A Study of the Effect of Strategic Planning on Student Achievement in Rural Public Schools in New York State

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A Study of the Effect of Strategic Planning on Student Achievement in Rural Public Schools in New York State

Abstract
Many public school district leaders, including school administrators and board of education members develop and implement strategic plans in order to guide the leadership in carrying out the mission and vision of the district they serve. Although strategic planning is practiced widely among many organizations, little is known about the relationship between strategic planning and student achievement. This study used a qualitative research design and goal setting theory to determine how rural school superintendents and administrators are using the strategic planning process in their districts to affect student achievement. Data were collected using virtual interviews with public school superintendents in 11 rural school districts in New York State. Results of the study found that goals developed during the strategic planning process in districts studied supported the districts’ mission, vision, and core beliefs. Results of the study also found that the practice of strategic planning affected student achievement positively, and that districts studied implement goals through distributed leadership. This study provided recommendations for further research in strategic planning.

Document Type
Dissertation

Degree Name
Doctor of Education (EdD)

Department
Executive Leadership

First Supervisor
Dr. Susan Schultz

Second Supervisor
Dr. Jeanette Silvers

Subject Categories
Education

This dissertation is available at Fisher Digital Publications: https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/education_etd/471
A Study of the Effect of Strategic Planning on Student Achievement in Rural Public Schools in New York State

By

Stephen P. Miskell

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Ed.D. in Executive Leadership

Supervised by
Dr. Susan Schultz

Committee Member
Dr. Jeanette Silvers

Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. School of Education
St. John Fisher College

August 2020
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my six children; Sean, Sarah, Ryan, Jonathan, Kyle, and Corey, who continue to inspire me to be the best person I can be. I love you all very much. Having raised you to be the six amazing and wonderful people you have all grown to be is and always will be my proudest achievement.

To my parents, Dr. Charles F. Miskell and Commissioner Mary McGrane Miskell, who taught by example and never wavered from their convictions. They raised my six siblings and me in a loving home and provided each of us with a moral compass to navigate life’s journey. My siblings, Ted, John, Carl, Mary Ellen, Kevin, and Martin all live their lives with the values instilled within us by what our parents taught us and how they lived. I am sure that our parents would be happy to see how much my siblings and I enjoy each other’s company whenever we have a family gathering.

To my three grandchildren, Thayer, Zofia, and Aleksander, who are a tremendous source of joy in the lives of their parents and grandparents, may you always hold the zest for life that you have right now.

To Dr. Susan Schultz and Dr. Jeanette Silvers, my amazing dissertation committee. Thank you, Dr. Schultz for guiding me through the process of writing and re-writing my dissertation, leading up to my successful dissertation defense. Thank you, Dr. Silvers, for your support, coaching, and encouragement. Thank you both for all of your helpful suggestions, always delivered at just the right moment. Your patience and guidance throughout my dissertation journey sustained me through the process. I also
want to thank my advisor, Dr. Guillermo Montes, for guiding me through the Executive Leadership Program at St. John Fisher College. Thank you, Dr. Montes, for your wisdom and kindness throughout my journey.

I would like to thank my team, the Weekend Warriors, who were such an amazing group of people to work with on group projects and presentations. Thank you, Dr. Mitch Daly, Dr. Karen Kwandrans, and Dr. Amy Considine for your strong work ethic and determination. You brought out the best in me and in each other.

I am very grateful to Dr. Marla Iverson, for many conversations about strategic planning and for all of her support, advice, and encouragement throughout my dissertation research. Thanks also to Dr. Suzanne Newton and Dr. Carl Stokes from Cohorts 12 and 13, respectively, for all of your support and encouragement throughout the journey. I would also like to thank Dr. Charles Infurna, Mr. Stephen Todd, and Mr. Michael Mead for serving as my practicum supervisors in the Executive Leadership Program.

Last, but not least, I want to express my appreciation to St. John Fisher College for allowing me to be part of the challenging and unique Executive Leadership Program. I have no doubt that I have grown as a scholar and as a person during my pursuit of my doctoral degree from the college.
**Biographical Sketch**

Stephen P. Miskell is an educator with extensive experience in teaching and school administration. Dr. Miskell graduated from Cayuga Community College in 1976 with an Associate in Arts degree, and from SUNY Brockport in 1978 with a Bachelor of Science degree. Dr. Miskell later earned a Master of Science degree from SUNY Brockport in 1982, a Master of Business Administration degree from Syracuse University in 1990, and a Certificate of Advanced Study from SUNY Brockport in 2017. Dr. Miskell completed his doctoral studies in the Ed.D. Program in Executive Leadership at St. John Fisher College in 2020. Dr. Miskell pursued his research in the study of the effect of strategic planning on student achievement in rural public schools in New York State under the direction of Dr. Susan Schultz and Dr. Jeanette Silvers and received his Ed.D. in 2020. Dr. Miskell is planning to continue writing for publication to contribute further to the research on strategic planning.
Abstract

Many public school district leaders, including school administrators and board of education members develop and implement strategic plans in order to guide the leadership in carrying out the mission and vision of the district they serve. Although strategic planning is practiced widely among many organizations, little is known about the relationship between strategic planning and student achievement. This study used a qualitative research design and goal setting theory to determine how rural school superintendents and administrators are using the strategic planning process in their districts to affect student achievement. Data were collected using virtual interviews with public school superintendents in 11 rural school districts in New York State. Results of the study found that goals developed during the strategic planning process in districts studied supported the districts’ mission, vision, and core beliefs. Results of the study also found that the practice of strategic planning affected student achievement positively, and that districts studied implement goals through distributed leadership. This study provided recommendations for further research in strategic planning.
Table of Contents

Dedication ................................................................................................................................. iii

Biographical Sketch ....................................................................................................................... v

Abstract ......................................................................................................................................... vi

Table of Contents .......................................................................................................................... vii

List of Tables ................................................................................................................................. x

Chapter 1: Introduction .................................................................................................................. 1

Strategic Planning and Public School Performance ................................................................. 2

Strategic Planning Elements ......................................................................................................... 4

Problem Statement .......................................................................................................................... 5

Theoretical Rationale .................................................................................................................... 6

Statement of Purpose ...................................................................................................................... 10

Research Questions ....................................................................................................................... 10

Potential Significance of the Study ............................................................................................... 10

Definitions of Terms ...................................................................................................................... 11

Chapter Summary .......................................................................................................................... 11

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature ............................................................................................ 13

Empirical Method Review ............................................................................................................ 13

Strategic Planning Literature ........................................................................................................ 13

Rural Public School Districts ........................................................................................................ 29

Summary of Empirical Findings .................................................................................................... 30

Chapter Summary .......................................................................................................................... 31

Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology ................................................................................... 32
Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 32
Research Context .................................................................................................................. 33
Ethics and Confidentiality Considerations ........................................................................... 33
Research Participants .......................................................................................................... 33
Researcher Connection and Field Notes ............................................................................ 34
Instruments Used in Data Collection ................................................................................... 34
Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis .................................................................... 35
Summary ............................................................................................................................... 36
Chapter 4: Results ................................................................................................................ 37
Introduction and Research Questions .................................................................................. 37
Data Analysis and Findings ................................................................................................. 37
Demographic Summary ....................................................................................................... 38
Findings ................................................................................................................................. 39
Strategic Planning in Public School Districts: What Type of Goals are Included? ........... 40
How are Goals in the Strategic Plan Being Implemented? .............................................. 55
How are the Strategic Plans in Rural School Districts Being Monitored? ...................... 62
Summary of Results ............................................................................................................ 67
Chapter 5: Discussion ......................................................................................................... 70
Introduction ........................................................................................................................ 70
Implications of Findings ..................................................................................................... 71
Limitations ........................................................................................................................... 80
Recommendations ............................................................................................................. 80
Conclusion ........................................................................................................................... 82
References ................................................................................................................... 84
Appendix A .................................................................................................................. 88
Appendix B .................................................................................................................. 89
Appendix C .................................................................................................................. 93
Appendix D .................................................................................................................. 94
Appendix E .................................................................................................................. 96
Appendix F .................................................................................................................. 98
Appendix G .................................................................................................................. 101
Appendix H .................................................................................................................. 103
## List of Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 4.1</td>
<td>Research Questions and Themes</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1: Introduction

Strategic planning is used by public and private institutions to provide a road map to what an organization is, does, and for what purpose. Strategic planning requires information gathering, the development of strategic choices, and careful assessment of present decisions on future results (Bryson, 2004). While strategic plans vary among organizations, there are some common components to all plans, namely mission, vision, and goals (Bryson, 2004). An organization’s mission articulates its reason for existing. Vision describes where an organization hopes to be or who it will serve in the future. Goals included in strategic plans typically describe how an organization will carry out its mission and vision (Bryson, 2004). Strategic planning is a focused effort to formulate decisions and action plans to direct what an organization is, what it does, and why (Sang, Kindiki, Sang, Rotich, and Kipruto, 2015).

Although strategic planning is a widely used management tool in organizations, there has been a substantial drop in the number of research studies on strategic planning in peer reviewed academic journals since the early 1990s (Wolf & Floyd, 2013). Prior to that time, much of the academic research considered the relationship between strategic planning and the financial performance of business firms. Miller and Cardinal (1994) conducted a meta-analysis of that association and found a modest relationship between strategic planning and performance. Also, in 1994, Henry Mintzberg published a book and several related articles describing the “fall” of strategic planning, asserting that real strategy is not derived from the strategic plan (Mintzberg, 1994). Following Miller and
Cardinal (1994) and Mintzberg (1994), the number of studies on strategic planning published in peer reviewed journals began a steady decline. Nonetheless, strategic planning continues to be a widely used management tool in many organizations, including public schools, universities, and corporations.

In light of the widespread and continued use of strategic planning, organizations could benefit from knowing whether the process of strategic planning makes a positive difference for the organizations using that tool. For example, a corporation might want to know whether strategic planning improves performance, leading to increased wealth for its shareholders. A school district would be interested in knowing whether strategic planning leads to school improvement. In order to guide strategic planning or justify its efficacy, it would be helpful for any organization to know whether the strategic planning process leads to positive change and growth.

**Strategic Planning and Public School Performance**

Public school districts are held to accountability for successfully educating children in the United States, from kindergarten through the 12th grade. In New York State, the Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS) were adopted by the NYS Board of Regents in January 2011. All NYS public school teachers in Grades Pre-K -8 began implementing instruction aligned to the CCLS during the 2012-13 school year (New York State Education Department, 2019). The intent behind the adoption of the CCLS by the Board of Regents was to ensure college and career readiness upon graduation for all children attending NYS public schools. Teachers in Grades 9-12 began the process of implementing units aligned to the CCLS and building content capacity. The New York State Education Department (NYSED) required all public school administrators to
transition to student assessment aligned to the CCLS in March 2013. Results of student achievement scores for all public schools in New York State are available to the public through New York State School Report Card data on the NYSED website. Children attending public schools in New York State are assessed annually in Grades 3-8 in English language arts (ELA), science, and mathematics. At the high school level (Grades 9-12), students are required to take and pass New York State Regents Examinations in the core content areas of science, mathematics, ELA, and social studies. Student achievement results on the NYS assessments matter not only to parents and their children, but to the public school districts the children attend as well. Poor results on state assessments at the district level may result in a school district being designated as a “Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) School” or as a “Targeted Support and Improvement School (TSI)” (NYSED, 2019). The high stakes nature of New York’s assessments requires school administrators to monitor test results closely, and to establish plans for improved results district wide as well as for individual students.

Because public school administrators are required to assess their students periodically, school administrators and school boards include goals for academic achievement in their strategic plans that describe how student progress will be measured over time with the hope that doing so improves performance on state assessments. It would be helpful, therefore for school district stakeholders to know whether or not including goals for academic achievement will result in improvements in student learning.
Strategic Planning Elements

Strategic plans are designed to help an organization achieve its established goals, and it is important to identify its key stakeholders and ensure their involvement in the planning process. In a public school district, the board of education is responsible for establishing policies for educating children within the district, and delegates the responsibility for carrying out policies and the operation of the school district to its superintendent of schools. Many superintendents and boards of education have developed strategic plans to articulate goals and strategies to be carried out during the school year or over the course of the next several years. As noted by Bryson (2004) there are common elements found in strategic plans formed by many organizations, including public school districts, namely mission, vision, and goals.

Mission. Mission statements describe the raison d’etre of organization; why the organization exists, whom it serves, and the needs it addresses. In the development of strategy and when choosing among alternatives, the organization will be guided by its fundamental mission (Ozdem, 2011). Mission statements are considered to be a vital starting point for strategic initiatives such as Total Quality Management (TQM) (Bart et al., 2001). Mission statements provide a focus for developing goals for an organization and in doing so, provide a point of reference for decisions concerning the allocation of resources (Bart, Bontis, & Taggar, 2001).

Vision. Vision statements describe an organization’s view of the unknown that lies ahead within the context of current facts, hopes, threats and opportunities (Ozdem, 2011). Vision, therefore, represents what the organization wants to become or to accomplish in the future. Vision statements focus on the future. For a school district, a
vision statement describes where the district aspires to be as a result of carrying out the mission of the district (Allen, Vella-Brodrick, & Waters, 2018).

**Goals.** A goal is the object or aim of an action, to attain a specific standard of proficiency, typically within a specified period (Locke & Latham, 2002). An organization may establish goals to achieve many different desired outcomes, such as improved financial performance or increased market share for a corporation, or improvements in academic achievement for students enrolled in a public school district. Once an organization establishes its mission and vision statements, the establishment of goals within a strategic plan describe how an organization will fulfill its mission and vision, as well as how progress towards goals will be measured.

**Problem Statement**

The review of literature on strategic planning shows that research in strategic planning began to decline in the mid-1990s, despite the fact that many organizations continue to develop and implement strategic plans (Wolf & Floyd, 2013). The lack of research in strategic planning seems most evident with regard to public schools, particularly in the United States. More research on strategic planning should be conducted concerning the impact of strategic planning on performance, whether it be for business firms or educational institutions.

The literature concerning public schools and strategic planning is more difficult to find than studies on strategic planning in other kinds of organizations. This is surprising, as most public school districts have strategic plans, or at least elements of strategic planning within their mission and vision statements. There are three types of public school districts in New York State: rural, suburban, and urban. There have been periodic
efforts to consolidate smaller rural schools in favor of larger districts (Bard, Gardener, & Wieland, 2006). Larger school districts are often viewed to be more economical and efficient, promoting better economies of scale (Bard et al., 2006). A series of economic downturns nationwide promoted additional focus on rural school consolidation, as many Americans migrated from farms to urban areas, causing a continued declining enrollment in rural school districts (Smith, 1988). Cotton (1996) conducted a study of the advantages of small schools and found advantages in the areas of student achievement, extracurricular participation, feelings of belongingness, attendance, and dropout rates. This study will focus on strategic planning efforts in rural school districts.

The paucity of research currently available concerning strategic planning in public schools, despite the fact that the use of strategic planning is a relatively common practice in public schools today, reveals a gap in the literature on strategic planning. Public school boards of education and administrators would benefit by knowing whether investing time and resources into developing, implementing, and monitoring a strategic plan for their organization would be beneficial. Strategic plans found in public schools today typically include goals for academic achievement, despite the fact that there is little empirical research as to whether or not the inclusion of goals in a strategic plan focused on academic achievement actually results in improvements in student performance.

**Theoretical Rationale**

This study will be conducted within the framework of goal setting theory, which refers to the effects of setting goals on subsequent performance. A goal is the object or aim of an action, to attain a specific standard of proficiency, typically within a specified period (Locke & Latham, 2002). Key thinkers behind the theory are Edwin A. Locke,
from the University of Maryland, and Gary P. Latham, from the University of Toronto. Locke began goal setting research in the 1960s. His research revealed an inductive relationship between goal setting and improved production performance. Locke and Latham describe themselves as industrial-organizational psychologists, with a primary interest to predict, explain, and influence performance on organizational or work-related tasks. Accordingly, the researchers focused on conscious performance goals, together with the level of task performance (Locke & Latham, 2002). Goal setting theory indicates that the source of motivation is the desire and intention to reach a goal; if individuals or teams find that their current performance is not achieving desired goals, they typically become motivated to increase effort or change their strategy (Locke & Latham, 2006).

