

## CHAPTER ONE

# Introduction

*“Whole-system change . . . requires educators to make sure their school districts create and maintain strategic alignment . . . to ensure that all the horses are pulling the wagon in the same direction.”*

—Francis M. Duffy

According to B. Davies and B. J. Davies (2005), “Strategic leadership is a critical component in the effective development of schools” (p. 10). They see strategic leadership not as a separate type of leadership (e.g., transformational leadership) but as a broader initiative that may span other leadership models (e.g., collaborative, instructional). In other words, strategic leadership skills are useful when principals aim to improve instructional programs, collaborate with broad constituencies, and transform their schools into (for instance) learning communities. The knowledge and skills of strategic leadership are critical to help accomplish these initiatives. In general, strategic leaders are committed to improving their organizations on many levels. Principals who exhibit strategic leadership believe and engage in the following activities, among others:

- Coordinating all functions and practices in the school so that everything works in harmony toward a common end
- Ensuring that all individuals share common goals

## 2 Strategic Leadership

- Assessing the ability of the organization to respond to social, political, or interpersonal crises
- Adjusting the organization's mission to meet newly developing exigencies
- Imagining varied possibilities for the future

Serving as a strategic leader means that you are:

- Cognizant of pressures that may come to bear on the school organization
- Willing to respond promptly and with long-term planning initiatives
- Considerate of organizational resources
- Aware of strengths and weaknesses of individuals
- Ready to prioritize many requests for programs and resources
- Aware that strategic planning is not a linear, neat process but involves constant revision
- Interested in setting goals and articulating concrete plans to achieve them
- Disciplined and organized
- Never satisfied with success
- Committed to ongoing, whole-school improvement

As strategic leader of the school, you are continually, above all else, involved in strategic thinking. Strategic thinking "is predicated on involvement" of key participants. "To think strategically, . . . [principals] must be active, involved, connected, committed, alert, stimulated." It is "the calculated chaos" of your work that drives your "thinking, enabling you to build reflection on action as an interactive process. . . . Such thinking must not only be informed by the moving details of action, but be driven by the very presence of that action" (Mintzberg, 1994, p. 291).

According to Liedtka (1998), the following are the major attributes of strategic thinking.

**A systems or holistic view.** Strategic thinking is built on the foundation of a systems perspective. A strategic thinker has a mental model of the complete end-to-end system of value creation . . . and an understanding of the interdependencies it contains. . . . [The strategic thinker] sees [a] job not as a sum of its specific tasks, but as a contribution to a larger system that produces outcomes of value. . . .

**A focus on intent.** Strategic thinking is intent-driven. . . . Strategic intent provides the focus that allows individuals within an organization to . . . leverage their energy, to focus attention, to resist distraction, and to concentrate for as long as it takes to achieve a goal.

**Thinking in time.** Strategic thinkers link past, present, and future. . . . The gap between today's reality and intent for the future . . . is critical.

**Hypothesis-driven.** Strategic thinking . . . deals with hypothesis generating and testing as central activities . . . and avoids the analytic-intuitive dichotomy; . . . it is both creative and critical in nature. . . . This sequence [of hypothesis generating and testing] allows us to pose ever-improving hypotheses without forfeiting the ability to explore new ideas.

**Intelligently opportunistic.** The dilemma involved in using a well-articulated strategy to channel organizational efforts effectively and efficiently must always be balanced against the risks of losing sight of alternative strategies better suited to a changing environment. . . . There must be room for intelligent opportunism that not only furthers intended strategy but that also leaves open the possibility of new strategies emerging.

