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Management
Group

CASE STUDY

Setting the Course at Sioux Falls School District (SD): New Superintendent Rallies the District with Strategic Planning

by John J-H Kim and Kristen Keen

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There isn't a board meeting that goes by where we are not talking about how we are addressing our strategic plan.

Setting the Course at Sioux Falls School District (SD):

New Superintendent Rallies the District with Strategic Planning

John J-H Kim and Kristen Keen

Before even arriving at Sioux Falls School District (SFSD), Dr. Brian Maher knew his first objective would be to work with the district to create a strategic plan. For the past eight years, Dr. Maher had been serving as superintendent of Kearney Public Schools in Nebraska, a small district of approximately 5,300 students and 14 buildings, where he had been named Superintendent of the Year by the Nebraska Council of School Administrators. With over 24,000 students, Sioux Falls School District was significantly larger—it was the largest urban district in the state—and had been facing myriad new challenges in recent years. As of SY2014-15, South Dakota had the lowest average teacher salary in the country, and there were concerns statewide about a shortage of K-12 dollars and of qualified educators. Meanwhile, the district itself had been growing in terms of number of students and was experiencing a rapid increase in diversity. According to a local paper, “Twenty years ago, the vast majority of students were white. Today, white students make up just under 64 percent of the students in Sioux Falls.”¹ Dr. Maher knew he needed to create a dynamic, detailed strategic plan to effectively tackle the district’s challenges.

Dr. Maher’s first step was to learn about the district. Before arriving in the district, he had mapped out a 100-day plan for connecting with the community and figuring out what was working and what was not working at the schools. This included a listening and learning tour—not only for Dr. Maher to learn about the Sioux Falls community and stakeholders, but also to give the community the chance to get to know him. Dr. Maher believed that “to come up with a pre-conceived



SFSD

FAST FACTS



**SIoux FALLS
SCHOOL DISTRICT
(SD)**

24,865 students*

- **15,612** White
- **3,071** Black
- **2,763** Hispanic
- **1,400** Multiracial
- **1,091** Native American
- **903** Asian
- **25** Pacific Islander
- **43.3%** Free and Reduced Lunch Eligible
- **14.7%** Special Education (K-12) Identification
- **13.1%** English Language Learners

Staff of
2,000+

*Fall 2017, South Dakota Department of Education



Dr. Brian Maher began serving as superintendent of Sioux Falls School District in July 2015. Immediately before this, he was superintendent of the Kearney Public Schools in Nebraska and had been named Nebraska's Superintendent of the Year. His experience in education includes positions as a high school principal, an assistant principal, an athletic director, and a teacher of all levels

of mathematics as well as high school physics. Dr. Maher holds a bachelor's degree in math education from Midland University in Fremont, Nebraska, and master's and doctorate degrees from the University of Nebraska, Omaha.

New to SFSD but aware that the district had been facing many new challenges in recent years, Dr. Maher began his tenure by creating a new strategic plan for the district. The process he followed in conjunction with DMGroup made for a positive entry plan.

notion of what Sioux Falls needs without learning anything about Sioux Falls would be the kiss of death for my superintendency in Sioux Falls.”²²

This approach was in line with his leadership style. Described as being a “servant leader and an advocate for students and teachers,”²³ Dr. Maher attributes his leadership style to his father, who was an elementary school custodian. Dr. Maher was raised believing in the importance of every individual's contribution to the success of a school system. The youngest of seven children, he has said that he grew up poor, and that access to a good education and his aspiration to become a teacher helped him succeed. Given his own experiences, Dr. Maher is passionate about the power of education; he knows the tremendous importance of making students aware of the opportunities available to them and encouraging them to believe in themselves and to reach for their dreams.

Through his initial listening and learning tour, Dr. Maher found that Sioux Falls School District has a lot going for it, with a “great base to build upon.”²⁴ He was then eager to embark on work to create a five-year strategic plan to guide the work ahead. Having read about the strategic planning approach of District

Management Group (DMGroup), Dr. Maher felt an affinity with the process DMGroup outlined, which tightly aligns vision and mission to the daily work of the district. Dr. Maher also liked that the process begins with an in-depth quantitative and qualitative study of the district and includes a well-crafted stakeholder engagement plan. DMGroup was quickly engaged to partner with the district to develop an actionable, results-oriented strategic plan that would engage the community and mobilize the district to work together toward shared goals.