Locke and Latham’s (2002) goal setting theory states that there are several mechanisms that are particularly important for how goals affect performance: direct attention, energizing, task persistence, and effective strategies. Direct attention refers to focusing attention and effort toward goal-relevant activities, and away from distractors (irrelevant activities). Energizing means that goals have an energizing function; high goals lead to greater effort than low goals. Task persistence refers to the amount of time spent on the behavior to achieve a goal. When participants can control the time, they spend on a task, hard goals prolong effort. Effective strategies indicate that in the desire to achieve a goal, the individual seeks out different ways to achieve it.

Locke and Latham (2002) identified four moderators, or conditions, that must be met to make goals effective in invoking motivation through the mechanisms noted above. They are: goal acceptance/commitment, goal specificity, goal difficulty, and feedback on
progress to the goal. Accepting the goal is the first step in creating motivation. Two key categories of factors facilitating goal commitment are (a) factors that make goal attainment important to people, including the importance of the outcomes that they expect as a result of working to attain a goal and (b) their belief that they can attain the goal (self-efficacy) (Locke & Latham, 2002). The second moderator, goal specificity, indicates that a goal must be specific and measurable. Goal specificity indicates the who, what, when, where, why, and how of the expectations of the goal. Specific goals, Locke and Latham found, lead to higher task performance than do vague or abstract goals. For performance to increase, goals must be challenging, specific, and attainable (Locke & Latham, 2002). The third moderator, goal difficulty, refers to goals being an effective motivation tactic if difficulty is taken into consideration. This means that goals should be set high enough to foster high performance, but low enough to be attainable (Locke & Latham, 2002). Interestingly, when goals are set too high or too difficult, not only do motivation and commitment suffer, but integrity may as well. A study conducted by Ordonez and Scheitzer (2004) found that people tend to be dishonest if they fall short of their goals. Setting goals that are too high not only jeopardizes motivation and commitment but can also lead to corruption and dishonesty (Ordonez and Scheitzer). The fourth moderator, feedback, refers to the fact that for goals to be effective, people need summary feedback that reveals progress in relation to their goals. Without feedback, people are unaware of their progression (or regression). Feedback is most effective when it is directed at setting more challenging goals (Locke & Latham, 1979).

The goal setting theory is a useful theoretical framework for considering whether the inclusion of specific academic goals in strategic plans lead to improvements in
academic achievement. Dishon-Berkovits (2014) conducted a study of motivational influences on academic achievement for students enrolled in an introductory college course. Goal setting theory was used as a theoretical framework to develop an understanding of academic performance. Students were given assigned performance or assigned learning goals. The study indicated that to ensure academic success, the most advantageous goals a teacher should assign in a classroom are assigned learning goals. These results also suggested that successful students are those who adopt a combination of mastery and performance-approved goals. Dishon-Berkovits found that a specific, challenging assigned learning goal led to higher academic achievement than a specific challenging performance goal. Dishon-Berkovits also indicated that while goal setting theory was not often examined in the context of academic achievement, results demonstrated that concepts from goal setting theory can be effectively applied to fostering academic achievement.

Cabral-Marquez (2015) considered the impact of goal setting on reading scores among fifth grade children in the Valparaiso School District. Noting that hundreds of studies in various fields have established that setting goals leads to improved performance (Locke & Latham, 1990), Cabral-Marquez described how helping students set reading goals resulted in higher reading activity and higher reading achievement for the students included in the study. Along with high quality reading instruction, setting goals to stimulate reading motivation was found to be very effective for the fifth-grade students at Valparaiso School District.

There is a need to connect strategic planning in public school districts to the achievement of goals articulated in those plans. While many school districts have
strategic plans, there is not much literature that indicates whether those plans are effective or lead to the achievement of identified goals.

**Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to determine the role of strategic planning in the achievement of goals established to improve academic success of students in rural public school districts.

**Research Questions**

To understand the benefit of strategic planning and its impact on student performance, this research was guided by three questions:

1. According to the framework developed by Locke and Latham (2002), what types of goals are being developed and included in strategic plans in public school districts?
2. If strategic planning is used in rural schools, how are goals contained in the strategic plan being implemented?
3. How are strategic plans in rural school districts being monitored?

**Potential Significance of the Study**

A review of literature conducted concerning strategic planning in public school districts indicates that empirical research regarding strategic planning in public school districts is limited. Many public school districts develop strategic plans, which are often included on their respective websites. The connection between strategic planning and student achievement would be very useful to the key stakeholders who develop such plans, particularly school superintendents and school board members, who are charged with managing and governing public school districts.
Strategic planning is relevant to the field of education because it provides a mechanism for school administrators, teachers, parents, and school board members to understand the environment the district is operating in as well as desired future outcomes, and how it wishes to achieve and assess those outcomes.

**Definitions of Terms**

*Strategic planning* – a disciplined effort to produce fundamental decisions and actions that shape and guide what an organization is, what it does, and why it does it. To deliver the best results, strategic planning requires broad yet effective information gathering, development and exploration of strategic alternatives, and an emphasis on future implications of present decisions (Bryson, 2004).

*Mission* – A mission statement describes an organization’s raison d’être; its reason for being, and answers the question, “Why do we exist?” (Dufour & Eaker, 1998).

*Vision* – A vision statement describes what is the desired future of the organization and provides the foundation upon which goals are built.

*Values* – Values describe the core beliefs of the organization and provide guidance for the manner in which stakeholders carry out the mission and vision of the organization (Gurley, Peters, Collins, & Fifolt, 2015).

*Goals* – Goal statements describe the level of performance to be achieved in a selected domain (e.g., student learning, professional development) (Gurley et al., 2015).

**Chapter Summary**

The shared purpose and commitment of an organization is articulated in a strategic plan, which describes the mission, vision, values, and goals of the organization (Gurley, et al., 2015). Although strategic planning is a widely used tool in organizations,
including public schools, there is little research concerning the relationship of strategic planning and goal achievement in public schools. There is a need to identify the relationship between strategic planning and academic achievement in public schools.

Goal setting theory is a theoretical lens that posits the role that goal setting plays in fostering student learning and academic achievement. The next chapter, Chapter 2, will analyze the empirical literature in the areas of strategic planning, including mission and vision (the building blocks for any strategic plan), as well as the links between strategic planning and performance.

A comprehensive review of the literature is presented in Chapter 2, including studies pertaining to mission and vision statements and studies that examined strategic planning and organizational performance. The research methods used to collect and analyze data for this qualitative study are described in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 of the dissertation presents the analysis of the results of interviews conducted with public school superintendents about strategic planning in their respective school districts. Findings and implications of the study are described in Chapter 5, which includes recommendations for further research.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Empirical Method Review

The literature review began with a search of existing research about strategic planning. The search method for literature included the use of several databases and search terms. Initial search terms consisted of “strategic planning,” “student learning,” “decision making,” and “school improvement.” To ensure current information, a 10-year period (2009-2019) was established for the search. The most useful databases for the literature review were SAGE, Taylor and Francis, and ProQuest Central. Titles and abstracts were reviewed to determine whether an article should be downloaded to consider in its entirety or disregarded. Only empirical studies were considered for the literature review. The search process produced empirical studies of strategic planning in many different areas. Higher education (12 articles), public schools (seven articles), the effect of strategic planning on performance (11 articles), and studies concerning mission, vision, and values (19 articles) appeared most prominently.

Strategic Planning Literature

Mission and Vision. A mission statement in a strategic plan is a short statement that explains why an organization exists, its purpose, what kind of product or service it provides, and who it serves. A vision statement in a strategic plan describes what the organization wants to be in the future.
A mission statement in a strategic plan is a short statement that explains why an organization exists, its purpose, what kind of product or service it provides, and who it serves. A vision statement in a strategic plan describes what the organization wants to be in the future.

Lake and Mrozinski (2011) conducted a qualitative study using an instrumental case study design. Nine nationally dispersed community colleges were selected for the study, assisted by the Society for College and University Planning (SCUP). Colleges were selected based upon reputation, geographical dispersion, size, and degree of urbanization (p. 7). The authors collected data through a pre-interview questionnaire, interviews with the executives responsible for strategic planning at each college, and a review of the strategic plan for each college. Data analysis included a priori theming and coding of interview transcripts. Results showed that the mission statement roles most often named by the participants in the study were goal clarification, mission statement as a marketing tool, and accreditation requirement (Lake & Mrozinski, 2011). Goal clarification in a mission statement supports the strategic planner(s) with the development of strategy, setting priorities, and distributing resources. Mission statements are also required for the accreditation process. This requirement may pose a problem for the college, however, when mission statements originally prepared for the strategic planning process are “borrowed” for use to fulfill the accreditation requirement, since the original purpose of the mission statement may be lost. Results of the study showed that despite the conflicting roles of mission statements, participants indicated that having a mission statement as a planning tool was worth the time and resources used to develop and maintain the mission statement for their respective colleges.
Allen et al. (2018) conducted a mixed-methods study of school vision and mission statements from 287 secondary schools in Victoria, Australia. The qualitative part of the study was an emergent coding approach (p. 36), while the quantitative analysis was conducted with a supervised lexical analysis approach (p. 37). Schools desire to prepare their students to be successful in life by equipping them with knowledge and skills that they will need later in life (in the workforce or college, for example). Measures of academic achievement (grades and assessments) were useful indicators of student outcomes. Many schools also value additional outcomes for students beyond academic achievement, such as well-being or school belonging (Allen et al., 2017). Vision or mission statements for schools typically describe the school’s purpose and priorities. The study conducted by Allen et al. (2017) sought to determine whether there is a relationship between the emphasis schools place on academic achievement and student well-being, as indicated by their respective vision or mission statements. Results of the study indicated that prioritizing academic achievement and mental health in vision or mission statements is beneficial but must be supported by school leaders and developmental psychologists at “multiple socio-ecological levels to have the greatest impact on student achievement and well-being” (p. 43).

Stemler, Bebell and Sonnabend (2011) conducted two research studies (presented together) to evaluate the validity of two criticisms often raised concerning the use of mission statements for research purposes. The two criticisms identified by the authors included the assumption that school mission statements “actually say nothing of value” (p. 391), and that there is a lack of data on “how closely the school mission statement correlates the actual day-to-day functioning of a school” (p. 392). The first study (Study
1) conducted by the authors examined the extent to which schools vary in their mission statement content. The second study (Study 2) described by the authors examined school principals’ perspectives on the relationship between the mission statement and the practices at their school. Study 1 was a quantitative study of 50 high schools selected randomly from 10 politically and geographically diverse states. This process resulted in the collection of 421 mission statements that were coded and quantitatively compared.

The authors looked to determine the variability in the themes across school mission statements. More specifically, the researchers wanted to determine whether a sample of mission statements from high schools in 10 different states would show agreement on the primary purposes of school.

In Study 1, the authors also considered whether high school mission statements:

Systematically differ in their content depending on (a) contextual variables such as the geographic location of the school, (b) input variables such as the urbanicity of the school, or (c) output variables such as the school’s NCLB (No Child Left Behind) classification (Stemler et al. 2011, p. 392).

Results of the quantitative study (Study 1) found consensus across schools from all states on three major purposes of high school education: civic development, emotional development, and cognitive development (p. 399). There were notable differences in the thematic emphases of mission statements within states. Some schools emphasized integration in addition to the three primary themes, while some schools placed emphasis on a safe and nurturing environment.

The second study reported on by Stemler et al. (2011) was a qualitative study of the use and context of school mission statements. The purpose of the study was to
provide more context on the role that mission statements play in the day-to-day functioning of a school (p. 403). The sample for Study 2 was a subset of schools from Study 1, randomly selected. The authors administered a qualitative interview with a random sample of principals to determine how mission statements for their respective schools were developed, and whether there is a relationship between the mission statement and what occurs in classrooms. The purpose of posing such questions was to address the use and validity of mission statements. Most (85%) of the principals interviewed believed there was a strong connection between the mission statement and practice. A small number (14%) of the principals reported little connection between the mission statement and instruction. While many (62%) of the principals interviewed mentioned the bureaucratic requirement of mission statements, most (77%) considered their mission statement to be a powerful tool for providing direction and for communicating with school stakeholders (teachers, parents, etc.) (Stemler et al., 2011, p. 406). A strong majority (93%) of the principals interviewed noted that stakeholder committees worked together to write the school mission statement. Only one school had a mission statement that was supplied directly from the school board (p. 407).

As mentioned earlier, mission statements are an integral part of strategic plans for organizations. Ozdem (2011) conducted a study to analyze the mission and vision statements articulated in strategic plans at 72 public universities. Strategic planning allows organizations to make long-term plans in consideration of the risks and opportunities faced by the organization and set strategies to evaluate performance and take the organization into the future. The function of mission statements is to guide the whole process of strategic planning, expressing the organization’s reason for being.
Vision statements look toward the future, expressing the aims and objectives the organization wants to reach in the long term (Ozdem, 2011, p. 1889). The focus of Ozdem’s study was to examine the frequency and the format of mission and vision statements on the strategic plans of public universities in Turkey. The data for the study were collected from the mission and vision statements found in strategic plans at 72 universities, using a survey design. Ozdem examined mission and vision statements based on subthemes found in the statements. The most prevalent subtheme found in the mission statements was “Providing Services for the Education of a Qualified Workforce” (p. 1891). The vision statements examined from the strategic plans of the universities sampled produced themes of “research,” “community service,” and “educating a qualified workforce” (p. 1892). As mentioned earlier, mission statements describe an organization’s reason for being. Ozdem’s study found that universities viewed educating a qualified workforce as a priority. Interestingly, Ozdem found that universities of different sizes and histories used similar mission and vision statements (p. 1892). Ozdem stressed that mission and vision statements should convey qualities that are unique and contribute to the institutional identity of an organization (p. 1892).

A business school’s mission statement is the source of the school’s strategic planning and subsequent initiatives designed to fulfill its goals, as noted in a study conducted by Leonard and Huang (2014). The researchers presented a mathematical model used to link individual and aggregate classroom performance effectively and efficiently to the institutional mission statement (p. 3). The authors used final course grades as measures of student learning. The model was applied to a business school with five learning goals in the undergraduate business program, and five learning goals in the
MBA program. Students in both programs were provided with 1 week of orientation, during which the mission and learning goals were introduced to the students. Students were later reminded of the school’s learning goals as found in the mission statement and course syllabus. Results showed improved classroom performance in both programs.

Learning goals must be measurable to be used in the mathematical model used in the authors’ study (p. 7). It is essential, therefore, for strategic plans to include goals that are measurable, or SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound).

Mission statements for colleges and universities have become an increasingly important component for the accreditation of universities and colleges, as noted in the next section.

Mission statements are an increasingly important component for the accreditation of universities and colleges of business. Palmer and Short (2008) analyzed the content of mission statements from 408 members of the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) and explored the relationship between mission content and measures of business school characteristics, including performance. The authors drew a sample from AACSB-accredited schools of business in the Unites States, collecting mission statements from 408 schools. Mission statements were coded using Pearce and David’s (1987) 8-item typology. The authors measured five structural characteristics prominent to higher education: Ownership (public vs. private); geographic scope (urban/suburban/rural); highest degree offered (bachelor’s, master’s, PhD); religious affiliation, and full-time enrollment (Palmer & Short, 2008, p. 460). The authors relied on several performance measures to provide a “quasi-balanced scorecard” (p. 461) approach to the measurement of organizational performance. Palmer and Short (2008) noted that measures may not be easily generalized from one university to another, and the
authors selected three categories for their study. One category was the operating budget per full time faculty member, as a measure of financial performance. The balanced scorecard (Kaplan & Norton, 1992) examines several measures that capture a broad view of performance along four dimensions: financial, customer, learning and growth, and internal business process (Palmer & Short, 2008, p. 461). To measure customer performance, ratings measures from *U.S News & World Report* graduate and undergraduate business school rankings were used. To measure employee learning and growth, Palmer and Short (2008) used the percentage of faculty with doctorate degrees (p. 461). Results of the study showed that differences in business school performance were related to mission content (p. 465). These findings provide business school administrators with the incentive to carefully consider the process used to create mission statements; not only to keep accreditation, but also to convey their futures (Palmer & Short, 2008).

For corporations, performance is typically measured by a firm’s ability to increase shareholder value. Other organizations, such as hospitals, are also concerned with financial performance. Bart et al. (2001) investigated the content of mission statements in different organizational contexts - hospitals, high technology firms, and industrial organizations (p. 21). The purpose of the study was to model and test the relationships among mission statements and firm success or failure. The study involved a lengthy questionnaire, with a sample of 83 of the largest corporations in North America (23 US and 60 Canadian firms). To measure performance, the researchers used a questionnaire concerning financial performance, such as sales, profit, and growth (p. 25). A correlation comparison was made to evaluate the validity of the data. Results indicated that when
employees had a clear understanding of their organization’s mission statement, they were likely to be personally committed to it. Furthermore, when employees are committed to the mission of their organization, there is greater positive impact on performance.

