What is my role in the process?
- Who are the relevant stakeholders?
- How does this impact the overall system?
- Is this sustainable?

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