Strategic Planning Work Begins

In the fall of 2015, Sioux Falls School District embarked on its strategic planning work with District Management Group. The work was guided by DMGroup's Strategic Planning Framework, the result of deep research and the experience of helping many districts put powerful strategic plans into practice. The framework sets out a methodical approach that distills a broad vision for the district into concrete, measurable goals and implementation tactics that are all aligned and interconnected (*Exhibit 1*). The objective is to create a focused plan that will drive the daily work of the district. DMGroup believes that less is more: the most powerful strategic plans are not lengthy documents detailing a

32 Schools

- 4 High Schools
- 5 Middle Schools, Grades 6-8
- 23 K-5 Elementary Schools

Graduation Rate**

83.79%

SY2016-17

ACT Scores:

22.9

compared to 21.8 for the state

Total Operating Budget:

\$163,503,500

Per Student Spending:

\$6,777

Source: SFSD SY2016-17

**South Dakota Department of Education, SY2016-17

hundred initiatives but rather are concise plans focused on a small set (e.g. five or six) of the most important levers that can drive improvement. DMGroup laid out its detailed, easy-to-follow process for developing an effective strategic plan (*Exhibit 2*), and SFSD and DMGroup launched their work.

PHASE 1: DESIGN

Forming the Steering Committee

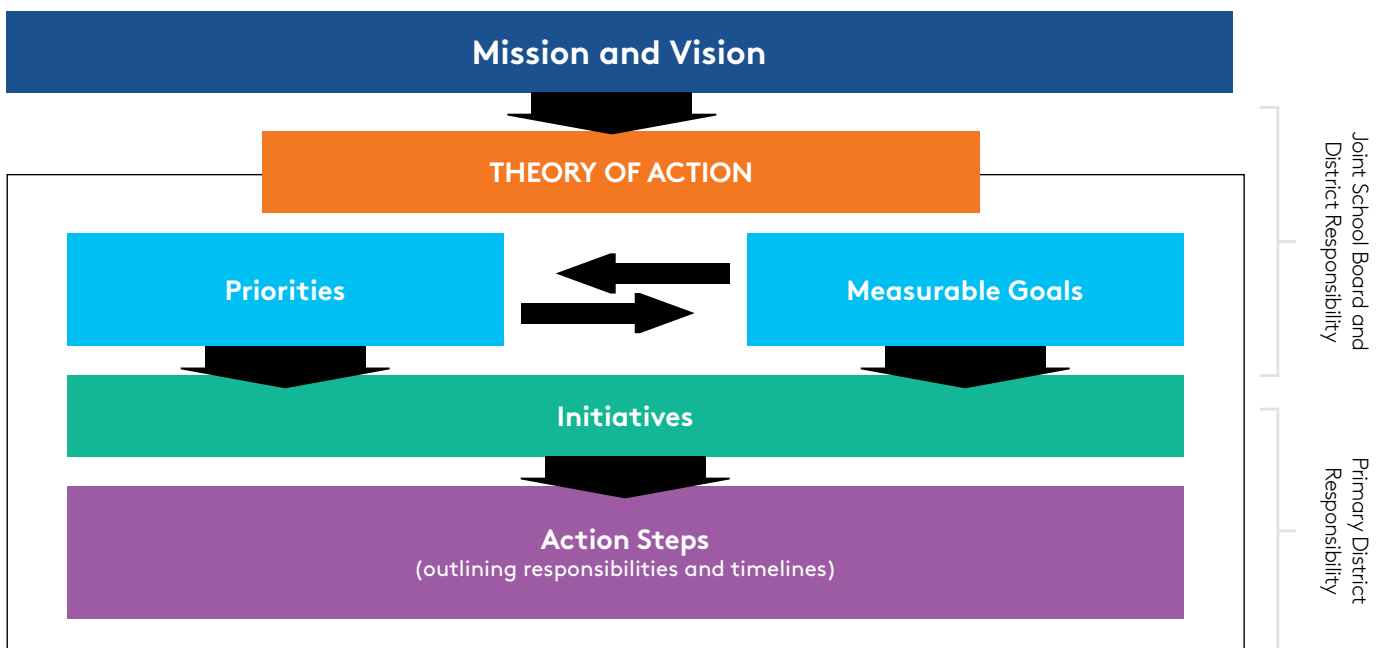
The first step in the strategic planning process is to create a Steering Committee to serve as the project owners for developing the strategic plan. It is important that members of this committee are prepared to invest significant time and effort into developing a plan, and that all committee members are committed to functioning as a cohesive team to create the best plan for the *entire* district, and not for a particular interest group. In DMGroup’s experience, a group size of approximately 10 to 12 members is advised.

Sioux Falls School District created a Steering Committee that included a total of 10 leaders and staff including central office leaders, school principals, Board of Education members, and the teachers’ union president. These individuals were selected to bring their unique perspectives to ensure that the work would be applicable and meaningful to all system stakeholders. In addition, the Steering Committee members would play an important role in engaging parents, community leaders, school employees, students, and others throughout the process and fostering thoughtful dialogue about the district’s goals and priorities.