Mission and vision statements are an integral part in strategic plans for organizations, and the literature review shows that mission and vision statements are used in strategic plans for many types of organizations, such as business firms, public schools, and universities. By establishing its purpose and vision for the future, an organization can develop strategies to facilitate the success of the organization. Those strategies will be clearly articulated in the strategic plan for the organization.

Performance. Miller and Cardinal (1994) conducted a meta-analysis of the relationship of strategic planning and firm performance. The authors studied data from 26 earlier studies and determined that there was a modest or inconsistent relationship between strategic planning and firm performance. To explain the inconsistent planning-performance findings, Miller and Cardinal (1994) developed a contingency model. A simple planning-performance model would show that strategic planning positively affects performance (p. 1650). Miller and Cardinal developed a model that encompasses two types of variables: substantive contingency variables and methodological contingency variables. Firm size is an example of a substantive contingency variable. Large firms develop bureaucratic tendencies, causing inertia that makes it more difficult for the firm to respond to changes in the market (p. 1651). Capital intensity is another example of a substantive contingency variable. Capital intensive firms have plants and equipment (capital assets) that are expensive and require long periods of use to generate a return on investment. Capital assets may not be easily adapted to uses for which they were not
originally designed (p. 1651). A third example of a substantive contingency variable is turbulence. Changing, unpredictable conditions in the business environment require increased planning for a firm to cope with the changes (p. 1651). Miller and Cardinal (1994) described methodological contingency variables (quality of assessment strategy, for example) as different research methods used across studies that might produce different findings (p. 1651).

Miller and Cardinal (1994) found that when their model was applied to 26 earlier studies, planning is very positively related to profitability. Miller & Cardinal concluded that strategic planning does positively affect firm performance, and that earlier researchers “who have concluded that planning does not generally benefit performance appear to have been incorrect” (p. 1662).

Sandada, Pooe, and Dhurup (2014) conducted a positivist, quantitative research study of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in South Africa. A positivist research perspective seeks to test a hypothesis to explain and predict the effect of one factor upon another (p. 661). Data was analyzed from 200 questionnaires that were distributed to SME owners and managers. Factor analysis, correlations, and regression techniques were used in the study to consider the relationship between strategic planning and business performance. Results of the study show that primary strategic planning factors are mission, vision, formality of strategic planning, and strategy implementation (p. 666). Strategic planning was determined to have a positive and predictive relationship with the performance of SMEs in South Africa.

Another overseas study that considered the effect of strategic planning was produced by Glaister and Falshaw (1999). They conducted a quantitative study of the
nature and practice of strategic planning in U.K. companies. The researchers sent questionnaires to 500 companies selected randomly and received 113 responses. Respondents were CEOs (56%), finance directors (18%), planning executives (18%), and other senior executives (8%) (p. 108). Results of the study showed that most firms produce strategic plans for a period up to 5 years. Plans are reviewed regularly with an emphasis on results. The strengths, weakness, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) was the highest-ranked strategic planning technique for the firms sampled (p. 115). The study produced “broad agreement” among the firms studied that strategic planning is important and is an effective way to improve the financial performance of the firm (p. 115).

Arend, Zhao, Song and Subin (2017) conducted a quantitative study of public companies randomly selected from the High Technology Industries Directory (p. 1745). The researchers used the total design method for survey research and mailed surveys to 686 firms in the directory. The dependent variables in the study were new product projects and return on investment. The independent variable was strategic planning, which considered how much of each firm’s planning process is formalized, implemented, and includes long-term goals (p. 1746). Arend et al. (2017) found support for three hypotheses, which were: (a) strategic planning decreases the number of new product development (NPD) projects but increases a firm’s financial performance; (b) as the age of a firm increases, the negative effect of strategic planning on the number of NPD project increases; and (c) an increase in risk-taking decreases the negative relationship between strategic planning and the number of NPD projects (p. 1744). In sum, the study found that the effect of strategic planning on innovation was negative, while its direct
effect on performance is positive (p. 1747). These results highlight the complexity of the strategic planning process.

Dibrell, Craig, and Neubaum (2013) conducted a quantitative study of 448 firms in a multi-industry sample. The researchers collected data through a mail questionnaire, and randomly chose 3,351 potential respondents from a Dun & Bradstreet list of the population of U.S. firms in the natural services, manufacturing, and financial services industries (p. 2002). The study measured the firms’ strategic planning process using a scale from Brews and Hunt (1999), which measures elements of a strategic plan, such as objectives and implementation. Furthermore, Dibrell et al. (2014) measured planning flexibility, innovativeness, and firm performance (p. 2003). Planning flexibility considered the ability of a firm to modify its strategic plan in response to threats or opportunities that arise. Innovativeness measured the emphasis on innovation (new products, specialty products, etc.). Firm performance was measured with a 4-item scale to consider each firm’s return on assets, return on sales, growth in market share, and sales growth (p. 2003). Results of the study found that firms’ formal strategic planning process and planning flexibility are positively associated, and each is also positively related to innovativeness. Furthermore, innovativeness fully mediates the relationships between firm performance and strategic planning and planning flexibility (p. 2005).

Although research on strategic planning declined in the mid-1990s, organizations continue to practice the use of strategic planning, and the literature supports that practice. Strategic planning does have a positive effect on the performance of an organization. Better performance for a corporation means improved profitability and increased wealth for its shareholders.
Public Schools. Among the four areas that appeared most prominently in the search results mentioned earlier, studies about strategic planning in public schools appeared less often, with seven empirical studies out of a total of 49 articles for the four areas collectively. Wanjala and Rarieya (2014) used a qualitative multiple case design to learn about strategic planning in two secondary schools in Kenya. The schools were chosen for the study because they were known to be using strategic planning, although with different results (p. 20). One school was successfully engaged in strategic planning, while the other was seen to be struggling with the process. Data was collected through interview and focus group discussions (FGD), as well as document analysis. There were 47 participants, considered to be key school stakeholders (principals, teachers, parents, and students) (p. 20). Results of the study showed there were several factors that would either help or hinder the schools’ participation in strategic planning. Those factors included knowledge of strategic planning, leadership styles, financial resources, and professional support (p. 17). The study showed that to successfully develop and maintain a strategic plan, the key stakeholders must first understand the concept of strategic planning and should receive training to develop that understanding if necessary (p. 25). It is also important to have the right leader in place as the “vision bearer” to facilitate the strategic planning process. Limited budgets also affect the quality of the strategic planning process and school improvement in general. It must be understood that effective strategic planning includes the need for an organization to manage its scarce resources wisely (p. 27).
Winnand and Edlefon (2008) described an action research model to help the strategic planning process at a rural school district. The school superintendent used action research to conduct a series of focus groups with key stakeholders (community members, students, and staff). The superintendent was the principal investigator for this study. The purpose of the research was to provide a methodology to gather perceptions from community members in a rural school district and provide a model for school administrators in neighboring school districts for strategic planning (p. 32). The superintendent conducted the data analysis by first transcribing every response and then assigned weighted values to each. A total of 421 responses were categorized. A final analysis of the data was conducted by a fellow superintendent from a neighboring school district (p. 36). The action research model used by the school district studied could serve as a model for other rural superintendents considering the development of a strategic plan for their own districts.

While it is encouraging to see strategic planning in public schools, many schools and communities are inhibited by a lack of resources needed to implement the strategic planning process effectively. The superintendent who used action research to foster strategic planning in his district used a creative approach, one that could be modeled by peer superintendents. Strategic planning is not an uncommon practice in public school districts, regardless of size. If school administrators (superintendents and principals) are creative and determined, they can set up strategic planning in their school districts.

Yikier and Altinay (2018) conducted a study of school directors’ strategies in improving education in schools of the Office of General Secondary Education in Cyprus (p. 514). A case study was conducted to consider the role of directors and teachers in the
strategic planning process in rural areas (p. 514). Face-to-face interviews were held with participants (15 directors and 15 teachers). Results showed that budget formation inhibited strategic planning, as local school officials have little flexibility in their budget, making planning difficult. Many of the participants reported that frequent teacher transfers make strategic planning difficult. The study helped in that it led to recommendations for in-service training for teachers and directors about strategic planning, while a recommendation was also made to reduce teacher transfers.

**Higher Education.** Aleong (2007) conducted a mixed-methods study of the strategic planning process for a higher education institution using a case study research method. The aim of the research was to determine whether the institution had a strategic plan, and how well strategy is performed. The research question was “Are there differences in performance based on differences in strategy?” (p. 38). Data was collected through interviews at Eastern University and from performance data collected from the institution. Results showed that Eastern University had a clear mission and vision and distributed its resources well and made great strides in performance. Performance for the university was measured with respect to enrollment and financial performance.

Following the example of Glaister and Falshaw (1999), Yelken, Kilic, and Ozdemir (2012) conducted a SWOT analysis in their research at the Mersin Vocational School of Higher Education (MVSHE) in Turkey to provide analysis for strategic planning purposes. Specifically, the researchers wanted to present suggestions for improving the distance education program for the institution, based on opinions of students from that program (p. 267). Yelken et al. (2012) collected data from students and academic staff through structured open-ended survey questions (p. 268). The authors
identified strengths and weaknesses of the distance education program and presented recommendations to the MVSHE administration to consider.

Welsh, Nunez, and Petrosko (2005) conducted a study of 2-year and 4-year colleges in Kentucky to consider the sources of faculty and administrative support for strategic planning. The study was conducted soon after a reform effort in the state to restructure its higher education system (p. 20). The study focused on three research questions concerning faculty and administrative support for the implementation and development of strategic planning at two and four year institutions. The three research questions developed for the study were: (a) How do faculty and administrators at 2-year institutions compare with their counterparts at 4-year institutions in their support for strategic planning? (b) Within each type of institution, how do faculty and administrators compare in their support for strategic planning? (c) If there are differences in these two comparisons, what factors help explain them? (p. 21). The research questions were addressed through a mailed survey distributed to full-time faculty and academic administrators in Kentucky’s public 2-year and 4-year colleges during the spring semester (Welsh et al. 2005, p. 25).

Data from the study were analyzed by two methods: *t*-tests to compare group means, and hierarchical multiple regression analysis to identify predictors of support for strategic planning (Welsh et al., 2005, p. 26). Results indicated that there was no significant difference between 2-year and 4-year college faculty members regarding support for strategic planning. This was also the case for administrators at 2-year colleges and their counterparts at 4-year colleges (p. 26). Concerning the second research question, results showed that administrators at both types of institutions reported more
support for strategic planning than did faculty members in their respective institutions (p. 28). The third research question sought to explain the relationship between respondent status (faculty or administrator) and support for strategic planning activities at both 2-year and 4-year colleges. Results showed that administrators at both types of colleges are more likely to support strategic planning than faculty members at either 2-year or 4-year colleges (p. 29). The results reported in the study conducted by Welsh, et al. (2005) would likely be of interest to other college administrators and faculty members, as the implementation of strategic planning efforts is not likely to succeed without the active support of a broad range of constituents.

**Rural Public School Districts**

As described by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), rural schools are defined as fringe, distant, and remote (Appendix A). School administrators in rural public school districts in New York State are confronted with many challenges to providing children with a sound, basic education and to be well prepared for life beyond high school. Despite the fact that the population of New York City is growing, and urban and suburban areas have remained relatively stable, New York State’s population has declined by 1.4 million in the last decade (Little, 2020). The precipitous decline in population has been acutely felt in rural areas, where residents are becoming more impoverished as business employers leave and household incomes decline, accordingly. As the standard of living declines, rural districts find it difficult to attract and retain highly qualified teachers and administrators (Little, 2020). The declining population in rural areas means fewer taxpayers contribute to local school district funding derived from property taxes. Declining resources means that rural school districts find it difficult to
maintain the breadth of curriculum necessary to prepare high school students for college and career readiness. The declining tax base in rural communities makes districts more dependent on state aid, which is woefully inadequate. As an example, despite the fact that pre-K is highly effective in addressing the impact of poverty, learning deficiencies, mental health and other issues affecting children in rural areas, the state requires pre-K programs to be funded “up front,” requiring districts to bear the cost of pre-K education before receiving any reimbursement from the state. Rural public school districts in New York State are confronted with daunting challenges in the face of declining enrollments and limited funding. In spite of these challenges, rural school administrators and boards of education strive to be “good stewards of resources and their charges” (Little, 2020).

**Summary of Empirical Findings**

Despite the fact the empirical research about strategic planning declined significantly in the mid-1990s, the practice of strategic planning remains widespread at many types of organizations. The review of literature for this paper considered strategic planning implications in four areas: mission and vision, performance, public schools, and higher education. The fact that strategic planning continues to be common practice supports the need for further research in strategic planning. The literature review indicates that strategic planning has a positive effect on performance, which should be of interest for any organization or institution.

The review of literature on strategic planning demonstrates substantive gaps in this literature that warrant further research. Research in strategic planning began to decline in the mid-1990s, despite the fact that many organizations continue to develop and implement strategic plans. The lack of research in strategic planning seems most
evident with regard to public schools, particularly in the United States. More research on strategic planning should be conducted concerning the impact of strategic planning on performance, whether it be for business firms or educational institutions.

Chapter Summary

The literature review has provided an overview of strategic planning and explained different applications of strategic planning. Mission, vision, and values are key components of strategic plans, and the literature review explained the impact of mission and vision on performance through the strategic planning process. The literature also supports a positive relationship between strategic planning and organizational performance. The review of literature on strategic planning also demonstrates the different methodologies researchers have employed to study the topic. Most of the empirical studies reviewed used a quantitative methodology, but there were a few qualitative studies included in the literature review, as well as three mixed-methods studies, in which both qualitative and quantitative methodologies were used.

The review of literature on strategic planning reveals a gap in the literature. There is less research on strategic planning in public schools relative to other studies on strategic planning in other organization types. This is surprising in that most public school district have strategic plans, or at least elements of strategic planning within their mission and vision statements. Further, the literature review regarding higher education and strategic planning indicated that there is a positive relationship between strategic planning and performance at 2-year and 4-year colleges and universities.
Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology

Introduction

This chapter describes the research design and research model used for the study. The chapter then describes the research context and research participants. Next, the research instrument that will be used for the study is discussed. The chapter then describes the procedures used to collect and analyze these data.

Qualitative research involves the exploration of a problem that analyzes the views of participants in a lived experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A qualitative research model was used for this study because it provided a method for learning what rural school superintendents understand about strategic planning and how they use it to improve academic achievement in their districts. The ability to conduct research in a natural setting is a crucial component of qualitative research. Creswell (2014) described qualitative research as interpretive research, where the research is involved in a “sustained and intensive experience with the participants” (p. 187). The qualitative research for this study was grounded in the research problem and research questions. The problem for this study is the lack of research about strategic planning that is frequently used in educational settings and how strategic planning effects student achievement. The focus of this research is strategic planning in rural public school districts.

To understand the effect of strategic planning on student achievement in rural public schools in New York State, the following research questions guided the research:
RQ1: According to the framework developed by Locke and Latham (2002), what type of goals are being developed and included in strategic plans in public schools?

RQ2: If strategic planning is being used in rural public schools, how are the goals contained in the strategic plan being implemented?

RQ3: How are strategic plans in rural school districts being monitored?

Research Context

This study was conducted in 11 rural public school districts in New York State. The school districts included in this study had less than 1,000 students in Grades K-12 who have strategic plans in place. The qualitative research was conducted with rural school district superintendents who are actively engaged in the strategic planning process. The researcher interviewed each superintendent through a virtual platform (Zoom).

Ethics and Confidentiality Considerations

Approval for this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at St. John Fisher College. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, their confidentiality rights, and data collection methods. No participant names, school districts, or any identifying information appear on any transcripts or in this study. Pseudonyms were assigned to participants to ensure that participant confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process. Recordings, transcripts, and all interview documents are stored securely in a locked file and password protected hard drive. All research files will be stored securely for 3 years, and then destroyed.

Research Participants

Participants for this study were 11 rural school superintendents and 1 executive director of curriculum and data management serving in rural public schools in New York
State in the 2019-2020 school year. The purpose of the study was shared with each of the participating superintendents, as will confidentiality rights and data collection methods. Participants were informed that their names and any identifying information will be confidential and will not appear on any transcripts or documents used in the study and that the study was approved by the IRB at St. John Fisher. An invitation was sent to the research participants via email with a letter of introduction. A consent form explained the purpose of the study and participant rights (Appendix B).

