*Planning for Success 2015 Case Study*

**Reading Public Schools Creates An Action Plan, Builds District Focus and Coherence, Leadership Capacity, and Public Understanding**

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When Superintendent John Doherty learned about the opportunity to engage in a *Planning for Success* action plan pilot, he immediately expressed interest for his district. “I saw the presentation last November at the MASS/MASC [Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents/ Massachusetts Association of School Committees] Conference. I had been creating district goals every year using the process I had learned in NSIP [New Superintendent Induction Program], so I was very intrigued by how we could streamline that process and make it more focused on the areas we felt were important to the district.”

John said he chose the *Planning for Success* model because it was simple and accessible, engaged stakeholders, and supported alignment across district, school, and teacher goals. “It was simpler [than other approaches]. It allowed us to get a lot of input and feedback from the stakeholders, particularly our administrators, who were very involved in this process. The format was very easy to use and easy to communicate to others when it was done. It was very much aligned to what we had been doing in the goal setting process. There was alignment to teacher evaluation, our SIP [School Improvement Plan] process, and the district goal-setting process that I was using through NSIP.”

**The Action Planning Process**: Reading’s action planning process spanned six months, January to July 2015, as a result of Superintendent Doherty’s decision to hold development of the action plan until summer, as preparation for the 2015-16 school year. Action planning was conducted by the District Leadership Team, which met for three 3 hour retreats and one 7.5 hour retreat over this period to develop the district action plan and begin work on the district’s monitoring and public reporting system, a total of 16.5 hours. The team then met again in August to put finishing touches on the plan. The final district action plan was composed of action plans for three district objectives.

See the appendix to review the agendas for each retreat and participants’ reactions to the work at each stage—as well as their insights about the value and challenges of this action planning process.

**District Leadership Team Feedback on the Action Planning Process**: In reflecting on the *Planning for Success* action planning process, Reading’s District Leadership Team members offered a range of insightful comments about the benefits of this work both for their district and for others. A snapshot of these comments is included in the table below.

| **Evaluation Question** | **Selected Participant Evaluation Comments** |
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| *In what ways, if any, do you believe this work benefitted your district and/or leadership team?* | * This work allowed us, as a DLT, to have candid conversations about what is working and what is not working. It then allowed us to create action plans for five areas.
* There was a great deal of openness in communication, which led to great discussion, problem solving, and moving ahead with action plans. I feel that the steps we have outlined will guide us to achieving our goals.
* Overall, this pilot did a really nice job of taking our desire to work in the more abstract and theoretical and forced us to ground our work in specific time frames and action steps.
* Provided us with a foundation/springboard to plan for the upcoming school year/all on the same page.
* The idea is good—much harder to try to work off an existing plan—and there was a lot of time off topic—no monitoring systems identified due to lack of time. Good to get us to narrow down to specific steps.
* It will help me to shape my School Improvement Plan and also work on my school vision that I had planned.
* Forced us to look concretely at the volume of goals and the ambiguous description which was causing confusion.
* This work will help us to be more focused as a team and hopefully more focused as leaders. This was a positive experience. It helped us to discuss priorities we have and make connections to all the work we are doing.
* We have our district goals for the next couple of years and have clarified the focus of our work together.
* Helped create clear benchmarks/actions.
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| *Would you recommend this planning process to other districts? Why or why not?* | * Absolutely, I would recommend the process. It provides a structure and a way to have meaningful conversations.
* Yes. It brought up a great many considerations that I would not have come up with on my own. The process was very effective.
* Yes, it really helps to ground the work.
* Yes. Got all stakeholders to share a common vision for school year plans.
* Depends on where they are in their district goal/action plan process.
* Yes—the timing of which to be refined. It makes for great summer work and didn’t mesh as well during the school year.
* Yes. It is helpful for setting priorities and focusing teams.
* Try to ensure connections from one meeting to another continues to happen. Sometimes I felt we created a product but never saw work in subsequent meeting.
* Yes, though the timing is important. Having completed the action plan in the summer prior to the start of the year was great. Doing the other work during the school year was more challenging.
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**Superintendent’s Reflection**: When reflecting on his district’s *Planning for Success* experience, Superintendent John Doherty said, “Now that we’ve gone through it, it definitely has met our expectations. It helped streamline what we needed to focus on as a district. The process put clarity to what we felt was important.” As he observed, “[The process] generated a lot of good discussion on ‘what are the things we are going to prioritize this year?’” John then observed that “Now we can refer to these action plans [for prioritized objectives] and say ‘no, this is what we need to be focused on. We can’t be doing that right now because these are the things we’re focused on.’”

While John commented that the *Planning for Success* handouts “were very easy to use; I like the template—simple but effective,” he still stressed the value of an external facilitator for this process. “I do a lot of facilitation of our DLT meetings; I think it was beneficial that I was not facilitating and

someone from the outside was.” As John observed, “when the Superintendent or someone else from the district is facilitating, it doesn’t allow everyone’s voice to be heard. I’d never want anyone on the team to think I’m pushing an agenda, and if I or someone else from the district was facilitating, there might be that perception. By having an outside facilitator, I’m part of the team that’s doing this [work].”

