**Identifying Strategic Objectives and Strategic Initiatives**

Developing Overarching Goals and Identifying the Initiatives to Accomplish Them;

Using Community Visioning and Root Cause Analysis Results as a Starting Point

**What Are Strategic Objectives and Initiatives?** Strategic objectives, as defined by the Massachusetts Planning and Implementation Framework, are the coherent group of overarching goals and key levers for improvement that will achieve the future vision. Strategic objectives articulate not only the “what” of the plan but also the “why.” Strategic initiatives are the projects and programs that support and will achieve the strategic objectives. Strategic initiatives are the “how.”

**Why This Step is Important:** The strategic objectives and initiatives of the district plan emerge from:

* an understanding of the district’s current performance, achieved through data and root analysis;
* a vision of the future, achieved through a community visioning process; and
* a knowledge of effective evidence-based practices, achieved through research.

While it is most helpful if root cause analysis and research of effective practices occur early in the planning process, both will provide value at any point throughout the process as the plan is developed. In addition, a district may choose to include research as part of a strategic initiative, for example, as part of the creation of a professional development plan or implementation of a multi-tiered system of support.

**The Process for Identifying Strategic Objectives and Initiatives:** Planning teams begin the process of developing strategic objectives when they identify cross-cutting themes in the community visioning feedback that was gathered as part of the planning process. Teams identify these common themes by synthesizing responses from all stakeholder groups, as described in the PfS resource “Synthesizing Community Feedback.” Teams will then want to explore these themes for connections to issues identified in their analysis of the current context, as described in the PfS resources, “Analyzing Data for Root Causes” and “Analyzing District or School Planning Practices and Culture: SWOT Analysis.” Teams will also want to consider evidence-based practices and the first-hand knowledge and experience of instructional leaders as they continue to develop the plan’s strategic objectives.

The overall process for identifying strategic objectives and initiatives will vary depending on the district’s particular planning process, planning team structure, and the data that the planning team has gathered. The process below describes one possible approach to this work. This multi-step process would occur over consecutive planning team meetings.

1. *Identify strategic objectives:* Strategic objectives, the “big buckets” or overarching goals of the district plan, should be generated from all data available up to this point in the planning process, including common vision themes, root cause analyses, SWOT analyses, and research. When leading the team in drafting strategic objectives, facilitators should choose an approach based on where the team stands with its work at that point.

The descriptive statements and/or bulleted lists of common themes that result from a synthesis of all community visioning feedback, as described in the PfS resource “Synthesizing Community Feedback,” serve as an excellent starting point in drafting objectives. If the team is using the Back to the Future Protocol as its visioning protocol, the common themes for question 1, which asks participants to describe what the district or school looks like in its future state, will be the best source of data. The team’s goal is to identify 3-5 strategic objectives for the plan, which might require consolidation, prioritization, an addition to, or other reframing of the “big buckets” that might begin to emerge from these common themes.

To move from common themes to strategic objectives, facilitators may choose to organize the planning team in small groups and charge each group with using these themes to create draft objectives for presentation and discussion with the entire planning team. Or a facilitator may choose to lead a discussion of these common themes and the crafting of objectives based on them with the planning team as a whole.

Regardless of approach, the facilitator’s goal is to ensure that the planning team—not the facilitator—takes the lead in selecting language and framing the strategic objectives as statements of both “what” and “why.” Facilitators should encourage the team to draft action-oriented objectives that begin with a verb; doing so will help the team think through and more clearly and specifically define the objective’s intention. Lastly, the facilitator should continue to work with the planning team on the framing of strategic objectives until the team comes to consensus and has a sense of shared ownership for the objectives as stated.

The time required for this work can range from 1 to 2 hours initially, depending on the team’s starting point, the facilitation approach, and the discussion required to reach consensus. The process of framing strategic objectives is iterative work and facilitators will likely return to the objectives for review and revision multiple times during the planning process, as the plan continues to develop and evolve.

1. *Identify strategic initiatives:* Once the team has identified draft strategic objectives, they should begin to identify draft strategic initiatives, the projects and programs that support and will achieve these strategic objectives. Since strategic initiatives are identified to support specific objectives, it is most effective to conduct initiative planning by organizing the team into small groups each of which is focused on a different strategic objective. Small groups should work with all data generated by the planning process, including common vision themes and root cause analyses related to their objective.