**Researcher Connection and Field Notes**

The primary instrument in a qualitative study is the researcher. Any bias that a researcher may bring to a qualitative study needs to be clarified (Creswell, 2014). The researcher for the study is an educator with nearly 30 years of experience in education, including service as a classroom teacher, school administrator, and board of education president. This collective perspective and experience afforded the researcher to bring a breadth of knowledge to the study and to interpret and understand results from the study. Field notes were generated during data collection to assist the researcher in developing themes from superintendent interviews (Saldana, 2016). The researcher played the primary role in facilitating interviews. The researcher’s observations during interviews and reflections were essential to the analysis of the data.

**Instruments Used in Data Collection**

The purpose of this study is to determine how rural school superintendents are using the strategic planning process in their districts to affect student achievement. For this study, a survey instrument was created that included interview questions developed by the researcher. For a qualitative research study, the researcher is the primary
instrument (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher developed semi-structured interview questions. The researcher’s role is essential in a qualitative study. Accordingly, field notes were used during data collection to record the researcher’s observations, reflections, and the development of themes (Saldana, 2016). Interview questions were developed using the goal setting theory (Locke & Latham, 1990) as the theoretical framework for the study.

**Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis**

The following procedures were used to interpret the study’s data:

1. Obtain permission to conduct the study from the Institutional Review Board at St. John Fisher College.

2. Obtain names and contact information of potential superintendent participants for the study.

3. Invite superintendents to participate in the study via email.

4. When participants for the study are determined, communicate with each via email or telephone to confirm the date, time, and location of the interview in each school district.

5. Conduct video interview with each participant. The researcher created audio recordings of the participant interviews with a digital voice recording device.

6. Code the interview transcripts, using the recorded participant interviews.

Member checking (Creswell, 2014) was used with participants to clarify questions and accuracy of responses.

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1 In-person interviews with each participant in their respective school districts were not possible due to social distancing requirements as a result of COVID-19.
7. A peer coding process was used to ensure interrater reliability. Reliability refers to fidelity of responses of multiple coders in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A peer will code the data with the researcher to provide interrater reliability and validity to the qualitative study (Creswell, 2014).

8. Complete the analysis of the data.

Summary

This study employed a qualitative research approach to determine how school superintendents use the process of strategic planning in rural public school districts in New York State. Interview data was collected with the use of a recording device and transcribed. The superintendent interviews were collected using an a priori coding process. The data were analyzed to identify themes to better understand what strategies superintendents used to affect student achievement within their strategic plans. The strategic plan for each district was discussed during the interview and referred to in the discussion as written evidence to support the qualitative interview.

Chapter 4 will provide a review of the results of the study, including a description of the themes that emerged from the process of analyzing the interview data collected.
Chapter 4: Results

Introduction and Research Questions

Strategic planning is a widely used practice among business firms and educational institutions, including public school districts. It is unclear whether and to what extent the practice of strategic planning affects student achievement. This qualitative study was designed to investigate the role of strategic planning in the achievement of goals established to improve the academic success of students attending rural public schools in New York State. The research questions investigated by this study were:

1. According to the framework developed by Locke and Latham (2002), what type of goals are being developed and included in strategic plans in public school districts?

2. If strategic planning is being used in rural schools, how are goals contained in the strategic plan being implemented?

3. How are strategic plans in rural school districts being monitored?

Data Analysis and Findings

This section includes a demographic study of the participants and a description of the data collection process. A summary of the themes that emerged through the process of data analysis is also included in the section. Findings are indicated for each research question and its corresponding themes.
Demographic Summary

A semi-structured interview process was used to collect data for this process. There were 12 participants in the study, representing eleven rural school districts. Eleven superintendents were interviewed, and in one district, the superintendent invited the district’s executive director of curriculum and data management to take part in the interview along with the superintendent. While all 11 superintendents were invited to include another administrator in their respective interviews, the other 10 superintendents interviewed chose not to. Each of the study participants were assigned a pseudonym and the districts they represented were referred to using the letters A-K. Participant demographic information is included in Appendix C. Of the 12 individuals interviewed, six currently hold a doctoral degree in education, and one participant was in the process of completing a doctoral degree. Face-to-face interviews were intended to be conducted on site at each of the 11 school districts. However, because of the global pandemic associated with the COVID-19 health crisis, it was necessary to conduct the interviews for each of the participants virtually, via video conferencing (Zoom). An interview protocol (Appendix D) was used to conduct the interview process.

To ensure that all of the responses were captured properly, each Zoom interview was recorded. The recordings for all 11 interviews were saved on a password protected hard drive and then submitted to a transcription service. The interview transcripts were also saved to a password protected hard drive and later printed, for coding purposes. Interview transcripts were placed in a locked file cabinet when not in use. In cases where a superintendent made a specific reference to a document, such as the district’s strategic
plan when responding to a question, such documents were also collected and reviewed. To assist with triangulating the data, the researcher also used field notes.

The open coding method was used for data analysis. Interview transcripts were read several times and recordings were reviewed several times to achieve saturation. Codes were then analyzed to develop themes for each of the research questions.

The study used a research process of semi-structured interviews to gather data from 12 participants representing eleven rural school districts in the western, central, and northern regions of New York State. Based upon New York School Report Card data found on the NYSED website, the districts included in the study had K-12 enrollment figures from 292 to 2,463. The open coding process was used to analyze interview transcripts. Upon the completion of the coding process, themes were developed for each of the three research questions. Findings from the study are reported in the next section.

Findings

The research endeavored to answer three research questions by qualitative analysis of data for themes. When findings were reported for the study, comments made by the 12 participants were provided with verbatim discussion. No changes to grammar or sentence structure were made to the interview responses that the participants provided during the conversations that occurred during the Zoom interviews.

The first research question sought to determine what type of goals are being developed and included in strategic plans in public school districts. Three themes emerged from the data analysis: goals that are aligned to planning initiatives, goals that are measurable, and goals that cascade, or spiral down from the board of education, to the administrative team, and to classroom teachers. The second research question sought
to understand how goals included in the strategic plan are implemented. Two themes emerged from the analysis of the data: *distributive leadership and alignment*. Research question three sought to determine how strategic plans are being monitored in rural school districts. *Progress monitoring* emerged as the theme to address research question three.

Table 4.1 shows the themes related to each research question. The research questions are restated in the first section of the table. Themes that emerged during the data analysis for each research question are listed in the second section of the table. Study findings were summarized and interpreted based on the themes that emerged for the research questions.

Table 4.1

*Research Questions and Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Themes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research Question 1: According to the framework developed by Locke and Latham (2002), what type of goals are being developed and included in strategic plans in public school districts?</td>
<td>Goals that are aligned to planning initiatives</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Goals that are measurable</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Goals that cascade or spiral down</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research Question 2: If strategic planning is being used in rural schools, how are goals in the strategic plan being implemented?</td>
<td>Distributive leadership</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Alignment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question 3: How are strategic plans in rural school districts being monitored?</td>
<td>Progress monitoring</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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*Strategic Planning in Public School Districts: What Type of Goals are Included?*
Research Question 1 - *According to the framework developed by Locke and Latham (2002), what type of goals are being developed and included in strategic plans in public school districts?* - focused on the kind of goals that are found in strategic plans among the districts included in this study. All 12 administrators who participated in the study indicated that the goals included in their respective strategic plans supported each district’s mission and vision.

**Theme 1: Goals that are aligned to planning initiatives.** Of the three themes that emerged from the discussion about the types of goals found in school districts’ strategic plans, alignment to planning initiatives emerged as one theme. Rick, the superintendent at District A responded with:

One of the things that I see as an opportunity, if you don’t mind, is to connect.
And I think this is one of the challenges of schools is connecting the work to the shared decision making team within the school.

Sam, superintendent at District H, described a similar focus on alignment in describing the goal setting process in his school district:

The goals annually are set by the board and administrative team. So, we look annually, we look at what strategic objectives we’re trying to achieve that year. Our board tries to align their goals to that. So, some of the board goals are perfectly aligned with the strategic plan, but they’ll often also assign goals to themselves as a board that are learning objectives specific to the board and they also assign things to the administrative team that while they are outside the strategic plan details, they do parallel to that.
Alignment of goals to the strategic plan is an essential element in the planning process. Speaking about an update to the district’s strategic plan at District I (Appendix E), superintendent Betsy said, “It was adopted in February 2019, and it has guided us through our goals and any decision making we make always refers back to the strategic plan. It must align with that.” Strategic planning in public school districts typically and intentionally includes a large group of people that represent the different constituency groups associated with public education, and that group of individuals must work in close cooperation to ensure that their established goals align properly with the strategic plan.

In describing the strategic planning process at District K, superintendent Jim noted:

So, my second year, to make a long story short, the work began, and it still to this day consists of a large district team that meets on a yearly basis to update the plan. And that consists of board members, parents, students, teachers, administrators, support staff. So, it’s a large group that we start with, and that defines our overall mission, vision, core beliefs, and the district priorities. And then, following that, there are multiple meetings at the building level at each building; elementary, middle, and high, where different members move forward with teaching staff, parents, things specific to that level. And they use the umbrella of the district priorities to define building level priorities and action steps. In other words, it starts with the district. And then we have the district performance targets and trend data that we look at for 3-year periods of time. And then there’s the building level performance targets, and they’re all connected.
Public school districts in New York State must consider state and federal requirements in the strategic planning process. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed into law in 2015 by President Barack Obama and is the most recent reauthorization of the No Child Left Behind legislation that governed policy for K-12 public school education in the United States. Among the provisions included in the law is the requirement that all students in the United States be taught to high academic standards that are designed to prepare students to be college or career ready upon graduation from high school. At District G, superintendent Bruce reflected that concern:

So, we’re very proud of those numbers. And then, what we worked to do with the secondary level at the bottom, was to align the performance indicators with the expectations all laid out in ESSA. Not all of them, because we couldn’t do all of them right now. We just don’t have the bandwidth to do it, to marry those two things. So, we’re working toward a common goal and stay in compliance with state and federal requirements.

The theme of alignment was further exemplified by the comments made by superintendent Brian while discussing the development of goals at District C:

Over the summer I meet with the administrators in a retreat and we look at where we are with our goals from strategic planning and we help develop the district goals, the board of education goals which are aligned with strategic planning goals. We develop that, those sets of goals. We take them to the board of education; they approve them in August; so, I’m prepared on opening day on September 1, “These are our district goals.” Of course, they’re aligned with strategic planning.
Strategic planning is not static; districts can and do adjust strategic plans in place whenever it necessary and appropriate to do so, and proper alignment is considered. Goals may be aligned to other planning initiatives associated with student achievement, such as professional development. Professional development for teachers and administrators can support goals established to improve student achievement. For example, in District A, when discussing professional development, superintendent Rick said:

To be honest with you, we have work to do in order to align the professional development practices with the stated goals of the district. So that whole idea of organizational alignment between taking your resources and dedicating them to the goals that you want to, we have some work to do there. And the strategic planning process is a part of that, but it’s also more about conversations about making sure the items fit together. Like making sure our efforts and the themes and the systems that we have are all trying to produce those goals. So, we could probably tighten up the alignment between professional learning and instructional goals.

Superintendents discussed aligning goals to academic achievement and aligning professional development for teachers and administrators to support the goals established in the strategic plan. By necessity, goal setting must also be aligned with school district budgets as well. At District C, Superintendent Brian referred to “strategic budget planning process” to ensure that the resources required to meet goals in the strategic plan are budgeted for. As an example, Brian described an online program called I-Ready as “a strong computer based program that could help shore up students’ skills and reinforce them. …That program was expensive, cost us over $100,000. But it was beneficial too.
So that was a big investment identified to raise our scores…” Brian further described the district’s alignment of goals to the budgeting process:

I have each administrator put in a Google Doc what they’d like to see in the upcoming budget. And I tell them it’s got to be based on our goals, right? …I want to know their needs. I want to know what you need to fulfill your goals. So, they put them in there and the reasons why they need them.

At District K, Superintendent Jim described a similar focus on aligning the strategic plan with the budget process:

We do a stakeholders’ report every year where we show our performance goals, how we’re doing, and we revisit the strategic plan. And we line that up with what we’re prioritizing for the next budget year so that the district sees that strategic plan in multiple media formats every year.

At District A, Superintendent Rick said that spending decisions are determined by aligning priorities to the district’s mission and vision, indicating that linkage to be good budget practice. Tim, the Superintendent at District E, made a similar assertion: “The budget is a reflection of goals, aspirations and expectations of the program. It’s not only a tangible financial document, it’s a strategic plan.”

Superintendent Betsy, from District I, also referred to alignment when discussing professional development tied to the strategic plan: “We won’t approve a professional development request without it being linked to that.” Similarly, Superintendent Carol from District J also connected professional development with strategic planning, stating:

“So, we really started working on offering opportunities or looking for opportunities that really homed in on the skill and the focus areas from our
strategic plan…Now, occasionally, someone will need assistance with a particular content area or maybe classroom management or something, but everything revolves now around our strategic plan.”

Responding to a question about the process for adding, removing, or changing goals in the strategic plan, Superintendent Peter, from District D said:

Every year we’re going to go back. This year, we’re going in October and we’re going to look at our plan, I mean look at our goals and where we are. Sometimes you want to tweak it; sometimes you want to raise the bar; sometimes you’re finding that there’s still a big gap. And so, we want to still not lower that gap, but look at strategies, and they’re not working as efficient as we hoped to, so we’ll look at that piece also. And we’ll realign, and then gain support of the board. Because sometimes it comes with financial resources, and/or it’s reallocation of your present resources, that you look at your resources differently.

Another example of alignment that the data revealed was the effort made by superintendents to ensure that their investment in professional development supports the strategic plan and is also in line with the public school education in general. As Superintendent Tim from District E stated:

What they want relative to what I feel their strengths and weaknesses are, my evaluative judgment relative to where SED’s [state education departments] going, relative to where the field’s going, relative to position ourselves to self-actualize the mission, vision, and core beliefs.
At District G, Superintendent Bruce emphasized the importance of providing professional development to support the goals established in the strategic plan,

One of the things I’m most proud of, my time as superintendent, we’ve had more professional development available to staff in the areas that we identified in need through our strategic plan, but also identified through requests, that’s connected to our strategic plan, in order to support them.

Superintendent Betsy from District I likewise linked professional development to the goals established in the strategic plan by commenting, “We won’t approve a professional development without it being linked to that [the strategic plan].” Carol, Superintendent at District J added, “…occasionally, someone will need assistance with a particular content area or maybe classroom management, but everything revolves now around our strategic plan.” Betsy, at District I said similarly,

“Anything I report in my board report is related to our annual goals, and then if they don’t fit specifically, like if something’s kind of an oddball, but it doesn’t align with this particular goal, it’s literally this goal and then things that I report…it all reports back to the strategic plan, which is great, so that I can tie it back that way.”

Alignment is an important consideration for making any revisions to a strategic plan, such as adding, removing, or changing goals included in the strategic plan. At District D, Superintendent Peter indicated that the district reviews the goals established in the strategic plan annually:

“Sometimes you want to tweak it, sometimes you want to raise the bar, sometimes you’re finding that there’s a big gap. And so, we want still not to lower that gap,
but look at the strategies, and they’re not working as efficient as we hoped to, so, we’ll look at that piece also. And we’ll realign, and then gain support of the board. Because sometimes it comes with financial resources, and/or it’s reallocation of your present resources, that you look at resources differently.”

At District F, Superintendent Gary described a similar process that occurs annually at the retreat for the school board and the administrative team. The leadership team reviews the categories within the district’s strategic plan (student achievement, educating the whole child, staff development, community partnerships, and fiscal responsibility), to ensure that goals are aligned to an area of focus. As described by Gary, “We can refer to them as we make decisions and say, look at our goal under that. What we’re talking about doesn’t match. So, what do we have to do to match our strategic plan?”

**Theme 2. Goals that are measurable.** In order for a school district to determine whether progress toward achieving goals is occurring, goals must be measurable. Some districts included in the study use the acronym SMART to describe goals included in their strategic plans that are specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound (Doran, Miller, & Cunningham, 1981). At District B, superintendent Lynn and executive director of curriculum and data management Sue described the process of considering greatest areas of need (GAN). Teachers and administrators in District B review data regularly in order to develop goals to address the greatest areas of need. Several districts studied used an outside consultant to facilitate the goals setting process.