John offered two specific recommendations to support the effectiveness of the *Planning for Success* action plan work. First, John observed the importance of engaging in this work with a high functioning leadership team: “You do need to have a functioning team to make this work. I think we do. If you don’t have a functioning team it might be more difficult for this process to happen. Make sure you have a team that’s not afraid to speak up, that everyone is there for the right reasons, that there are no hidden agendas, that everyone is invested in the mission and vision of the district; that helps the process.” As John stressed, “make sure you have norms, and use protocols effectively, and allow for everyone’s voice to be heard—these are all important pieces.”

John also offered this suggestion on the timing of the action plan work: “One suggestion—which we sort of stumbled into—the summer was a critical part of this for it to all come together. We didn’t start the process until Nov/Dec, and we could have pushed it so we finished by June, but having the summer really helped us because we weren’t distracted by everything else going on during the school year. Using the beginning and end of summer was very helpful.”

When asked if the action planning process had impacted the capacity and culture of his leadership team, John said, “Yes, it definitely did. We included in this process all of our principals, assistant principals, team chairs, and central office administrators. There were probably about 25 people involved in developing our action plans.” As John observed, action planning with this group “really built capacity and understanding among everyone in the group that this is what we would focus on this year. So yes, it did have a positive effect on the leadership team.”

In addition, John found the *Planning for Success* process valuable professional development for his team: “We’ve been working on teambuilding for the last couple years, but [the process] allowed us to create a space where people felt they could give their thoughts and opinions. There was a lot of conversation about the goals—were they manageable? Were we taking on too much? What did we need to take off our plate? [The process] allowed open and honest dialogue.”

In terms of the action plans’ potential impact on student achievement, John asserted, “I think they have potential for high impact, if implemented correctly.” John observed that, “the plans are really strong and high-quality; people are invested in them and have ownership because they were part of the process. The plans are simpler to understand and use than previous plans, which is good. It’s a much more public document, so the public can understand it. These [plans] will be shared with the community and the school committee; the school committee will be approving them. They’re easier to read and understand than what we had before, because of the format.”

When asked if he would recommend the *Planning for Success* process to other Superintendents, John said: “I absolutely would. If it’s a superintendent that’s looking for a way to develop some coherence in their goal setting process in aligning district, school, and teacher goals, this is definitely the way to go.” John noted that Reading’s principals and school councils were using the template to develop their school improvement plans. “We all agreed after we went through the process that this was a perfect template for SIPs [School improvement Plans].”

**Appendix: Reading Public Schools Case Study**

The following table identifies what the District Leadership Team did in each retreat and what some team members said about this work and specific activities.

|  | **Meeting Agenda** | **Selected Participant Evaluation Comments** |
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| **Retreat 1** | * *Planning for Success* model
* Personal reflection
* Analysis of current district planning practices and culture (SWOT Analysis)
* Early evidence of change benchmarks
 | * Good foundation set for perhaps some big changes we need to make.
* It was an excellent starting point for the work we need to do. Overall, it was a very positive day.
* I wasn’t sure where we were heading at first but felt better by the end of the session. The “task” itself (developing a district action plan) seems a ~~bit~~ lot overwhelming.
* The personal reflection was a good activity to jumpstart our focus. The conversations were open and honest.
* Early evidence of change was very eye opening. We could use more examples to help guide this conversation and development.
* I enjoyed the conversation and passionate voices.
* I wonder if the de-privatization of leadership practice will help develop the culture throughout the system.
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| **Retreat 2** | * Review SWOT results from Retreat 1
* Designing the monitoring and reporting process
 | * The monitoring process led to many conversations that were helpful in thinking about action planning.
* Activity seemed unclear or unhelpful at first, but ended up yielding some very good discussion and reflection.
* A good start…the group works best with real work, i.e. refining an initiative or goal that is in play. As cited above, going from theory to practical work is the challenge.
* Very good workshop with a lot of reflection and discussion about where we are as a DLT and where we need to go. I think today was necessary to build a good foundation for the next workshop, which is to develop an action plan. The discussion was rich and important.
* In the beginning, a bit too much talking/listening. When we got into “the work,” I found great value in the process and discussion. We are an action-focused/hands-on group—we like to be engaged!
* It was well structured and organized—we appreciate that! Information was helpful though I’m still not sure what this “plan” should look like.
* Good start, but a lot of time spent on revisiting some topics—not much action taken. Whole group talk tends to derail work.
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| **Retreat 3** | * Digging deeper: early evidence of change
* Monitoring system characteristics
* Action planning workshop
* Action plan review and revision
 | * Small groups were very helpful. It was good to break down information and have someone outside the group look our work over.
* The protocol was a nice format for feedback. The Digging Deeper conversation was not as focused. It might be helpful to complete a reading or text-based protocol to increase learning.
* The review of the action plan was very helpful in the sense that it allowed us to see how well these plans could communicate to people who had not been part of the process.
* It was an excellent session where there was a lot of dialogue. The group was very receptive to the work. The process worked well. From the development of the draft action plan to the implementation of the protocol, the discussion was excellent.
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| **Retreat 4** | * Review of work to date
* Successes and challenges of SY14-15
* Action planning workshop
* Action Plan review and revision
 | * Purposeful, responsive.
* A great deal was accomplished. Terrific sharing of ideas.
* Productive, collaborative. We are a group who likes to get things done!
* Overwhelmed at first but by the end I felt confident we created an action plan that was appropriate for our schools.
* Today we were much more focused. Working in smaller groups really helped us stay focused.
* I enjoyed the action planning work. I appreciate the feeling of getting things done.
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