Conducting the Needs Assessment

Beginning with a clear, accurate, and shared understanding of the current state of the district is critical to a successful process. With myriad opinions and theories on what a district could do differently, a “fact base” grounded in rigorous research and analysis

Exhibit 1 DMGROUP’S STRATEGIC PLANNING FRAMEWORK



DEFINITIONS

Mission and Vision: Long-term district aspirations

Theory of Action: Fundamental belief about what will lead to long-term success in the district

Priorities: Broad areas of focus to support the Theory of Action

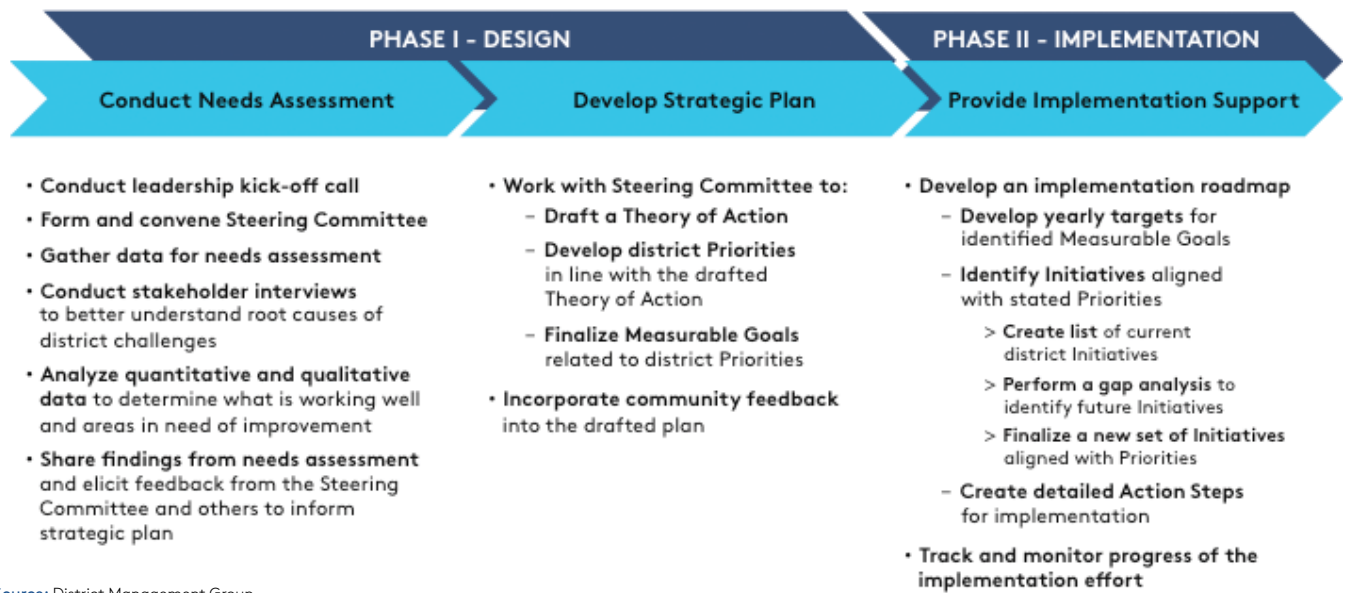
Measurable Goals: Specific and measurable targets related to district Priorities

Initiatives: Specific projects related to Priorities that help to achieve the Measurable Goals

Action Steps: An articulation of what steps need to occur, by when, and by whom

Source: District Management Group

Exhibit 2 DMGROUP'S STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS



Source: District Management Group

provides common understanding from which to launch the strategic planning process. Quantitative data and qualitative information are essential to forming a solid understanding of the district's needs.

Gather Quantitative Information

At Sioux Falls School District, this work began with a comprehensive and rigorous performance analysis of the district's schools over the previous five-year period, including examining student achievement, achievement gap data, culture and climate data, budget data, and enrollment across grades and schools. However, data analysis only reveals part of the story.

Collect Qualitative Input – Stakeholder Engagement, Part I

DMGroup's process includes stakeholders at the start, as it is important to include their perspectives and insights early on. Plans created in silos have limited potential for success. However, it is important to avoid the common mistake of holding a series of open meetings where stakeholders share their concerns, hopes, and ideas, only to later find that their feedback has seemingly been ignored. Targeted stakeholder feedback is therefore sought at the beginning, and broader stakeholder engagement is incorporated at a later stage in the process.

At SFSD, qualitative data was gathered through focus groups and interviews with over 50 different stakeholders, including central office leaders, principals, staff members, parents, and Board of Education members.