Some goals included in the strategic plans in districts studied are part of state and federal accountability measures. District B, for example, is considered a target school
district by the New York State Education Department (NYSED). Superintendent Lynn and director of curriculum Sue worked with NYSED to develop a District Comprehensive Improvement Plan (DCIP) to improve instruction and address needs identified for the district related to student performance and the enhancement of teacher and leader effectiveness within the district. The accountability process provided by NYSED is closely related to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). As described by superintendent Lynn with District B:

ESSA has come out with the measures of interim progress. And so, what we’ve done is we’ve updated the metric that we’re using. So, we’re actually using what the state has identified. So, and they take a look at where we are, and I think they set that on the 16-17 school year of data. And then they established 5 years of targets for us. So, now we shifted and are using those targets in our strategic planning as well because it would make no sense to have to monitor against accountability, and then also have some other internal kind of target. It’s confusing for people.

District C uses an outside consultant to assist with goal determination. Superintendent Bruce described the process where the consultant visits the district in the fall, and works with the leadership team to review progress toward goal achievement:

So, every year we set different goals and we work throughout the year on those goals. Then, Sam comes in, in the fall, and we take benchmarks of where we are and do we need to retain certain goals, or have they become part of the fabric now that we will just normally be doing them. So, do need to retain? Do we want to
add? And we always change our metric to push out; to increase where are targets are going to be.

Superintendent Peter from District D engaged with Northwest Education Association (NWEA) to help the district acquire additional data to review. As superintendent Peter described it:

So, it also gave us more points to look at, as far as a starting point, a midyear, and trimester. So, we had those data points, also we looked at report card, three through eight testing, and then we started developing goals based on that, knowing where our needs were, where our strengths were, and where our weaknesses were, and what we were looking to aspire to do in the plan.

District E also uses an outside facilitator who works with the district’s instructional leadership team to determine the goals for the strategic plan. As superintendent Tim described the process:

We look at our current data and what our performance data is telling us. We look at current trends, what’s out there in the field of importance that we should be latching onto, current trends in the field. We look at SED, what’s going on at the SED level, SED regulatory that has to be incorporated. Those are maybe the three key drivers. Our existing data, what’s out there in SED, what’s current trends, and what our board preferences are, then we also survey our staff. We have a large survey tool that we use with our staff to get the staff input as to where they feel things should go. Instructional goals…. There are two types of goals in my mind. They are operational goals, which are the year in front of you, the current year you’re in. Then they are strategic goals, that’s two to three years out.
Another example of measuring progress toward achieving goals was described by Superintendent Bruce at District G, where the district reviewed how well it was monitoring the effectiveness of tracking results. The reflection on effectiveness led to some changes to improve the process. As superintendent Bruce stated:

We needed to start tracking our results. We had worked with the Fountas & Pinnell, but really hadn’t used that data very effectively. So that’s why we only have one year of information there. And we went back historically on where we were performing on 3-8 assessments now. And I can’t tell you that I’m a huge fan of 3-8 assessments, but at least it’s a performance indicator and that’s how we’re measured. But one of the things that we’re very proud of, and I’m very proud of, is the mean growth percentile. And if you look at that mean growth percentile, and then later on, go back to the end, it says anything above 54%, you’re outperforming, or you’re performing at a high level. So, it’s kind of a double-edged sword because we were so low. People might say, “Well, it’s easy to perform at a high level when you’re so low.” But what we’re seeing is, anything above a 54% with mean growth percentile is awesome. So, this past year we were at 59% for ELA and 67% for mathematics. So, we’re very proud of those numbers. And the, what we worked to do with the secondary level at the bottom was to align the performance indicators with the expectations all laid out in ESSA.

Other districts emphasized the importance of measuring progress toward achievement of goals and linking goals to student achievement. Betsy, at District I, described using data to support strategic planning: “So our strategic plan was designed
specifically for student achievement. And all of those other areas play a part, and so we looked at a lot of data that helped us decide what direction to go.”

Superintendent Carol at District J described a similar process for using data to measure the district’s progress toward goal achievement:

We like to refer to the data. Our district is data driven and we use data from a variety of sources. And as we look at that, we identify strengths and weaknesses. It might be in particular populations, or it might be in grade levels or content areas. And that is something when we first developed our plan, we identified those areas that we felt we could improve upon. And we utilize that information. That piece is a living document, because the data changes. So, we utilize that, and when we meet in the summer, we review the plan, the progress we’ve made, and then we identify what we want to focus on for the following year.

At District K, Superintendent Jim stressed that student achievement is not measured by test scores alone; there are other measures that can and should be included when monitoring the effectiveness of goals in the strategic plan. As Jim described the process in his district:

When we initially designed the goals, we were talking about the idea that success can be more than just the test scores. And so, we were looking deeper. So, we looked at buckets before ESSA came out. We had already wanted to look at something that…And one example is the percent of the cohort graduating with rigorous outcomes as defined by either earning advanced designation diplomas, passing one or more AP courses, earning a three on that AP exam, earning
concurrent enrollment or a CT endorsement. So, we defined what success means for multiple paths of kids.

**Theme 3: Goals that cascade or spiral down.** When describing the type of goals that are being developed and included in strategic plans in public school districts, superintendents often mention how goals cascade, or spiral down from the board of education to the administrative team and to classroom teachers. Superintendent Lynn at District B described the process this way:

> So, yes, we do have a strategic planning process. It’s really based on the Middle States accreditation process. So, we did go through that accreditation a number of years ago. I think we’re in year 6, or year 5 maybe, of our accreditation. And so, I think we have a plan for growth and improvement that identifies areas of focus in each of 12 different standards; certainly, there’s priorities in different years. From that, the Board of Education identifies precise priorities for each school year. Those priorities then become the basis of my goals of the administrative goals, but strategically then, those priorities then really help our plan for growth and improvement, and the work that happens through our work with the individual teachers and schools…. So, it kind of really spirals from growth and improvement, connects into priorities, the administrative goals, as well as the greatest areas of need for the teachers.

Sue, the director of curriculum and data management at District B described the process further, indicating that the board of education sets priorities for the district each year, which are shared by the superintendent with the administrative team, “and then it cascades from there.” Describing the process further, Sue stated:
I think most directly when we think about strategic planning, link to student achievement, it’s we look at the assessments of our students. We look at our next steps for guided reading, we look at our star assessment, which is our universal screening tool. And then, from there we look at gap areas or the standards that are most in need. And then we go through the process and I think that the teachers at the end of the process have a voice in it, which is, I think nice because that’s where the change has to happen, within the classroom. So, it’s really a cascading process of who is involved from the governance committee to the administration to the teachers.

Superintendent Lynn summarized, “It really does. It spirals throughout, as Sue said, it really spirals from the governance team all the way through the administrators, and down in involving the teachers as well.”

When describing the strategic planning process in their school districts, superintendents described starting with a large group of stakeholders, including school board members, administrators, parents, teachers, students, and other members of the community. Several districts used an outside consultant to facilitate this process. Superintendent Brian from District C described the process:

So, I contacted [the consultant] and he was willing to come on as our consultant and so we created a large stakeholder committee of about 30; teachers including union leaders, administrators, parents, community members, students. All of the ones you want making a collective shared decision making process. So, we came together as that group and created the plan.
Other superintendents interviewed described a similar process in their respective districts for formulating their strategic plans. Ultimately, however, for goals to affect student achievement, the cascading or spiraling down process described above must occur, because as Sue from District B indicated, “…that’s where the change has to happen within the classroom. So, it’s really a cascading process of who is involved from the governance committee to the administration to the teachers.”

**How are Goals in the Strategic Plan Being Implemented?**

Research Question 2 - If strategic planning is being used in rural schools, how are the goals in the strategic plan being implemented? examined the process that superintendents use to ensure that the goals created for the strategic plans in their districts were implemented with fidelity. As mentioned earlier, all 12 administrators interviewed for this study indicated that the strategic planning process is used to support their districts’ mission and vision. Significantly, all 12 administrators included in the study indicated that the strategic planning process affects student achievement. As Superintendent Carol, from District J, put it, “Yeah, if you don’t know where you’re going, how are you going to get there?”

**Theme 1: Distributed leadership.** The first theme of the second research question emerged as distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006) Superintendents distributed the responsibility for implementing goals among the district staff. When asked “How can you be confident that your strategic plan is being followed consistently throughout the district?” Rick, from District A responded this way:

Trust. Yeah, I think trust and communication with leaders. In John Kotter’s work, I think he used an expression that, organizational change, one of the keys is
to over communicate by a factor of 10. So, I think a lot about that when I think about, at a faculty meeting, I’ll communicate something, and I’ll give it in writing. And then I’ll give it in an email, and I follow up in the faculty meeting. And then I might send a re-mail about it. And so as much as I think that’s time consuming when I think about a factor of 10, I’m at three. So, I think my level of trust in terms of how thoroughly it’s being followed directly related to the efforts that I make to communicate at all levels. Or to ensure if not me, personally, to ensure that communication is happening at all levels. And the key to that is trying to do that within a culture that’s supportive and not top down. I think trust and communication, constant communication, are probably the best answers to that.

At District B, superintendent Lynn described the process where administrators divide up responsibility to a specific grade level or content area to work with teachers accordingly:

We have administrators who are now assigned to a grade level or content area. So, there’s someone from the administrative team that’s sitting on the DDI [data driven instruction] meetings as the teachers are bringing their data, as they’re talking about their progress, as they’re thinking about what’s going to be our focus for the next weeks…they really go through that DDI process.

At District C, superintendent Brian tracks the implementation of the district’s strategic plan through his administrative team. Building principals play a significant role in the process of ensuring goals are implemented and followed as intended. As Brian described it:
Yeah, I mean I do leave quite a bit of it up to the building principals to make sure they’re working with their teams and it’s getting done. But when I meet with them two times a year for formal observations, I’m asking those questions. If it’s not happening, I’m asking why? Why isn’t this happening? Not heavy handed, that’s not my point. But just so they know if I’m going to observe them, I’m going to be asking them questions about the goals so that they’re working on them.

At District E, Superintendent Tim emphasized transparency to ensure that the strategic plan is being followed consistently and with fidelity:

I think that when we invest such an enormous amount of time in transparently reviewing the accountability’s built in it by design….That’s right. I believe in it. Give power to get power, be transparent to maintain positive relationships and to keep things going.

At District G, Superintendent Bruce credited the district’s culture for ensuring that the strategic plan is being followed consistently. As Bruce described it:

I would say that’s an easy answer from the standpoint that it comes back to the culture within your school….So people are really invested in this strategic plan. The plan alone isn’t where…it’s a framework. It’s the authenticity that the staff bring. Because they aspire to have [District G] be a model school. So, it’s the authenticity, it’s the social-emotional, it’s the mindfulness component that people are buying into [as] part of the process, to help us achieve the outcomes that we desire to achieve. To be effective, then, strategic plans must be implemented such that there is clarity concerning areas of responsibility among the leadership team.
and with fidelity. The strategic plan should be thought of as a living document, that needs to be nurtured and followed consistently by all district stakeholders.

As superintendent Betsy described the importance of District I’s strategic plan:
I think because we have such a…it’s tied to so many different groups and it’s reflected at almost every leadership meeting, that it is our guiding force. I feel very confident. It’s not on a shelf. Because I’m a part. I was a part of it, and I am a part of all these other groups too. It’s not on a shelf. It doesn’t sit there.
We can talk about anything within the strategic plan and we can say where we know it’s easy. Teachers and administrators can say, “We really need to focus on more career-oriented stuff, or we need to focus on getting them connected in the community with somebody.” So, they’re able to walk the walk and talk the talk. They really are.

With a similar response, superintendent Carol at District J supported the concept of the strategic plan being a living document. For it to be effective, the strategic plan must be revisited and reflected upon often. When used actively and consistently, the strategic plan can be a very powerful tool for school districts. As Carol described it:

Well, I think I can be confident in that because it’s not a document that just sits on a shelf. It’s something that we take a great deal of pride in, and we refer to it frequently. When we start talking about, for instance, spending textbook money, if you will, or purchasing new technology, the conversation typically turns to, well, what does it say in our strategic plan? So, we do utilize the document. It does drive everything we do in the district. And we recognize that it’s not perfect, because before I came to [District J], there never was a strategic plan in writing –
in this district, so this is really our first attempt. So, we don’t proclaim to have the perfect document, but it does get used. It does help us drive our decision making.

**Theme 2: Alignment.** The emergence of the alignment theme continued throughout the analysis of the data. The alignment of goals to planning initiatives emerged as a theme in response to Research Question 1 and did so again in regard to Research Question 2. A school district’s strategic plan addresses many different areas in addition to the focus on student achievement, and planning initiatives must be aligned to support the district’s mission, vision, and core beliefs. Without properly aligning goals and objectives contained within the strategic plan, its implementation could not be carried out effectively. For example, a district’s expectations for effective teaching and learning must be addressed in the strategic plan to ensure that the district’s curriculum aligns with the New York State Learning Standards, professional development aligns to meet the needs of classroom teachers to deliver instruction of the curriculum, and the observation and evaluation of teachers and administrators aligns with curriculum and instruction. In District B, for example, Superintendent Lynn spoke about establishing expectations for teaching and learning:

So, we have first of all, a curriculum review process. That’s going to help guide what is taught in the classroom, and the revision cycles….And so, an example would be our balanced literacy approach, our guided reading focus, and the work we’ve done on writing as well. So, there’s an example of looking at the data, recognizing that we needed to approach, let’s talk about reading slightly differently. And so, I mean, I think it starts administratively, but then we’re always pulling in the curriculum council, and then really planning for
implementations that we might need, because in order to change teaching and learning in the classroom, you may likely need professional learning in order to make that shift. And so, I would say that the implementation strategies do begin with the administrative staff pretty quickly, are shared with the curriculum council, but then, as we’re thinking about then what the implementation could look like, I mean that, then that, the learning, the professional development is organized, and then I think, if you look out past the implementation, then it’s really who monitors to make sure that there’s fidelity with the work. Part of that happens, I think, through the just observation process that we have. Guiding principles, we have all of our administrative team does classroom observations. So, I think we get that sort of feedback loop in there. I would say that’s an area though, that we’re focusing on improving, because I think we’re pretty good at identifying, “here’s an area we need to improve,” thinking about what it is that could potentially help us improve, identifying either a resource or professional learning, implementing that, getting the teachers on board. So, now the teachers are, let’s talk about balanced literacy. It’s the fidelity piece that we’re really focusing on, because that’s the piece that if you don’t have a real tight loop to make sure that, all right, you retrained. Are you really doing it exactly the way you should be doing it? I think that’s the area I would say that we are focused on.

Responding to a question about the design, documentation, and communication of expectations for effective teaching and learning in the district’s plan, once implemented, Superintendent Brian from District C responded as follows:
Over the summer I meet with the administrators in a retreat and we look at where we are with our goals from strategic planning and we help develop the district goals, the board of education goals which are aligned with strategic planning goals. We develop that, those sets of goals. We then take them to the board of education; they approve them in August and then I’m prepared on opening day in September to say, “These are our district goals.” Of course, they’re aligned with the strategic planning. So, I present those out. We talk about them. We talk about where we are in terms of showing them with our state testing and where we are with that.

At District D, Superintendent Peter described aligning goals included in the strategic plan to the district’s core belief that “children are our first priority.” Focus on the district’s core belief is considered the driving force in the strategic plan at District D. Decisions made during the strategic planning process always center around the core belief of children as the first priority. As Peter emphasized, “How’s this program going to benefit children, and how do we measure it? So, we started really focusing on what we’re talking about. Principals did a good job rolling it out.”

At District G, Superintendent Bruce also spoke about the district’s strategic plan and goals established within it being aligned to the district’s core beliefs, and the importance of ensuring that all stakeholders are well aware of the district’s strategic plan and what is included in it: “But we have the strategic plan really marketed throughout the district. It’s very prevalent…every classroom has a strategic plan, a mission, vision and core beliefs and then the performance indicators.”
As described by the study participants, alignment was a consistent emphasis that emerged from the interview data. All 11 districts included in the study indicated that the strategic plan is designed to support the mission, vision, and core beliefs of the district. Goals established in strategic planning cascade from the board of education to the superintendent and building principals and to classroom teachers. Professional development for teachers and administrators is tied to supporting the goals established by the strategic planning process.

