

## What's Your School's DNA? Using Data to Drive Innovation

by Willard R. Daggett, Ed.D. and Susan A. Gendron

**P**owerful, innovative learning environments don't just spring into being—they are the product of strong leadership, intentional, focused planning, and purposeful, aligned systems. How can you as a school leader plan for a different kind of change process that addresses the greatest areas of need, uses resources wisely, and motivates all stakeholders to work toward a shared vision?

### The Need for Smart Innovation

All schools face the challenge of preparing students for college and careers in a world of rapid cultural, technological, and economic transformation. Supporting the development of literate, culturally aware critical thinkers who can solve pressing problems is no easy task, and demands that we make significant shifts from the 20th century “factory model” of schooling (Mehta, 2013) to new models that focus on deep learning, rigor, and relevance (Fullan & Langworthy, 2014, Daggett, 2014).

Innovation isn't a luxury for today's schools—it's a necessity. To best serve all students, the schools of today need to operate in disruptive ways (Christensen, Johnson & Horn, 2008), continually reinventing and reimagining teaching and learning. Identifying and managing the right innovation for your students, schools and community is not only based on your school's DNA, but also backed by research and data. Schools that take a hard and purposeful look at every aspect of the organization and use a data analysis process to plan and take action will address this challenge successfully.

### Six Signs Your Strategic Plan Is Falling Short

While most schools have some form of strategic plan process in place, simply creating and documenting a plan doesn't always lead to significant improvement. Many schools make one or more of the following mistakes when shaping their plans:

#### 1. Forgetting to Look Inside

Every school's strategic plan will look different, because every school has its own DNA. However, many schools jump immediately to the “planning” part of strategic planning, neglecting the importance of data collection, analysis, and reflection.

#### 2. Limiting the Conversation

In many cases, a small group of people creates the strategic plan at a school, and

the plan reflects the priorities, needs, and perspectives of that group. This can lead to omissions of critical ideas and perspectives, and can also limit the sense of ownership and buy-in across a school.

#### 3. Falling Prey to Blind Spots

Identifying strengths, needs, challenges, and opportunities in a system while operating *within* that system can be challenging. It's easy to overlook big issues when they're right under your nose, or to assume that “this is just how things are.” It's also easy to get caught up in everyday, urgent details, and lose sight of the bigger picture.

#### 4. Staying in the Comfort Zone

Real transformative change is hard. It's a natural tendency to stick with the familiar, or to focus on superficial challenges that have obvious solutions. However, this approach often doesn't address the biggest needs faced by schools. Schools can't keep doing the same thing and expect different results or to match the changing demands of an increasingly technology-driven society and economy.

#### 5. Taking the “More is More” Approach

In an effort to satisfy all stakeholders and address all problems, schools can sometimes develop strategic plans that read like encyclopedias—listing a huge quantity of goals and objectives that are not strongly connected to one another. As “comprehensive” as this approach may be, it can easily overwhelm and does not set schools up for success.

#### 6. Planning and Moving On

A strategic plan is not a “set it and forget it” resource—it's a living, evolving guide that should be revisited on a regular basis. However, staying focused on a long-term plan can be challenging when faced with the urgent daily challenges of school life, and many schools find that their strategic plans become one more document taking up space at the bottom of a desk drawer.

## Three Steps to Employ When Planning for Impact

So how can you, as a school leader, avoid these pitfalls and create pathways for meaningful and focused school-wide change? The following action steps can help:

### 1. Use Data to Drive Decisions

Taking the time to gather and analyze data about what's *really* happening in your school can be surprising—and rewarding. A truly comprehensive data analysis process invites voices and ideas from all stakeholders, and incorporates classroom observations, interviews, and surveys alongside robust quantitative data. Enlisting help from external partners can make this process manageable, and can also help to reveal critical blind spots and bring new perspectives and research-based practices to the conversation. This process provides a clear picture of what's happening in your school, and allows you to focus on the highest-priority areas.

### 2. Focus Your Plan on a Shared Vision

Rather than developing a plan that addresses every single challenge, opportunity for improvement, and potential innovation, start with your overall vision for rigorous, relevant student learning. Then identify the most significant, direct, and impactful ways that you can move your school closer to this vision. Mike Schmoker (2011) writes about the power of “simplicity, clarity, and priority” in the classroom and in our school systems, and emphasizes that focusing deeply on a few key areas can be much more effective than spreading resources and attention widely.

### 3. Cultivate and Practice Strong Leadership

The success or failure of any plan rests with the leader. Effective change leaders understand that transformative change is about hearts and minds, not just materials and processes, and are willing to risk vulnerability for the greater good. (Heifetz, Linsky & Grashow, 2002) Strong leaders empower and motivate their teams, sharing ownership, responsibility, and recognition across the school. (Pink, 2009) Finally, leaders of transformative change are able to stay focused on the big picture and long-term vision and help others to do the same. (Schmoker, 2011)

## Transforming Schools to Meet Student Needs

Introspection, focus, and leadership are all critical components of school success and transformational change. Leading edge schools think about teaching and learning in innovative ways, and this innovation starts with a clear, data-informed understanding of current school cultures, systems and practices. A careful look at the current needs and challenges of your school will not only support your decision making, but it is also a first and important step toward effectively preparing all students for success in college, careers, and lifelong learning.

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## About the Authors

**Willard R. Daggett** is Founder and Chairman of the International Center for Leadership in Education.

**Susan A. Gendron** is President of the International Center for Leadership in Education.