Needs Assessment: Key Findings

Quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed and assembled by DMGroup to provide SFSD's Steering Committee with an in-depth understanding of past performance. This provided the committee a fact base for assessing what needs Sioux Falls School District currently fulfills and what deficiencies or issues need to be addressed. High-level trends focused on performance, demographics, and behavior:

- **Performance:** At the elementary level, there was a wide range in reading proficiency across schools, with the overall district average slightly below the state average. However, at the secondary level, the proficiency levels for 8th and 11th graders in math and ELA were above the state average. At the high school level, the percentage of students taking one or more Advanced Placement course had increased, but it was noted that only 16% of these students were from low-income households. Graduation rates had fallen from 82.13% in SY2013-14 to 80.55% in SY2015-16, which was below the state average.
- **Demographics:** The Sioux Falls community had been experiencing a change in demographics over the past few years. In particular, SFSD's enrollment had steadily grown (+1.5% growth each year over the past five years) and the needs of students had been increasing (e.g., ELL and FRPL populations).

- **Behavior:** While the total number of suspensions at the secondary level had been on the decline over the past five years, there had been a significant rise in the number of moderate to severe behavior-related incidents at the elementary level. It was also suggested during qualitative focus groups that the current services and programs offered for behavior supports may not be sufficient to serve growing student needs.

Developing the Strategic Plan

Being new to SFSD, Dr. Maher appreciated the in-depth quantitative and qualitative analysis of the district. It was also helpful that Dr. Maher and all the members on the Steering Committee were beginning with a shared understanding of the strengths and the needs of the district.

The Steering Committee quickly determined that the existing vision and mission for the district continued to resonate, and was eager to push forward to detail the path to achieving that vision and mission.

SFSD's Mission

To educate and prepare each student to succeed in a changing world.

SFSD's Vision

It is the vision of the Sioux Falls School District to provide the opportunities and challenges for each student to succeed as a lifelong learner in a changing world. The District values a highly trained and committed workforce, continually evaluating and improving their own and student performance. The District recognizes its role as a key contributor to the social, civic and economic foundation of this community. To achieve this vision, we must ignite the hearts and minds of our students, staff, families, the business community and citizens.

Developing a Theory of Action

A critical step in the strategic planning process is identifying a Theory of Action. A Theory of Action is a set of beliefs and underlying assumptions about what drives improved student performance. Crafting a clear Theory of Action is challenging work; it requires various parts of the organization to come together to engage in authentic and courageous discussions about the core beliefs of the district, what is working well, what needs to change, and how the district intends to achieve its long-term vision and mission. In other words, the district must reflect deeply on the context needed to successfully address the root causes of its challenges.

Exhibit 3 SIOUX FALLS SCHOOL DISTRICT'S THEORY OF ACTION



Source: Sioux Falls School District

Because Dr. Maher highly values the contributions of every individual in the district, he believes there is much to be gained by promoting engagement and ownership. And his listening and learning tour further convinced him that school autonomy would be key to success for SFSD. He felt that each school needed to be empowered to make decisions and try new things based on the unique needs of its students and its school culture; this empowerment, however, had to be within a framework of accountability and high standards. It did not take very long for Dr. Maher and the Steering Committee to reach consensus on a Theory of Action centered on empowerment, accountability, and the setting of high standards (*Exhibit 3*).

Identifying Priorities

With the Theory of Action articulated, the next step was to determine Priorities, a short list of broad thematic areas of focus that will propel the district to achieve its vision and mission. A common challenge with this step is getting down to a short list of priorities from the lengthy number of items that a district may want to pursue. Often a district will start the process with a lengthy laundry list of priorities that reflect the varied opinions and perceptions of the Steering Committee members. The committee needs to work together to rise above ideological differences or, at the very least,

to appreciate those differences and then move to select the handful of priorities that align with the Theory of Action to achieve the vision.





A review of the qualitative and quantitative data helped SFSD’s Steering Committee identify and focus on the key challenges facing the district. After multiple discussions, the committee ultimately determined a list of the eight key priorities grouped into four broad priority areas (*Exhibit 4*).

Establishing Measurable Goals

To ensure that the strategic plan drives results, DMGroup’s approach requires that each specific priority be tied to a Measurable Goal. And each measurable goal must adhere to the SMART paradigm, meaning the goal must be Specific, Measurable, Aggressive yet Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound. The district followed DMGroup’s five-step process for establishing these measurable goals (*Exhibit 5*).