**How are the Strategic Plans in Rural School Districts Being Monitored?**

Research Question 3, *How are the strategic plans in rural school districts being monitored?* examined the process of the work done by school districts once a strategic plan has been implemented. Strategic plans are not intended to reside in a binder, sitting on a shelf and collecting dust. The plan is a living document that should be reviewed regularly and revised or updated whenever it is appropriate to do so. Progress monitoring emerged as the theme to describe the process that districts use to monitor the strategic plan that has been created and implemented to support the district’s mission, vision, and core beliefs.

The theme aligned to the third research question was progress monitoring. All school districts need to assess their students’ academic performance to measure their improvement and the effectiveness of the instruction that they are receiving. School districts engaged in strategic planning need to discern the effectiveness of their strategic planning as well. Results of the study showed that rural school districts monitor their strategic plans in a variety of ways and periodically review and report out about the status of their strategic plans.
School districts’ monitoring of their strategic plans included the manner in which they approach how well the actions steps to support the goals established within the plan are being followed. At District A, Superintendent Rick indicated:

The terms used in (District A) when we started, the plan that’s coming through, it’s guided by beliefs, guiding principles, and embedded practices. And there are strategic objectives and then targets within the strategic objectives. So, the actions themselves, it’s my understanding, are determined more at the building level. There’s a building improvement team that works with the departments or grade level teams within each building. And they determine the actions that give the district the best chance of success at meeting the target and strategic objectives.

Responding to the same question about ensuring that action steps in the strategic plan are being followed with fidelity, the Director of Curriculum at District B said:

So, it’s the Plan, Do, Study, Act process. And so quarterly, the curriculum leaders are reviewing the data with their grade level teams or departments. And then, we report on it quarterly. So, they make decisions. Do we keep the same goal? Do we modify the same goal? Or do we have to scrap the whole thing because it wasn’t the right goal, and we have to start from scratch? So, it’s iterative, as mentioned, and it’s established each year, and these results are reported to the board quarterly.

At District C, Superintendent Brian described the process for monitoring the strategic plan in his district:
So, you looked at our strategic plan. You see that it’s divided not priorities and strategies. Those are an overall part of our goals. What we do is we take that, as I said, and I can send a copy of our district goals for the year and you’ll see they’re aligned. In those district goals again, that are approved by the board in August and shared out, those have timelines and who’s responsible for them. So, it’s clear to everybody of who’s in charge of this goal. It should be done. So, when I go in and I evaluate the principal, I have a couple of walkthroughs. Then in other informal times I’m talking to them about how it’s going on this goal. What do we need, what do you need, and they give me some feedback on it. In January, formally we give a presentation on how the goals….And then in June formally, we give a presentation to the board on what was accomplished and what we didn’t accomplish.

At District D, Superintendent Peter referred to the benchmarking process used in his district:

As you said, we broke it down in the goals, but then the implementation of those goals, there are benchmarking pieces. So, by the end of year one we should be….for example, I’ll go backwards, easiest way, high school. We want to see in our first year we’re at 85% or 88%. This year we should be at 100% because they gave the regents away, right? But on a realistic thing, say your graduation rate’s 88%. Next year, we want to be 92%. Year after that’s 95%. And you always aspire to be 100%, but you need to look at those incremental steps. And also, the way that they assess it, because if you give a kid that does not pass [the] Regents
exam, it does not count as a graduate, a Regents graduate. So, there’s a combination there. Then we also look at 3-8 testing. We’re looking at our absentee rates. We’re looking at those pieces, and incrementally we’re trying to improve in all areas.

At District E, Superintendent Tim discussed the process for monitoring his district’s strategic plan with an accountability system he established for the district:

I created what’s called the goals accountability system, and it’s a system whereby we report out quarterly. We establish the goals; we report out quarterly on a matrix on the goals that’s reported to the board quarterly. Yeah, we have a few frameworks. We have the goals accountability report and then we have administrative quarterly reports that speak to the goals.

At District F, Superintendent Gary described his district’s monitoring process:

Yeah, so not only the higher level monitoring of that, but building planning teams meet monthly to talk about where they are with their goals, put further steps in place. So, they’re monitored quite often. They’re arranged in a Google Docs spreadsheet, so I can go in and look at them any time. When they have those monthly meetings, they go in and update where they are with those. It’s kind of a Gantt chart, if you will, what needs to be done and by when and by whom to keep people responsible and moving forward.

At District H, Superintendent Sam described the process for ensuring that the district’s strategic plan is being faithfully followed:

So, our initiatives set dates and specific objectives they want achieved by certain dates. We used a Gantt chart to set that out. So, we actually, after we did the
strategic plan, we actually sat with what we consider the owners of the plan. So, each initiative has someone who is like, they own that portion of the plan. Their job is to make sure the meetings leading to that accomplishment are at it. And so, we met, we got all the leaders for the different initiatives, they sat with two board members, myself, other members of leadership team. And we put out on a Gantt chart timeline and set out days of what we wanted to do. And we identified some key activities, not all the activities but some key activities that need to occur for each initiative.

Superintendent Betsy, from District I, described ensuring that the goals and action steps are monitored by the leadership team, as follows:

It’s a combination, it’s the leadership team. I have a full cabinet leadership, so it involves the three building principals, the assistant principal who’s also our athletic director, or director of student services who runs all our CSE meetings and is our CSE director. The assistant superintendent is also our business official, so she oversees, she kind of helps the elementary with the curriculum, and I help the high school with the curriculum piece, and then our group meets. Our full cabinet, which includes facilities and operations and all that, meets every other week, and then our instructional leadership meets the opposite week. So, we review those, and they have to report on those goals. Our board goals as well as strategic plan, they have to reference them in their monthly reports to me.

Progress monitoring occurs at District J with regular updates to the board of education. The district’s superintendent described the structure for the strategic planning document and how progress towards goals is reported to the board of educations:
The way our strategic plan, I’m just peeking at it here so that I can get the setback. The way it is set up, we have target areas, for instance, teaching and learning, then we’ll have a strategic issue. And underneath each strategic issue, there is a goal. And so, we have specific action steps, and then we have worked as a team to identify who’s responsible for those action steps. And then we have a column that is called measurement. And so, then we determine how we’ll measure our success or any particular steps. So, this plan is looked at usually every other month. I update the board on the progress that we’ve made.

**Summary of Results**

Eleven superintendents and one executive director of curriculum and data management were interviewed regarding the strategic planning process at the 11 rural public school districts included in this study. All administrators interviewed affirmed that strategic planning supports their respective districts’ mission and vision and affects student achievement favorably. The district leaders described the type of goals that are developed and included in their strategic plans, and how goals written into their plans are implemented. Each of the superintendents and the director of curriculum also described in detail the processes they use to monitor their strategic plans. The study indicated that goals included within the plans of participating school districts are aligned with planning initiatives from their respective strategic plans. It was evident that alignment of goals to the strategic plan was an essential element of the planning process. Strategic planning in the districts studied supports each district’s mission, vision, and core beliefs.

Strategic planning is not static; administrators who participated in the study described strategic planning as dynamic. Districts can and do make changes to their
strategic plans when it is necessary and appropriate to do so. At school districts included in this study, strategic plans do not sit unused in a binder on a shelf. The superintendents and the director of curriculum and data management who participated in this study indicated that their strategic planning is a visible and engaging process that affects decision making throughout their respective districts. Professional development is provided to teachers and administrators in order to support the goals established by strategic planning that support student achievement.

One way to ensure that strategic planning goals are measurable is by using the SMART goal planning process (goals that are specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound). School administrators interviewed for this study indicated that goals should be set high enough to encourage and challenge learners. As Superintendent Bruce described the process, “…every year we set different goals and we work throughout the year on those goals…and we always change our metric to push out; to increase where our targets are going to be.” Locke and Latham (2006) emphasized the point further by noting that, “High goals lead to greater effort, focus and persistence than moderately difficult or easy goals.” Strategic planning in districts studied includes goals that cascade, or spiral down, from the board of education, to the superintendent and administrative team, to classroom teachers. This is a very important concept, with the implication that real change and growth in student achievement occurs in the classroom. As mentioned earlier, all participants in the study indicated that the strategic planning process affects student achievement.

Goals included in strategic plans of the districts studied are implemented through distributive leadership and alignment. Superintendents reported that they distribute
responsibility for implementing goals among administrators and classroom teachers, ensuring that the strategic plan is being followed consistently and with fidelity. Aligning goals to a district’s core beliefs was a theme that emerged from this study.

Progress monitoring is used to keep track of how well each district’s strategic plan is being followed. School districts included in the study indicated that their strategic plans are reviewed regularly, and progress is reported to their respective boards of education accordingly.

Chapter 5 will discuss the implications of the study as well as limitations of the study and recommendations for future studies of strategic planning in public school districts.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

Strategic planning is used by public and private organizations to provide a road map to what an organization is, does, and for what purpose. The existing literature on strategic planning developed by many organizations, including public school districts, indicates common elements found in strategic plans, which are mission, vision, and goals (Bryson, 2004). The literature demonstrates the benefits of strategic planning for the performance of business firms (Miller & Cardinal, 1994). Qualitative studies of strategic planning in public school districts, however, were underrepresented in the literature. The purpose of this study was to determine the role of strategic planning towards the achievement of goals to improve academic success for students in rural public school districts. This chapter provides an overview of findings from the study, as well as their implications and limitations. Furthermore, the chapter provides recommendations for further research on strategic planning in public school districts. The research questions guiding this study were:

1. According to the framework developed by Locke and Latham (1990), what type of goals are being developed and included in strategic plans in public school districts?

2. If strategic planning is being used in rural schools, how are goals in strategic plans being implemented?

3. How are strategic plans in rural school districts being monitored?
Several themes emerged from the process of data analysis. These themes provided the results of the study summarized in the study findings. The next section provides a description of the implications and findings aligned to the three research questions.

**Implications of Findings**

Seven key findings resulted from this study. Finding 1 indicated that goals included in strategic plans among the districts studied are aligned to other planning initiatives for the district, such as a district comprehensive improvement plan (DCIP), a school improvement plan, or the Every Child Succeeds Act (ESSA). Finding 2 demonstrated that goals included in school district strategic plans are measurable. Finding 3 showed that the school districts studied develop goals that cascade, or spiral down. Finding 4 concluded that school districts use distributed leadership to implement strategic planning goals that are aligned to strategic planning initiatives. Finding 5 demonstrated that school districts use progress monitoring to keep track of their goal attainment. Finding 6 indicated that goals developed during the strategic planning process in school districts studied supported the districts’ mission, vision, and core beliefs. Finding 7 showed that the practice of strategic planning in school districts studied affected student achievement positively.

The goal setting theory (Locke & Latham, 1990) served as the theoretical framework for this study. Locke and Latham (1990) described five principles for goal setting: clarity, challenge, commitment, feedback, and task complexity. An outgrowth of the goal setting theory is the concept of SMART goals (Doran, 1981), which refers to goals that are specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART).
Recall that Finding 1 indicated that goals included in strategic plans among the districts studied are aligned to other planning initiatives for the district. Alignment of goals to the strategic plan emerged as an essential element in the planning process among participating school districts in this study. The SMART mnemonic aligns well with Locke and Latham’s (1990) five principles from the goal setting theory. The implication of the results of this study is that when school districts establish clear goals that are easy to measure, educators can discern progress towards the attainment of goals included in the strategic plan. At District E, for example (see Appendix F), the district’s planning team elected to use the state’s mean growth percentile (MPG) in place of the proficiency targets on assessments for Grades 3-8. The MPG takes into consideration economically disadvantaged students and students with disabilities and was thought to better reflect student growth for similar students from year to year in that district. At District G, one student achievement goal was to “Ensure that all students PK-12 are reading on or above grade level” (see Appendix G). The district’s strategic plan includes specific action steps aligned to that goal, who is responsible for seeing that actions steps are followed, and dates for completion. Participants in the study reported that key decisions for their respective districts always refer back to the strategic plan.

By measuring decisions based on the goals articulated in their strategic plans, administrators could be confident that they were carrying out the strategic plan as adopted by the board of education. This will ensure that the strategic plan is being followed with fidelity and monitored appropriately. Alignment was a strong theme that emerged from the study. School administrators seek to align their respective districts’ strategic plans with all other planning initiatives. This focus holds true through the
development of the annual school budget that must be presented for voter approval each spring. Resources that are required to support strategic planning goals are budgeted for, aligning the strategic planning document with the budget document each year. Resources are allocated or reallocated based upon how they can best support goals aligned to the strategic plan. Alignment was a consistent theme among the strategic plans of districts studied. This is important because, as mentioned above, district spending decisions are determined by aligning priorities to each district’s mission, vision, and core beliefs.

Decisions to support professional development are aligned to goals to support student achievement. At District B, for example, the strategic plan (Appendix H) includes a goal to “Support an environment of high expectations for all staff.” That goal was supported by a statement that included a provision for “Professional development opportunities for all staff to be continuous learners and promote innovation using My Learning Plan data.” Administrators are able to determine which professional development opportunities should be supported based on how such opportunities align to strategic planning goals.

Aligning goals established in the strategic plan to district planning initiatives ensures that school district leaders can be confident in their efforts to support their districts’ mission, vision, and goals. This was clearly evident in the results of this study.

Finding 2 showed that goals included in the strategic plans of participating school districts are measurable. This is an important factor, because to discern whether growth and progress towards the achievement of goals is occurring, they must be measurable. Whether reporting to a local board of education or to NYSED, goals must be measurable in order to demonstrate whether growth and progress toward goal attainment is taking place. School leaders included in this study reported that the strategic planning process
began with a large group of people, with representatives from many constituency groups in their respective school districts, including school board members, school administrators, teachers, parents, students, and members from the community at large. This is important, because the implication is that the inclusion of representatives of a district’s many constituency groups encourages buy-in from all stakeholders once the strategic plan is developed. If members of one or more groups do not feel included in the process, they might not support the planning initiatives written into the plan, or care about it one way or another. Including a broad stakeholder group in the initial planning stages of a strategic plan will likely create a feeling of goodwill in the process, and a sense of pride among district stakeholders with the completed strategic planning document. This may prove to be important over time, as the membership of school boards can and does change. So too will there be changes among the faculty and staff of a district, as well as students and their families. If the strategic planning process is firmly established in a district, perhaps it will help districts adjust to change over time. School leaders included in this study indicated that their strategic planning process helped them lead their district through the ongoing adjustments necessary to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, such as online learning. NYSED directed all school districts in the state to develop and submit reopening plans prior to July 31, 2020. Districts were required to develop plans to deliver instruction to students in person, remotely, or a combination of the two methods (hybrid instruction). It seems likely that in the districts studied, where strategic planning is an ongoing process, responding to instructions from NYSED would not be viewed as an overwhelming task, because the districts already have planning processes in place. As an example, at District G, the strategic plan (see Appendix G)
included performance measures for the past 5 years in areas such as K-5 ELA, Grades 3-8 ELA and math, and the percentage of high school students earning a New York State Regents Diploma with Advanced Designation at commencement.

Finding 3 demonstrated that goals included in the strategic plans of the districts who participated in the study cascade, or spiral down. A school board can create district-wide goals and charge the superintendent with the responsibility of ensuring that such goals are supported and achieved. Strategic planning provides the framework for developing, supporting, and measuring progress toward goal achievement for school districts. At District E, for example, the strategic plan identified goals for the current school year (immediate priorities), including to “Complete the transition to managed IT services, and continue to utilize best practices and training in the use of instructional technology” (see Appendix F). The same strategic plan also articulates long term goals (to be completed within three years), such as maintaining focus and effort on the continued “implementation of effective RTI (Response to Intervention) and SST (Student Support Team) with an emphasis on dropout prevention” (see Appendix F).

Superintendents can assign goals to building principals and department chairs, to ensure that goals for student achievement ultimately are supported by classroom instruction. As one administrator interviewed described the process, “…that’s where the change has to happen, within the classroom.”

Finding 4 showed that strategic planning goals are implemented through distributed leadership. Distributed leadership allows for the implementation of goals and strategies to occur within traditional roles as well as informally by educators entrusted with such responsibility. Within an environment where distributed leadership is
practiced, formal and informal leadership are not incompatible, but are rather different aspects of leadership practices that allow for many sources of influence (Harris, 2013). Just as goals cascade, or spiral down, in strategic plans, the responsibility for implementing and sustaining established goals is distributed by superintendents to building administrators and teachers. This process allows for the implementation of goals within the strategic plan with fidelity, to ensure that goals are followed as intended.