Further, pragmatic strategic leaders, according to Jones (2005), have a "realistic appraisal of the environment in which the school finds itself, the resources at its disposal and the opportunities that exist" (p. 6). They realize that, to be effective, strategic leadership must involve many others in the process. According to the Alliance for Nonprofit Management (2003–2004b):

An inclusive process:

- helps build both internal and external enthusiasm and commitment to the organization and its strategies. Individuals take on ownership of the goals and efforts to achieve the stated outcomes
- ensures that your informational data base reflects the needs and perceptions of internal individuals and external constituents
- incorporates a level of objectivity into the process. "Outsiders" can identify jargon or ask critical questions around which "insiders" might make assumptions
- develops foundations for future working relationships

#### 4 Strategic Leadership

- develops uniformity of purpose among all stakeholders
- establishes a continual information exchange among staff, management, customers, and other key stakeholders

This book represents one aspect of a principal's work. Each book in the series addresses a specific, important role or function of a principal. Discussing each separately, however, is quite artificial and a bit contrived. In fact, all seven forms of leadership (instructional, cultural, ethical/spiritual, collaborative, operational, school-community, and strategic) form an undifferentiated whole. Still, we can glean much from a more in-depth analysis into each form of leadership. It is with such understanding that this book is framed. Strategic leadership reflects an educational paradigm based on the following assumptions or premises:

- Organizational life is dynamic, complex, chaotic, and unpredictable, yet strategic leaders examine internal and external data to discern any predictable patterns or trends that will help in initiating a strategic vision or plan.
- Strategic planning helps a school establish direction and goals for the future by asking how the school may be different 5, 7, even 10 years from now.
- Strategic planning is an ever-changing, flexible, and creative process that requires leaders to exhibit patience and tolerance for ambiguity.
- Strategic leadership thrives in a learning community wherein educators demonstrate their long-term commitments to curricular and instructional excellence.
- You, as principal, play the most vital role in strategic planning as initiator, facilitator, motivator, assessor, and transformer.
- Strategic leaders are committed to participatory school management and leadership.
- Strategic planning is supported by a systematic assessment program aimed to collect data to inform decision making to improve educational programming.
- Strategic leaders are visionary iconoclasts who take calculated risks for the benefit of the school organization.
- Strategic leaders are astute politicians able to utilize organizational resources to accomplish their goals.
- Not content with the status quo, strategic leaders aim to transform the school organization to higher levels of performance and overall success.

**Reflective Questions**

1. Consider leaders you have known. Assess their strategic leadership skills. What stands out as particularly noteworthy? Unworthy?
2. Assess the degree to which strategic planning exists in your school. What have been your experiences with strategic leadership?
3. What strategic leadership challenges do you face? Explain.
4. React to the assumptions or premises listed above. Which make the most sense to you?
5. What is the benefit of a strategic plan? Describe a school in which such a plan exists.

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This book and series are also aligned with standards established by the prominent Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC). ELCC standards are commonly accepted by most educational organizations concerned with preparing high-quality educational leaders and as such are most authoritative (Wilmore, 2002). The ELCC, an arm of the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education, developed six leadership standards used widely in principal preparation. These standards formed the basis for this book and series:

1.0: Candidates who complete the program are educational leaders who have the knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a school or district vision of learning supported by the school community.

2.0: Candidates who complete the program are educational leaders who have the knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by promoting a positive school culture, providing an effective instructional program, applying best practices to student learning, and designing comprehensive professional growth plans for staff.

3.0: Candidates who complete the program are educational leaders who have the knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by managing the organization, operations, and resources in a way that promotes a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment.

## 6 Strategic Leadership

4.0: Candidates who complete the program are educational leaders who have the knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by collaborating with families and other community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources.

5.0: Candidates who complete the program are educational leaders who have the knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairly, and in an ethical manner.

\*6.0: Candidates who complete the program are educational leaders who have the knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context.

\*This standard is addressed in this book.