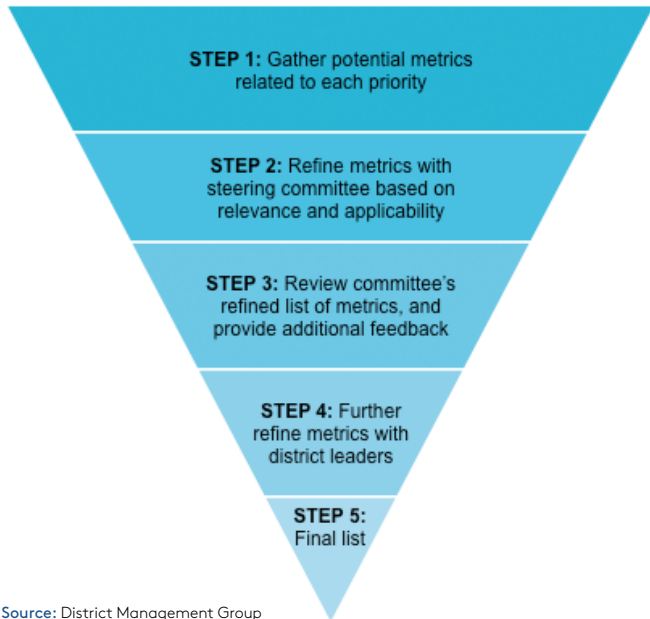
A wide range of potential metrics were researched and collected by the Steering Committee, and then analyzed and refined to ensure the metrics were both relevant and applicable to tracking the key priorities of the strategic plan. The list was finalized through a collaborative effort of the Steering Committee and district leadership.

Exhibit 4 SFSD'S PRIORITY AREAS AND SPECIFIC PRIORITIES

 <p>Student Outcomes</p>	 <p>School Climate & Culture</p>	 <p>Staff</p>	 <p>Community Engagement</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SFSD will provide rigorous, effective, and engaging curriculum and instruction for all students to emphasize growth and reduce the achievement gap, with special focus on the following areas: • SFSD will continue to foster an environment of high expectations combined with focused interventions and support in order to meet the learning needs of all students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SFSD will provide a nurturing and safe learning experience for all. • SFSD will develop strategies to enhance a culturally responsive workforce. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SFSD will develop strategies to enhance the quality and diversity of its workforce. • SFSD will explore strategies to retain high-quality staff. • SFSD will support and train staff to encourage innovation and enable them to grow throughout their careers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SFSD will equip staff with knowledge and tools necessary to effectively engage with families, partners, and the community to foster shared responsibility for student success.

Source: Sioux Falls School District

Exhibit 5 DMGROUP'S FIVE-STEP PROCESS FOR SELECTING MEASURABLE GOALS



Source: District Management Group

These measurable goals are highly specific. A few examples of SFSD's measurable goals for each priority area are as follows:

Student Outcomes – Measurable Goals:

- By 2019, graduation rates will increase by 5%.
- By 2020, the difference between the district's four-year cohort graduation rate and the four-year cohort graduation rate for students eligible for FRPL will decrease by five percentage points.
- By 2018, the district's third-grade reading scores will be at the state average.
- By 2020, parents surveyed stating they perceive teachers to hold students to high expectations will increase 10%.

School Climate & Culture – Measurable Goals:

- By 2020, the number of severe behaviors (Levels 3, 4, 5, and 6) in elementary schools will decrease by 5%.
- By 2020, the number of K-8 students who did not attend school at least 94% of the time will decrease by 5%.
- By 2020, the number of students reporting they feel safe at school will increase by 10%.

Staff – Measurable Goals:

- By 2020, we will increase the number of racially diverse teachers by 25% to more closely match the student populations belonging to minority groups.
- By 2020, the percentage of employees surveyed indicating by selecting a 4 or a 5 that their opinion matters will increase by 10 percentage points.

Community Engagement – Measurable Goals:

- By 2020, 100% of schools in Sioux Falls will have a parent and/or community and/or business support group.
- By 2020, 90% of SFSD employees will report they know how to access information they need to be successful in their position.

These measurable goals track performance as opposed to processes; completion of tasks does not necessarily lead to results. These measurable goals were agreed to as part of SFSD's strategic plan, and the district must work together to meet these goals and show tangible improvement. DMGroup believes that having measurable goals integrated into the strategic plan is critically important to keeping the district focused on achieving results.

Community Engagement – Stakeholder Engagement, Part II

With a draft of the strategic plan in hand, the next step was to share it with the community through a series of community engagement meetings. Having a draft plan to



SFSD

share with stakeholders helps to ground the discussion and allows for thoughtful, insightful feedback. These meetings invite different perspectives, and provide an opportunity for feedback and reaction. While such community meetings may not create consensus, hearing various reactions to the plan cultivates an appreciation for the complexities at hand and the trade-offs involved, and helps to promote some understanding among stakeholders.