If you are using the Back to the Future Protocol, the results for question 3, which asks participants to describe how the district or school moved to its future state from its present state, will be useful during this activity. In addition, the PfS resource “Researching and Selecting Evidence-Based Practices and Programs,” will be particularly useful as teams consider and select strategic initiatives. This resource provides information about how to search for and select effective evidence-based practices.

Small groups may use the PfS Strategic Objective/Strategic Initiative Organizer included with this resource as a worksheet for recording proposed strategic initiatives for their assigned objective. The worksheet offers space to record up to 6 draft strategic initiatives at this initial stage, if necessary. The final plan will likely include 4 to 6 strategic initiatives per objective. The time required for this work can range from 2 to 3 hours.

**Note to Facilitators:** If the district is conducting visioning using the Back to the Future Protocol (<http://www.nsrfharmony.org/system/files/protocols/future.pdf> and <http://schoolreforminitiative.org/doc/future.pdf>), you will find that all three of the protocol’s questions can serve as useful starting points in developing strategic objectives and initiatives. Themes identified for Back to the Future’s first two questions, about the future and present state of the district or school, can serve as useful starting points in identifying strategic objectives, the “what” and the “why” of the plan. Themes identified for the protocol’s third question, about actions that helped the district or school to move from the present to future state, can serve as a useful starting point in identifying strategic initiatives, the “how” of the plan.

As teams engage in the challenging and often messy work of developing strategic objectives and initiatives, it is helpful to remind participants that planning is an iterative process, and that they are creating first drafts of plan components that will continue to be reviewed, revised, and refined throughout that process. The *Planning for Success* process includes a structured quality review of the draft plan as a final step in the process, which offers an additional opportunity for review and revision. In addition, the structure of the planning process itself may offer planning teams ongoing opportunities for review and revision. For example, if the process is structured so that the leadership team and planning team are both actively engaged in and sharing the planning process, these teams may then serve as reviewers of one another’s work.

During the development of strategic objectives and strategic initiatives, it is extremely helpful to share multiple examples of both components with the planning team. In addition, it is also extremely helpful for planning teams to see and review a completed plan in the PfS format. The *Planning for Success* website offers a number of examples of plans that facilitators may choose from as they share examples with their teams.

**Text for Facilitator Presentation Slides:** Some suggested text for presentation slides for identifying strategic objectives and strategic initiatives is included below.

**1. Identify Strategic Objectives**

**Slide 1: Strategic Objectives**

* Strategic objectives
  + The coherent group of overarching goals that will achieve the future vision (the “what” and the “why”)
  + Example: *Provide engaging learning for students and staff to strengthen instruction for all types of learners*
  + Back to the Future Protocol question #1 serves as one data source
  + Analysis of current performance and evidence-based practices serve as other data sources
* Our goal
  + Identify 3-5 draft strategic objectives for the plan
  + Lead with a verb
  + Choose words for community understanding that reflect community aspirations

**Slide 2: Strategic Objectives Workshop**

* Organize into [X] small groups
* Identify a facilitator and recorder
* Review community visioning common themes and analysis of current context
* Draft 3-5 strategic objectives that respond to this data
* Prepare to share small group work with the team

**Slide 3: Group Presentations**

**2. Identify Strategic Initiatives**

**Slide 1: Strategic Initiatives**

* Strategic initiatives
  + The projects and programs that will help achieve each one of the objectives (the “how”)
  + Example: *Provide professional development to build capacity and retain high quality staff*
  + Back to the Future Protocol question #3 serves as one data source
  + Analysis of current performance and evidence-based practices serve as other data sources

**Slide 2: Strategic Initiatives Workshop**

* Organize into [X] small groups
  + [one group for each strategic objective]
* Identify a facilitator and recorder
* Review relevant data for proposed programs/activities
* Draft proposed strategic initiatives that respond to this data
  + Complete the Strategic Objective/Strategic Initiative Organizer
* Prepare to share small group work with the team

**Slide 3: Group Presentations**

**Strategic Objective/Strategic Initiative Organizer**

Identifying the Projects and Programs That Will Achieve a Strategic Objective