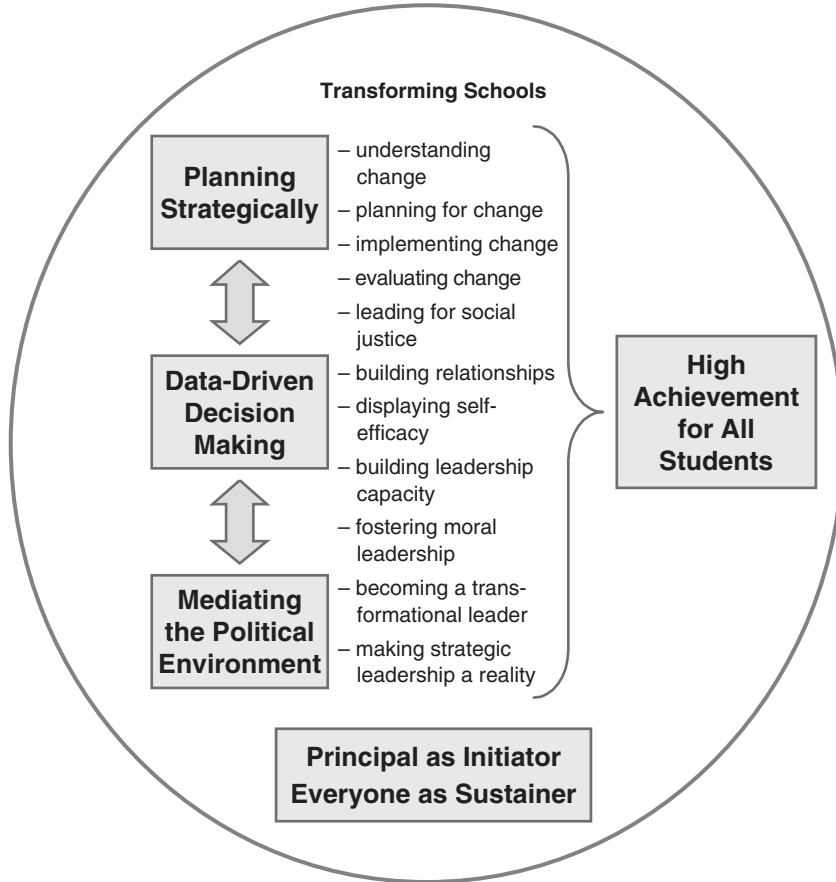
Readers should also familiarize themselves with standards from the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium and the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) (see, e.g., [http://www.ccsso.org/projects/Interstate\\_School\\_Leaders\\_Licensure\\_Consortium/](http://www.ccsso.org/projects/Interstate_School_Leaders_Licensure_Consortium/) and <http://www.boyercenter.org/basicschool/naesp.shtml>).

Another important point to make in this Introduction is for you to realize that you may think that strategic leadership may not have immediate payback, as some other forms of leadership do. However, underestimating the long-range impact of strategic leadership is short-sighted. Taking the time to frame a long-range vision supported by meaningful goals and objectives is vital to your school's success. Strategic leadership and planning will result, in the long term, in high student achievement for all students in your school.

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In order to establish a framework for the three chapters, Figure 1.1 illustrates the role of the principal attempting to facilitate and influence the critical elements of strategic leadership (i.e., planning strategically, encouraging data-driven decision making, and mediating the political environment, corresponding to Chapters 2, 3, and 4, respectively). Effective principals strive to transform their schools into cutting-edge institutions that understand the nature of change, promote a sense of social justice, and build leadership capacity and sustainability. When

**Figure 1.1** A Strategic Leadership Model That Promotes Student Achievement



these aspects of strategic leadership work at their best, a culture of student achievement for all students is established and maintained.

Allow me to offer a word on chapter format and presentation of information. Information in each of the three chapters is presented as concisely as possible to make for easy and quick reference reading. Each chapter begins with boxed material called “What You Should Know About.” The box will list and briefly explain the concepts covered in each chapter. Certainly, as mentioned earlier, each chapter will not cover every bit of information there is to know about a given topic. Each chapter culls, though, essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for a successful principal.

## 8 Strategic Leadership

A brief word on chapter organization is in order to facilitate reading. The first chapter includes some best practices for initiating and sustaining a strategic planning initiative. After reviewing some practical strategies for doing so, the second chapter highlights practices for collecting data for the purpose of making critical instructional and curricular decisions to enhance various goals in the strategic plan. The final chapter focuses on the knowledge and skills of transformative leadership that are so much part of a strategic leader. Taken together, these three chapters provide you with information and strategies that can set you on a course of strategizing for the future of your organization. This book, however, is not meant to be the definitive treatise on strategic leadership; rather, my goal is to raise some relevant issues for your consideration. It is my hope that the ideas in this book will give you pause to think about your own role in strategic leadership.