Because Dr. Maher and the Steering Committee wanted to ensure the district would gain input from a large and diverse pool of stakeholders, SFSD scheduled three community engagement meetings at different locations around the city at different times of day. And they launched an aggressive campaign to get the word out about these meetings. The district posted announcements on its website, Twitter feeds, Facebook pages, and its “ParentLink” mobile app. The Sioux Falls School District Office of Community Relations also utilized local media to inform the public about the strategic planning process, including local television stations KDLT, KELO, and KSFY; the district’s cable access channel KLRN-TV; and the local newspaper *Argus Leader*.

The Steering Committee was very pleased with the turnout at these community engagement sessions, as well as with the constructive feedback provided. Over

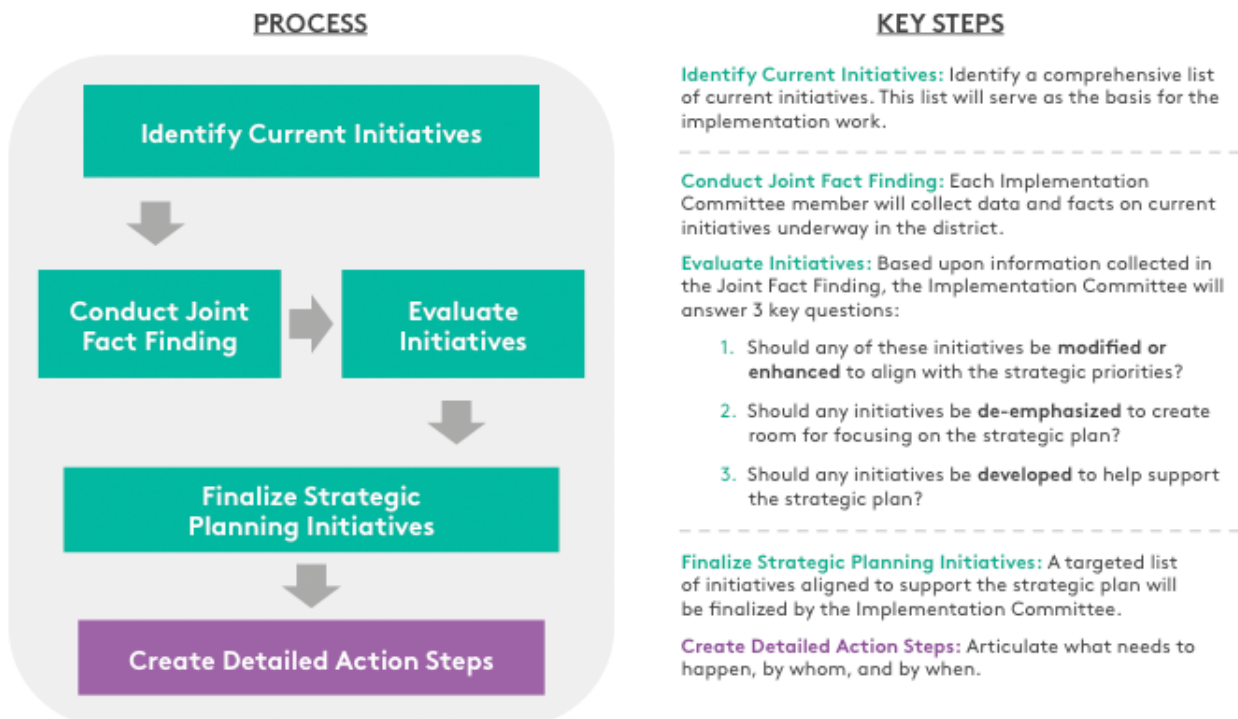
100 community partners and members of the public attended. The participants included school leaders, educators, parents and families, and community advocacy and activist organizations, and they provided a wide range of perspectives which helped to shape and refine the strategic plan. These meetings also provided SFSD leadership and Steering Committee members the opportunity to spend valuable time engaging in constructive interaction with these stakeholders, which will pave the way for further SFSD engagement and involvement efforts.

PHASE 2: IMPLEMENTATION

Developing a Plan for Implementation

SFSD’s Strategic Plan was approved by the School Board in January 2017, and the challenging work of devising an implementation plan began. The implementation plan details the actions that need to be taken, by what date, and by whom. DMGroup believes it is important that the implementation plan be developed by a broader group than the Steering Committee; it needs to include many of those who will be charged with executing the plan. SFSD therefore created an Implementation Steering Committee which included members of the original Steering Committee as well as more school-based leaders and staff to bring more on-the-ground experience to the discussion.