Other descriptions of this process used by superintendents interviewed were transparency and mindfulness, with accountability for goals built into the strategic plan. Superintendent Bruce at District G indicated that the mindfulness component when implementing strategic planning initiatives encourages buy-in, which helps the district achieve desired outcomes. This approach, district leaders affirmed, encourages buy-in with the strategic planning process. It was within this context that school administrators described their strategic plans as living documents, not something that sits on a shelf, collecting dust. As superintendent Betsy at District I described her district’s strategic plan, “It drives everything we do in the district.” Superintendent Tim at District E emphasized that distributed leadership encourages transparency, ensuring that the strategic plan is being followed consistently and with fidelity. When stakeholders within the school community buy-in to the strategic plan and the provisions for carrying out the plan, they are likely to assume their roles in the plan responsibly and professionally. District G, for example, assigns responsibility, or “ownership,” as various action steps designed to foster the successful completion of goals established in the strategic plan (see Appendix G). This is another example of the cascading effect described earlier.
Finding 5 demonstrated that school districts use progress monitoring to ensure that their strategic plan has been implemented and is being followed as intended. School districts included in this study monitor their strategic plans by making sure that it is clear to all stakeholders who have responsibility for goals included in the strategic plan. The process was succinctly described by the Executive Director of Curriculum and Data Management at District B: “So, it’s the Plan, Do, Study, Act process.” Goals are designed, implemented, followed, assessed, and reported on. Progress monitoring occurs with regular updates to the board of education. Using the adage “what gets measured gets done,” progress monitoring supports the strategic planning process and ensures that the goals within it are appropriately targeted and matched to relevant action steps.

Finding 6 indicated that goals developed during the strategic planning process in school districts studied supported the districts’ mission, vision, and core beliefs. All 12 school administrators who participated in the study supported this finding. The literature indicates that mission, vision, and goals are common elements for strategic plans (Bryson, 2004). At District G, for example, the strategic plan (see Appendix G) included a mission statement to, “Educate and inspire every student to achieve excellence.” The district’s vision statement indicated, “We aspire to be a model school that empowers all students to realize their unlimited potential.” The strategic plan at District E (see Appendix F) had a mission statement that said, “We nurture and empower each learner’s unlimited capacity to become a responsible citizen with a promising future.” The vision statement at District E was, “Striving for excellence as an innovative, advanced and reflective school community.” The mission statement at District B (see Appendix H) was articulated as, “[District B] is committed to academic excellence which empowers all
individuals to become motivated learners and challenges them to excel as citizens in a
global society.” The three examples provided reflect a focus on students. This focus was
found in most, if not all, strategic plans developed by public school districts who
participated in this study.

Finding 7 showed that the practice of strategic planning in school districts studied
affected student achievement positively. Significantly, all 12 administrators who
participated in this study supported this finding. As mentioned above, all 11
superintendents and the executive director of curriculum and data management who
participated in this study described each district’s efforts to align goals and decision
making with the strategic plan. Participating school districts also reported alignment of
strategic planning goals to the New York State Learning Standards as well as provisions
from ESSA. Goal setting is effective because people understand that setting goals leads
to a more disciplined and, hopefully, better quality of life; one develops a goal or goals to
attain a desired condition or status. Furthermore, setting challenging goals promotes
greater effort and determination, and stronger self-satisfaction once a goal is attained
(Locke & Latham, 2006). Examples of setting challenging goals among participating
school districts include goals to encourage students to take one or more advanced
placement (AP) courses or increasing the percentage of students who graduate with
advanced designation Regents diplomas. Other studies have found that strategic planning
positively affects the financial performance of business firms (Miller & Cardinal, 1994).
It is the focus on student achievement that drives the strategic planning process in public
school districts. All participants indicated that strategic planning supports the mission,
vision, and core beliefs for their school district. Certainly, student achievement must be a core belief for any public school district.

Wanjala and Rarieya (2014) found that several factors would either help or hinder participating in strategic planning in Kenyan secondary schools, such as knowledge of strategic planning, leadership styles, financial resources, and professional support. Factors that inhibit strategic planning are budget restrictions and turnover among the teaching staff (Yikier and Almay, 2018). It is the focus on student achievement that drives the strategic planning process in public school districts. All participants indicated that strategic planning supports the mission, vision, and core beliefs for their school district. Certainly, student achievement must be a core belief for any public school district.

**Unexpected Findings**

The review of literature did not consider distributed leadership in connection to strategic planning in public school districts. However, distributed leadership emerged as a theme connected to Research Question 2, *If strategic planning is being used in rural schools, how are the goals in the strategic plan being implemented?* The implication of this study is that leadership is fundamentally about influence (Harris, 2014). Leadership influence can be accomplished formally, by school administrators carrying out their day-to-day responsibilities in school oversight, and informally, by classroom teachers entrusted with leadership responsibilities. In this way, rather than thinking about leadership coming from traditional administrator roles of superintendents, directors, and principals, leadership can be provided by many levels of expertise and experience. This approach provides school districts with a means to build leadership capacity for school
improvement (Harris, 2014), capacity that can positively influence student academic outcomes (Miskell, 2014). Results of this study demonstrated that districts studied practiced distributed leadership to implement their strategic planning goals.

**Limitations**

There were three limitations to this study. First, this study began shortly after the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic. To support the state and national response aimed at controlling the pandemic, all public school districts in New York State halted in-person classroom instruction. Planned face-to-face interviews with the 11 superintendents and one executive director of curriculum and data management who participated in the study were not possible. Instead, all participating school administrators were interviewed with the use of video conferencing technology (Zoom).

A related second limitation to the study was the fact that districts were confronted with responding to a national emergency, which may have affected the number of participants in the study; some administrators may have felt that there just was not enough time to take part in an interview during a very stressful time. The consequence of a small sample size may mean that the study may not be generalized to all public school districts. The third limitation was that this qualitative study considered strategic planning in rural public school districts; would the results be similar if suburban and urban districts were studied?

**Recommendations**

This qualitative study analyzed data gathered from interviews with rural school leaders. A future study on strategic planning could focus on a quantitative analysis of
measures of student achievement, such as growth over time on the New York State math and ELA assessments in Grades 3-8 and Regents examinations.

This qualitative study considered only strategic planning in rural public school districts in New York. A future study could include suburban and urban school districts to discern whether the size of the school districts affects results, and to compare the strategic planning experiences of rural school educators with their counterparts in larger school districts.

Additionally, a study could be conducted to compare the results between districts where strategic planning has already been established and is ongoing, versus districts where such planning has not yet been established. Districts studied likely responded to the COVID-19 pandemic emergency quickly because they had effective planning processes in place and were able to develop the new plan for reopening their schools, as required by New York State officials. It would be interesting to establish whether or not this is the case through a future study.

Educational leaders, including public school superintendents and school board members representing school districts where strategic planning is practiced will likely concur with the results of this study. In public school districts where strategic planning is not taking place, it is recommended that educational leaders in such districts develop and implement strategic plans in their respective districts; the results of this study indicate that would be a worthwhile endeavor.
Conclusion

Results of this study indicate that strategic planning does affect student achievement in rural public school districts. Strategic planning supported the mission, vision, and core beliefs among participating school districts. Strategic planning is data driven and achievement focused. Results indicate that the strategic planning process drives decisions making and is closely aligned to planning initiatives across the district, as well as to the development of the annual district budget. While many districts do not have strategic plans in place, school leaders from the 11 districts included in this study all indicated that the strategic planning process was well worth the effort and resources allocated to it. Given that the school leaders who participated in this study all affirmed the value of strategic planning towards supporting student achievement, it seems likely that having strategic plans in place provided an invaluable resource.

Lencioni (2002) described the five dysfunctions of a team, essentially behaviors that organizations should avoid in order to be successful. The five dysfunctions described by Lencioni (2002) are: absence of trust, fear of conflict, lack of commitment, avoidance of accountability, and inattention to results. School districts that engage in strategic planning can avoid the pitfalls described by Lencioni by including all stakeholders (the board of education and the administrative team, students, parents, faculty, and staff) in the development and implementation of the strategic plan.

The practice of strategic planning provides school districts with a means of building trust and commitment. Strategic planning fosters accountability and attention to results. This study found that school districts develop goals that are specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and time-bound (SMART). Given the fact that the strategic planning
process is used in PK-12 educational settings, regardless of the dearth of literature, this study provides validity and creditability to the practice of strategic planning in public school districts. All 12 administrators interviewed indicated that strategic planning is well worth the effort and resources necessary to develop, implement, and monitor strategic planning in their respective school districts.
References


Appendix A

Rural Schools

As described by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), rural schools are defined as follows:

**Rural**

- **Fringe** - Census-defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster.

- **Distant** - Census-defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than less than 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster.

- **Remote** - Census-defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster.

Appendix B

St. John Fisher College

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Title of Study:  A Study of the Effect of Strategic Planning on Student Achievement in Rural Public Schools in New York State

Name of Researcher:  Stephen P. Miskell  (585-519-3972)

Faculty Supervisor:  Dr. Susan M. Schultz  (585-395-7296)

Purpose of Study:  The purpose of this study is to determine the role of strategic planning in the achievement of goals established to improve academic success of students in rural public school districts.

Place of Study:  Various. The in-person interviews with superintendents in rural school districts in New York State. Interviews will take place in person.

Length of Study:  One interview lasting no more than 60 minutes.

Risks and benefits:  The expected risks and benefits of this study are explained below.

Minimal risk exists, as the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research are not greater in and of themselves than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during routine tests. There are no additional anticipated emotional or physical risks associated with participating in this study. Participation or non-participation in this research study with not impact volunteers in any way. By participating in this study, participants will contribute to study results, which will add to the current body of research on strategic planning.

Method for protecting confidentiality/privacy:  All consent is voluntary. Pseudonyms will be assigned to all participants. Participants’ names and identifying information will remain confidential and will not appear in transcripts, analysis, or the final study. Written transcripts will be stored in an office in a locked cabinet accessible only to the researcher for a period of three years after the successful defense of the dissertation and then shredded. When not in use, the audio and electronic files of the data, as well as interview transcripts will be secured in the same cabinet with access only to the researcher for a period of three years after the successful defense of the dissertation and then destroyed.

Your rights:  As a research participant, you have the right to:

1. Have the purpose of the study, and the expected risks and benefits fully explained to you before you choose to participate.
2. Withdraw from participation at any time without penalty.
3. Refuse to answer a particular question without penalty.
4. Be informed of the results of the study.

I have read the above, received a copy of this form, and I agree to participate in the above-named study.

________________________________________________________________________
Print Name (Participant)                      Signature                                               Date
________________________________________________________________________
Print Name (Investigator)                     Signature                                              Date

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please contact the researcher above. If you experience emotional or physical discomfort due to participation in this study, please contact your health care provider or local crisis provider.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of St. John Fisher College has reviewed this project. For any concerns regarding this study and/or if you experience any physical or emotional discomfort, you can contact Jill Rathburn by phone at 585-385-8012 or by email at irb@sjfc.edu
Dear (Superintendent’s name),

My name is Steve Miskell. I am a doctoral candidate in the Executive Leadership Program at St. John Fisher College. I am conducting a research study as a requirement for the Education Doctorate (Ed.D.) degree in the Executive Leadership, and I would like to invite you to participate in the study. Your participation will consist of me interviewing you about the strategic planning process in your school district.

The topic of my study is the relationship between strategic planning and student achievement in rural public schools in New York State. I plan on interviewing current superintendents in rural public schools to learn about the process you use to establish goals to improve academic achievement in your strategic plan, and how you monitor progress toward achieving those goals.

The interview will take place at a mutually convenient location and time and will take approximately one hour. The interview will be audio-recorded for the purpose of data analysis later on.

Pseudonyms will be assigned to all participants interviewed. Names and identifying information of all participants will be kept confidential, and will not appear in any transcripts or analysis, or in the final study. Written transcripts will be stored in a locked office cabinet accessible only to the researcher, and audio and electronic files will be secured in a password protected hard drive held in a locked office cabinet with the written transcripts.
Thank you for your consideration. Please confirm your willingness to participate in the study by contacting me by email at spm07643@sjfc.edu or by phone at (585) 519-3972. Please feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns you may have. As a reminder, participant information will be kept confidential by assigning pseudonyms to all participants and securing all interview materials on a locked office cabinet. This information will be reviewed with you again at the time of the interview, and you will be asked to sign the Informed Consent Form prior to the interview.

Sincerely,

Stephen P. Miskell

Education Doctoral Candidate, Executive Leadership Program

St. John Fisher College, Rochester, New York
## Appendix C

### Research Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Background Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rick</td>
<td>Superintendent</td>
<td>Veteran school administrator serving in the first year the Superintendent position. Holds a doctoral degree.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lynn</td>
<td>Superintendent</td>
<td>Veteran school administrator and superintendent. Holds a doctoral degree in education and is well versed in strategic planning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue</td>
<td>Director of Curriculum</td>
<td>Veteran school administrator in the process of presently earning a doctoral degree in education and is well versed in strategic planning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian</td>
<td>Superintendent</td>
<td>Veteran school administrator and superintendent and well versed in strategic planning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>Superintendent</td>
<td>Veteran school administrator and superintendent. Holds a doctoral degree in education and is well versed in strategic planning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tim</td>
<td>Superintendent</td>
<td>Veteran school administrator and superintendent. Holds a doctoral degree in education and has extensive knowledge of strategic planning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gary</td>
<td>Superintendent</td>
<td>Veteran school administrator and superintendent. Holds a doctoral degree in education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bruce</td>
<td>Superintendent</td>
<td>Veteran school administrator and superintendent and is highly engaged in strategic planning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>Superintendent</td>
<td>Veteran school administrator and superintendent. Holds a doctoral degree in education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Betsy</td>
<td>Superintendent</td>
<td>Veteran school administrator and superintendent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carol</td>
<td>Superintendent</td>
<td>Veteran school administrator and superintendent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jim</td>
<td>Superintendent</td>
<td>Veteran school administrator and superintendent.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Appendix C contains the pseudonyms and some background knowledge, as well as the researcher’s impressions of the participants.
Appendix D

Data Collection Tool: Superintendent Interview Protocol

Introduction: Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. The purpose of this study is to investigate the effect of strategic planning on student achievement in rural public school districts in New York State. I would like to ask you some questions about the strategic planning process in your district, and how student achievement is impacted accordingly.

As stated in the information that I previously shared with you, our conversation today and the information you share with me will remain confidential. To ensure confidentiality, I will assign pseudonyms to participants, focus on themes that result from interviews, and avoid linking any statements to individual names. When not in use, any documents and recordings associated with interviews will be secured in a locked file, kept for three years after the successful defense of the dissertation, and then destroyed.

To ensure that I capture all of your responses and will be able to review the interview at a later time, do I have your permission to record this interview?

Interview Questions:

1. Does your district use the strategic planning process to develop goals to support the district’s mission and vision? Who is involved in developing the goals?
2. How do you determine what goals for student achievement are included in your strategic plan? Who is involved in this process?
3. How do you design, document, and communicate your district’s expectations for effective teaching and learning? How are the expectations determined, and by whom?
4. How does your strategic plan address action steps to support the goals established within the plan? Who is responsible for ensuring that the action steps are being followed?
5. How do you assess and review the effectiveness of the goals included in your strategic plan? How often is this process carried out? Who is included in the process?
6. How do you solicit and incorporate feedback from faculty and staff, students, parents, and school board members to revise goals or add new goals to the strategic plan? How often does this process take place?
7. How do you identify specific skills or resources that teachers and administrators will need in order to improve student achievement? Is professional development available for teachers and administrators?
8. What type of data do you use to determine whether the goals included in your strategic plan are being met, or progress towards achieving goals is occurring?
9. How is progress toward attaining goals reported to the board of education? How often is progress reported, and by whom?
10. What is the process for adding, removing, or changing goals included in the strategic plan? How often does this process take place?
11. How are faculty and staff, parents, school board members and community members made aware of the strategic plan and the goals within it?
12. Which goals and action steps included in your strategic plan specifically address student achievement? How is progress towards achieving these goals measured? How often? By whom?
13. How can you be confident that your strategic plan is being followed consistently throughout the district?
14. Do you believe that your strategic planning process affects student achievement? How?
15. Is your strategic planning process supported by your district’s annual budget? How?

Closing statement: Our interview is coming to the end. Is there anything else that you would like to discuss with regard to the strategic planning process in your district? Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today.
Appendix E

Strategic Plan – District I

We believe...