As a concluding activity to this Introduction, read the boxed material below, which contains 10 quotations meant to inspire and, more important, to provoke critical thinking about your role as strategic leader. Read each quotation, and ask yourself these questions:

- What does the author convey about strategic leadership?
- Critique the quotation. Does the thought reflect your beliefs? Explain.
- What practical step(s) could you take to actualize the idea behind each quotation?

### **Some Key Quotations Related to Strategic Leadership**

"If we want change to matter, to spread, and to last, then the system in which leaders do their work, must make sustainability a priority."

—Andy Hargreaves and Dean Fink

"A successful strategic planning process will examine and make informed projections about environmental realities to help an organization anticipate and respond to change by clarifying its mission and goals; targeting spending; and reshaping its programs."

—Richard Mittenenthal

"The challenges are abundant, the responsibility awesome, and the need for moral leadership incalculable."

—Carolyn M. Shields



“Leading change in public education is tumultuous work. It is relentlessly intense, enormously complex, and often downright chaotic.”

—Scott Thompson

“For strategic decision making to be effective, constraints and obstacles, as well as opportunities and challenges that impact the decision choice, must be identified.”

—Petra E. Snowden and Richard A. Gorton

“I believe courageous, passionate, and visionary leaders . . . need to recognize that their effectiveness as change-leaders is the result of the skillful interplay of power, politics, and ethics.”

—Francis M. Duffy

“Principals and other school leaders have been given a different charge: take an abundance of student data, mostly in the form of assessments, and turn this data into information to be used in improving educational practice.”

—Jeffrey C. Wayman, Steve Midgley, and Sam Stringfield

“Strategic leaders are able to picture a range of possibilities several stages ahead of the current phase of organizational development.”

—Jeff Jones

“Leading schools through complex reform agendas requires new leadership that goes far beyond improving test scores.”

—Michael Fullan

“The principal’s job is to design and nurture an environment in which teachers can more readily take charge of their work.”

—Robert J. Starratt

## CASE STUDY AND REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

*Strategic planning may come in various forms. Ms. Vincenza Gallassio is in her second year as principal in an urban elementary school in New York*

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*Note:* Many thanks to Ms. Vincenza Gallassio, who has allowed me to use her Principal Performance Review and her personal strategic plan as an example of how one principal strives for strategic leadership. Thanks also to E. Scott Miller, who serves as Ms. Gallassio’s supervisor and evaluator. Their strong professional relationship represents, in this author’s view, best practice for principal professional development as well as strategic planning.

## 10 Strategic Leadership

*City. Mr. E. Scott Miller, a local instructional superintendent charged with mentoring and evaluating Ms. Gallassio, is a strong supporter. "Ms. Gallassio is a forward thinker. Well organized and thoughtful, she understands the key ingredients of effective school leadership. She's a planner, but with sense and creativity. She thinks out of the box and knows how to generate enthusiasm, even among the more experienced teachers. Her keen sense of vision and energy make her one of the region's up and coming stars." He wrote her the following letter at the end of the first month of the school year.*

September 29, 2004  
Ms. Vincenza Gallassio  
Principal (IA)  
Public School XX

Re: Principal Performance Review, September 2004

Dear Ms. Gallassio:

Your leadership is essential to the effectiveness of the instructional program in your school. Governance legislation requires the Superintendent to evaluate the performance of each principal with respect to educational effectiveness and school performance, including effectiveness of promoting student achievement and parental involvement and maintaining school discipline. The Principal Review process is designed for you to set your goals and objectives for the school year in consultation with the Superintendent to ensure that the priority needs of your school will be addressed. We will meet in October to develop your goals and objectives for the 2004–2005 school year in the areas of:

- Instructional leadership
- Organizational leadership
- Staff development
- Student support services
- Community relations and communication

Your goals and objectives must support your school's Comprehensive Educational Plan (CEP)—include specific activities and a timeline. In addition to your written summary of your goals