Exhibit 6 DMGROUP’S STRATEGIC PLANNING IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS



Source: District Management Group

The first step in developing the Implementation Plan (*Exhibit 6*) is to assemble a comprehensive list of all current initiatives underway in the district. DMGroup's process seeks to avoid the "out with the old and in with the new" approach or the layering of additional programs on top of existing programs. Instead, DMGroup seeks to leverage and build upon the good work being done in the district and to create a coherent and aligned approach to moving the work forward; therefore, we begin with an objective look at existing initiatives. For each initiative at SFSD, an Implementation Steering Committee member was paired with a partner not within their same area of work or expertise. Often districts struggle with this phase of the work because staff members are not able to objectively review their own initiatives or pet projects. This pairing helped not only to increase cross-departmental collaboration but to ensure the objectivity of the fact-finding results. The joint fact-finding pairs were charged with collecting detailed data on each current initiative, including the amount of resources invested, the amount of hours and FTE devoted, the length of time each initiative has been underway, the number of schools and students impacted, and the effectiveness and results of each initiative.

These findings were then brought to the Implementation Steering Committee, which was charged with the most difficult task yet—evaluating each initiative based on three questions:

1. Should any of these initiatives be **modified or enhanced** to align with the strategic priorities?
2. Should any initiatives be **de-emphasized** to create room for greater focus on the strategic plan?
3. Should any new initiatives be **developed** to help support the strategic plan? New initiatives should be created only if there is a gap in what is needed to achieve strategic objectives.

Identifying new initiatives is generally easy, but it can be difficult to acknowledge that an existing initiative isn't working and should be either modified or removed. SFSD's Implementation Steering Committee found that they were having difficulty coming to agreement on some of the district's elementary literacy programs. The committee determined that a more detailed examination was needed, and decided to pursue an Academic Return on Investment (A-ROI) analysis of its Literacy in Action program specifically. The district had invested heavily in Literacy in Action and had deployed many of the district's strongest reading teachers, but its impact was unclear. Working with DMGroup, SFSD's staff learned how to use the A-ROI approach to assess a program's value, and then engaged in an A-ROI study of Literacy in Action. After a detailed analysis, the district found that this program was not proving effective and in some cases even hindered reading achievement. The difficult decision was ultimately made to eliminate the program; this, however, freed up \$1.5 million. Dr. Maher points out that this change creates opportunities to redirect these resources to programs that will have greater impact on raising the district's reading scores.

Conducting analyses like these helped the district determine which initiatives to keep, modify, develop further, or eliminate. This approach is helping SFSD's Implementation Steering Committee ensure that their resources are being deployed effectively and that all their initiatives are aligned to support the strategic plan.

Once the initiatives were fairly defined, a central office leader was assigned to help develop specific action steps for each Priority Area. The central office leader is also charged with staying engaged, providing support, helping to clear barriers, and making adjustments as needed to achieve the measurable goals.

While a full list of the initiatives and all the action steps included in the implementation plan is too lengthy to enumerate here, below is a listing of initiatives and examples of just some of the initial action steps for Priority Area 1. This provides some sense of how tightly the work in the district is tied to the strategic plan.

Priority Area 1 – Student Outcomes Initiatives and examples of some of the Action Steps:

- **Initiative:** Develop individualized plans for students at risk of not graduating
 - **Action Step:** Each high school will monitor students at risk of not graduating and will develop an individualized approach for each identified student
- **Initiative:** Refine and articulate the support model for struggling high schoolers
 - **Action Step:** Each high school will articulate their pyramid of interventions for struggling students
- **Initiative:** Implement and evaluate programs for struggling elementary readers
 - **Action Step:** Conduct an A-ROI study of selected reading interventions (Literacy in Action, Lixia, Core 5, Imagine Learning)
 - **Action Step:** Implement and evaluate the CORE Literacy Grant
- **Initiative:** Implement and evaluate the district’s Summer Climb Summer School pilot
- **Initiative:** Build district capacity for data-driven decision making
 - **Action Step:** Study full-time elementary instructional coach vs. part-time instructional coach
 - **Action Step:** Evaluate the NWEA MAP as a tool to measure student academic growth and inform the focus of interventions and support
- **Initiative:** Build a model for consistent and effective staff collaboration
- **Initiative:** Continue to expand and evaluate multiple pathways for students
 - **Action Step:** Explore partnership with Computer Science Immersion to establish a Coding pathway
- **Initiative:** Continue rigorous review of existing programs
 - **Action Step:** Review Gifted Education Program
 - **Action Step:** Conduct professional review of the K-12 Spanish Immersion program
- **Initiative:** Review and Implement Best In Class Curriculum
 - **Action Step:** Evaluate the K-12 Fine and Performing Arts curriculum delivery model and assessment options
 - **Action Step:** Evaluate the K-12 World Language curriculum delivery model and assessment options
 - **Action Step:** Begin Personal Finance and Business curriculum review

Priority Area 2 – School Climate & Culture Initiatives:

- Create plan to help increase student attendance
- Evaluate and implement programs designed to improve student behaviors
- Evaluate and select model for culturally responsive practices
- Evaluate supports and services for struggling students
- Continuous review of staff and student safety protocols