- Everyone can learn.
- Positive expectations, behaviors, and attitudes are modeled by adults.
- Risk taking, innovation and creativity are encouraged.
- There should be celebrations for what is going well.
- Students learn by cultivating their interests and talents.
- A positive school culture reflects a focus on cultural diversity.

- Acceptance of each other promotes a positive learning environment.
- Success is enhanced when all students take responsibility for their learning.
- The responsibility for a rigorous, goal-oriented education and for the well-being of each student is shared by the entire community.
- Each student is cared about, and in turn cares about and respects all others.

Strategic Focus Areas:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Achievement</th>
<th>Intentional Investment in Learning</th>
<th>School Culture and Community</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Goal 1: Academic Achievement: Each student will meet or exceed the expectations of the curriculum and instruction of the District and New York State Standards.

Outcome A: Curriculum and Instruction: All curriculum and instruction will be aligned to maximize student learning
- All teachers will develop curriculum, instruction, and assessments aligned to New York State Standards.
- All students will be exposed to curriculum that is relevant, engaging, and culturally responsive aligning to both New York State Standards and corresponding curriculum and instruction.
- All teachers will utilize data analysis skills to monitor and maximize student performance according to the New York State Standards.

Outcome B: Instructional Practices: Maximized student learning and high expectations for all students will be met through the use of differentiated instruction and effective instructional tools and assessment.
- All preK-12 students will be provided integrated instructional opportunities to achieve the best academic outcomes.
- All teachers will utilize innovative pedagogy to engage and teach all students.

Goal 1 Strategic Action Recommendations for Academic Achievement: Create Curriculum and Instruction Team(s) to

- map, review and update curriculum
- align instructional practices and create linkages with common and state assessments
- unpack New York State Standards
- design professional development and support tierkey trainings to help facilitate the implementation of district initiatives
- explore grading and scheduling alternatives
- review homework policy
- analyze student data, climate survey data, test data and report card data
- embed data review in team meetings, department meetings, faculty meetings and leadership meetings and develop professional learning communities.
Goal 2: Intentional Investment in Learning: Each student will be provided opportunities for authentic learning, collaboration and skill development in college, career, and citizenship while demonstrating an innovation mindset and appropriate use of technology.

**Outcome A: Engagement and Investment**: All students will be fully engaged in teaching and learning that meets their skills and needs to be college, career, and citizen ready (CCC).
- All students will engage in preparing to meet their future goals and responsibilities for college and/or career, and civic duties.

**Outcome B: Opportunities**: A wide range of teaching and learning opportunities will be provided to meet the needs of students at all grade levels and with all abilities to ensure both community and global perspectives.
- All students will communicate and/or collaborate with community, business, local and global education partners each year.
- All students will continue to explore opportunities to expand and deepen trans-disciplinary learning and problem-solving skills that can be applied and transferred to college, career, and civic readiness.

**Outcome C: Consideration of Reconfiguration of the two elementary schools to align grade levels in each building.**
- An analysis of the current building grade configuration will be conducted to determine the best configuration to meet the needs of all elementary students.
- A discussion and decision-making process will be initiated by the General Brown School District to consider reconfiguration of the district schools, specifically the two elementary schools in order to attain the horizontal and vertical alignment, congruence, and consistency of curriculum, instruction, assessment, space utilization, inclusivity, and opportunities.

Goal 2 Strategic Action Recommendations for Intentional Investment in Learning: Create a Team to
- develop a counseling/guidance and CCC plan and to embed career development K-12
- continue to advance offerings for all students especially in the areas of technology and in the community
- explore necessary resources to support new opportunities including realignment of grades to maximize alignment of curriculum, instruction, coordination and communication

Goal 3 School Culture and Community: Each student will demonstrate behaviors congruent with a school culture and community that reflect the values, beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, respect, and relationships that promote academic success and social and emotional well-being for all in inclusive, safe settings, and with family engagement.

**Outcome A: Inclusive environment**: The teaching and learning environment will be enhanced to ensure that students are engaged in learning in an inclusive environment that is socially, emotionally and physically safe.
- All students will engage in extracurricular activities that promote leadership development.
- All students will be educated in inclusive settings.
- All students, staff, parents and community members will feel welcome in all school settings, and they will support and promote cultural awareness and sensitivity.

**Outcome B: Staff and Community Development**: We will hire, mentor, develop and retain teachers and staff to model all aspects of this inclusive school culture and community.
- All staff will reflect the mission and vision of GBS to provide an inclusive teaching and learning environment for students.
- All staff members will engage in community outreach.

**Outcome C: Safety**: Student and staff safety will be at the forefront of decisions about facility and classroom procedures and space to ensure a focus on teaching and learning.
- All schools will be safe and secure at all times.

Goal 3 Strategic Action Recommendations for School Culture and Community: Create a Team to
- analyze student engagement data in activities
- develop strategies for increasing engagement to meet the learning and social needs of all students within school and the community
- develop a plan for enhancing a welcoming culture in all schools
- ensure all professional development aligns with district goals
- update the School Safety Plan to support physical safety & security, mental health and student discipline
- implement a robust mentoring program
Appendix F

Strategic Plan – District E

Pledge:
We nurture and empower each learner’s unlimited capacity to become a responsible citizen with a promising future.

Our Vision:
Striving for excellence as an innovative, advanced and reflective school community.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Performance Measures</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>2014</th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2016</th>
<th>2020 Target</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grades 4-8 ELA all students: Mean Growth Percentile (MGP*)</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grades 4-8 Math all students: MGP</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regents commencement exams: % cohort ≥ 65 (4 yrs)</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% cohort graduating (4 yrs – 8/31)^</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% cohort drop out (5 yrs – 6/30)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>&lt;5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% average daily attendance</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% chronic absence</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% graduates enrolling in 2- or 4-year colleges, other post-secondary or the military</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Grades 11-12 enrolled in college credit-bearing courses</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% enrolled in college classes earning an A or B</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>TBD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Grades 7-12 participating in &gt;=1 co-curricular activity</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Immediate priorities: Apply significant focus, resource and attention

- Investigate and implement alternative ways to measure Grades 3-8 ELA, math and science performance and continue to provide support for core and encore learning standards.
- Complete the transition to managed IT services, and continue to utilize best practices and training in the use of instructional technology.
- Provide all instructional staff training regarding CDOS standards and all graduation pathways.
- Continue to identify the essential standards to encourage the use of formative and common assessment data to improve instruction.

2016-19 strategies: Maintain focus and effort

- Continue the implementation of effective RTI and SST with an emphasis on dropout prevention.
- Track period-by-period attendance, and develop specific and timely interventions to reduce chronic and period-by-period absenteeism.
- Develop and implement a more comprehensive metric for high school rigor.
- Expand opportunities for college-credit bearing courses and associate's degrees.
*Mean Growth Percentile (MGP):*

The district’s planning team has decided to replace Grades 3-8 proficiency targets with growth targets using the state’s *Mean Growth Percentile (MGP).* The MGP is a measure of student growth year to year for similar students from grades 3-8 using a scale from 1-99. The MGP includes consideration of SWDs and economically disadvantaged student characteristics. Note: Grade 3 is a baseline year so there is no growth score for those students.

- An MGP between 60 and 100 represents growth that is **well above the state average** for similar students.
- An MGP between 46 and 59 represents growth that is **equal to the state average** for similar students.
- An MGP between 43 and 45 represents growth that is **below the state average** for similar students.
- An MGP between 1 and 42 represents growth that is **well below the state average** for similar schools.

The state has a short [video](#) describing how student growth scores are calculated. Below is Hancock’s trend for Grades 3-8 NYS ELA & Math assessment proficiency.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grades 3-8 ELA: % proficient</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grades 3-8 Math: % proficient</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

^Breakdown of graduation outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% cohort graduating (4 yrs – 8/31)</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- % Regents diploma</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- % local diploma</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- % Adv. Designation Diploma</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- % Regents w/ endorsement</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix G

Strategic Plan – District G

Mission:
Educate and inspire every student to achieve excellence.

Vision:
We aspire to be a model school that empowers all students to realize their unlimited potential.

Core beliefs:
- Students are our first priority.
- Every student can learn.
- We hold high expectations for all.
- We cultivate creativity and innovation.
- We create a safe, engaging learning environment that nurtures the whole child.
- A partnership among students, staff, families and community is necessary to achieve success.
- We support equitable opportunity for everyone.
- Everyone is treated with respect and dignity.
- We foster good citizenship and public service.

Performance Measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>K-5 EIA: % el/above year-end grade level benchmark (H&amp;P)</td>
<td>Gr. K-2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gr. 3-5</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NYS Gr. 3-8 EIA1</td>
<td>% proficient</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean growth percentile (MG&amp;P)2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% refusing test</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NYS Gr. 3-8 Math</td>
<td>% proficient</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MG&amp;P</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% refusing test</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% high school cohort with a rigorous outcome2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% earning Regents diploma with Advanced Designation Diploma</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% earning a Regents or local diploma with a CTE endorsement</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% cohort earning high school credit for a dual enrollment course</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% earning &gt;=15 college credits</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% cohort earning Regents/diploma passing nationally certified CTE exam</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% cohort earning Regents diploma with a CQUS endorsement</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Immediate priorities4: apply significant focus, resource and attention
- Ensure that all students PK-12 are reading on or above grade level.
- Provide engaging, differentiated, student-centered instruction.
- Provide targeted interventions to students at-risk.

Core strategies: continue to improve performance
- Identify and eliminate instructional gaps PK-12.
- Prepare every student with the skills necessary for a successful transition into a college or career.
- Implement a consistent schedule that promotes student opportunities.
- Integrate social-emotional learning standards into the classroom.
- Develop student leaders who are empowered in the educational process and who are prepared for the future.
- Maximize partnerships to provide more opportunities for students.
**Ensure that all students PK-12 are reading on or above grade level.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action step</th>
<th>Owner</th>
<th>Due</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Continue to analyze reading level data at K-6. Adjust and provide quality, targeted interventions.</td>
<td>Reading spec &amp; classroom teachers</td>
<td>3/2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Train K-8 interventionists in LLI.</td>
<td>Admin</td>
<td>Summer 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Explore ways to provide scheduled opportunities for authentic reading.</td>
<td>Lori, Diane</td>
<td>Summer 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Provide professional development in literacy across the curriculum PK-12.</td>
<td>Admin</td>
<td>8/2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Implement best practices from the PD PK-12.</td>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>2020-21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Provide targeted interventions to students at-risk.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action step</th>
<th>Owner</th>
<th>Due</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Research models, including resources required, for providing RTI in grades 7-12.</td>
<td>Jake, Shelby</td>
<td>8/31/2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Based on the research, develop a plan including schedule implications for providing quality, tiered interventions for those Gr. 7-8 who are reading below grade level.</td>
<td>Gr. 7-8 team</td>
<td>9/2020-2/2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Implement the plan to provide quality, tiered interventions.</td>
<td>Admin, Gr. 7-8 team</td>
<td>9/2021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Replicate RTI plan to other content areas and grade levels as appropriate.</td>
<td>Admin, teachers</td>
<td>2021-22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Provide engaging, differentiated, student-centered instruction.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action step</th>
<th>Owner</th>
<th>Due</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Use gallery walks at several faculty meetings to demonstrate engaging, differentiated, student-centered instruction.</td>
<td>Various teachers Admin</td>
<td>6/2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Implement peer visit opportunities inside and outside the district.</td>
<td>Admin Mentoring All teachers</td>
<td>2020-21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Schedule staff development focusing on engaging, differentiated student-centered instructions.</td>
<td>PK-6 7-12</td>
<td>3/13/20 &amp; ongoing 2020-21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Identify and eliminate instructional gaps PK-12.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action step</th>
<th>Owner</th>
<th>Due</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Determine crucial learning standards across all subjects, starting with 7-12 ELA.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Repeat the process in the following order for ELA: 4-6 followed by K-3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Utilize the same process used for ELA for Math, Science, and Social Studies.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Once crucial learning standards are determined at each grade level, align curriculum and teaching units to the Crucial learning standards.</td>
<td>Lacey All teachers</td>
<td>4/30/20 – 9/11/20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix H

Strategic Plan – District B

• In 2012-2013, District B began the process of preparing for Middle States Accreditation. This involved our Board of Education’s alignment of their priorities for the District with the Middle States Standards. Although the purpose of the Middle States self-study and accreditation process is to establish whether the school system meets the Standards for Accreditation, we selected the Excellence by Design self-study protocol to determine whether we have in place the building blocks for a quality school system.

The Excellence by Design protocol is based in the principles and concepts of strategic planning. Therefore, the protocol requires the school system to be forward thinking, not focusing so much on the past and past accomplishments but, instead, focusing on the future—what does the school system have to do differently or do better to further its mission and to ensure that all of its students are able to achieve the knowledge, skills, and characteristics the school system has defined in its Profile of Graduates.

Therefore, the culminating activity of the self-study and accreditation process is the developing of a Plan for Growth and Improvement in Student Performance.

Developing a Plan for Growth and Improvement involves:

  o Establishing a vision for the school system by creating or reaffirming a statement of mission.
  o Identifying a set of beliefs that will serve as the school system’s ethical code.
  o Developing a profile of the knowledge, skills, and qualities the school system expects of its graduates.
  o Identifying the areas of student performance that are the priorities for growth and improvement.
  o Developing action plans to achieve the performance objectives.
  o Monitoring implementation of the action plans.
  o Conducting periodic reviews of the progress being made toward achievement of its objectives.
Following are the required components of the Plan for Growth and Improvement:

- A Mission
- Beliefs
- A Profile of Graduates
- Three, four, or five objectives measurable student performance/organizational capacity objectives; at least two must be focused on growing and improving student performance
- One or more assessments for each objective
- Baseline data for at least one assessment for each objective
- Technical approval of the objectives
- Comprehensive action plans to achieve the objectives
- A plan for regular monitoring and review of the Plan (at least once annually)

Evidence of these required components are as follows:

**Mission**

The District B School community is committed to academic excellence which empowers all individuals to become motivated learners and challenges them to excel as citizens in a global society.

**Values**

*Learning*

We believe in providing a **world class education** for each student.

*Character*

We expect all to model behaviors of **respect, responsibility, trustworthiness, fairness, caring, and citizenship.**

*Leadership*

We believe in **developing and retaining strong leaders.**

*Environment*

We believe it is necessary to have a **clean, safe, and healthy environment.**
Communication
We believe in maintaining open communications with all stakeholders.

Community/Parental involvement
We value the importance of collaborative relationships between the school district and the community.

Commitments
We are committed to:

- Sustaining a rigorous and engaging continuum of learning through meaningful experiences that support the highest level of achievement. (Learning)
- Treating all members in the District B community with honesty, respect, and compassion. (Character)
- Modeling a positive attitude, fostering an enthusiasm for learning, and exemplifying a growth mindset with students, colleagues, and the community. (Character)
- Working as dedicated individuals who, as part of a collaborative team, continually strive toward excellence. (Leadership)
- Creating a safe and supportive environment that centers on wellness. (Environment)
- Enhancing open, consistent communication. (Communication)
- Advocating for and responding to the needs of the District B Community. (Community/Parental Involvement)

Vision - Profile of our Graduates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Values</th>
<th>Profile of our Graduates</th>
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| **Learning**
We believe in providing a world class education for each student. | District B graduates will effectively use a wide array of strategies to solve problems and think critically. They will be able to compete with other high-achieving graduates in the global society. |
| **Character**
We expect all to model behaviors of respect, responsibility, trust- | District B graduates will advocate for themselves and others, and accept responsibility for their own actions. They will |
worthiness, fairness, caring, and citizenship. demonstrate respect for the opinions and beliefs of all regardless of cultural, political, religious, and gender differences while making a difference for the greater good.

**Leadership**
We believe in developing and retaining strong leaders.
District B graduates will take the leadership skills they have learned to demonstrate civic responsibility by working collaboratively to enhance their community.

**Environment**
We believe it is necessary to have a clean, safe, and healthy environment.
District B graduates are mindful of and responsive to the environmental and technological needs of their local and global community. They will strive to enhance the world around them.

**Communication**
We believe in maintaining open communications with all stakeholders.
District B graduates will communicate and collaborate effectively as well as consider other views while contributing to the global society.

**Community/Parental involvement**
We value the importance of collaborative relationships between the school district and the community.
District B graduates will become responsible, compassionate members of society. They will participate in community service, develop skills of collaboration, and will appreciate diversity.