Priority Area 3 – Staff Initiatives:

- Recruit a more diverse workforce reflective of our student population
- Review the Professional Staff Evaluation system
- Obtain and evaluate district staff feedback
- Develop strategies to increase teacher retention

Priority Area 4 – Community Engagement Initiatives:

- Gather feedback from all stakeholders
- Engage community in dialogue about enrollment trends and facility needs
- Equip staff with knowledge and tools to support and participate in district initiatives

Although the strategic plan was officially completed in February 2017, with the priorities, measurable goals, and initiatives defined, the teams at SFSD had begun implementation work wherever possible at the beginning of SY2016-2017. Two examples of how SFSD has worked to implement its strategic plan are highlighted below.

Diversity of Teaching Force

Within the Priority Area 3 of Staff was a specific Initiative to enhance the diversity of the workforce. Students of color make up more than one-third of the district’s enrollment, but its teacher workforce is 98% white, a number that has hardly changed in decades. Dr. Maher made narrowing that gap a priority as superintendent. Teachers nationwide lack diversity, according to the U.S. Department of Education, but SFSD lags behind even the marginal national increases

in teacher diversity seen in the last three decades. Decades of research indicate that students benefit from having teachers of color. Students of color score higher on tests when they have teachers who look like them, and all students benefit from exposure to more diverse cultural perspectives.

The Measurable Goal created was that over the next five years, the district aims to increase teacher diversity by 25%, hiring around 80 new teachers of color.

There isn't a board meeting that goes by where we are not talking about how we are addressing our strategic plan. We are always referring back to our strategic plan. Even those who disagree with us will refer back to the strategic plan in making their point.

—Dr. Maher

In order to reach this goal, the district decided they needed to do more than participate in college recruiting and attend career fairs. They developed an action plan to grow their own teachers, and initiated two programs to enhance the quality and diversity of the workforce. One program was the High School Teacher Pathway program and the second was the Teacher Internship program. The High School Teacher Pathway program is being designed as a yearlong course offered at each of the high schools that puts the student on the path to becoming a teacher; dual-credit options with local universities are being pursued. Dr. Maher is passionate about meeting with students and encouraging them to become teachers. He explains: “We have students that have survived wars and gunshot wounds and come here not speaking English. They don't think it's possible for them to become a teacher, but I tell them, ‘You've already overcome so much more than I have. Of course you can do it. You can be a teacher!’”

The Teacher Internship program, launched in SY2016-17, is a pilot program that allows college graduates who do

not currently have a teaching certificate the opportunity to experience the classroom for nine weeks alongside a highly effective teacher; the objective is to encourage these individuals to become certified teachers. In its first year of implementation, the Teacher Internship Program placed six adult interns in classrooms for a nine-week internship; four of the six have enrolled in a university master's program to become certified teachers and two are pursuing alternative certification.

Dr. Maher points out that the district is the fourth-largest employer in Sioux Falls, and he is a strong advocate of “growing our own” and creating opportunities for the students and community. He is particularly proud of these two programs, and comments, “These programs will benefit the district for years to come.”

Graduation Rate

Within the Priority Area of Student Outcomes was a specific initiative to improve graduation rates. In SY2015-16, the overall district graduation rate was 80.55%, dipping below the state average and reflecting a steady decline over the past few years (from 81.35% in SY2014-15 and 82.13% in SY2013-14). SFSD wanted to reverse this trend and developed strategies to individually reach out to and target at-risk students.

The Implementation Steering Committee began by conducting a root cause analysis to understand some of the main drivers for the steady decrease in their overall four-year cohort graduation rate. Interestingly, the committee realized that they alone could not uncover the answers. Therefore, they expanded their root cause exploration by going school by school, and engaging each high school principal and assistant principal. Through these discussions, they uncovered a root cause of the decrease in graduation rates: they were not proactively catching and addressing students who were at risk of dropping out or not graduating on time.

Using their cross-functional team of central office administrators and school-based principals, they developed an action plan to address this issue. The team decided that they needed to focus on individual students, and therefore they created weekly “graduation cohort meetings” at each school where the principal, assistant principals, counselors, and social workers come together to examine the list of students who are at risk of dropping out or not graduating on time. Based on the menu of interventions available, the team then develops individualized plans for each student to best address that particular student's needs.

The Steering Committee set a measurable goal of increasing graduation rates by 5% by 2019. The district is already making headway, having increased four-year graduation rates to 83.79% in SY2016-17 from 80.55% the prior year. And graduation rates improved in nearly every demographic in Sioux Falls during the 2016-17 school year. Some of the biggest increases were seen for students who are Asian, American Indian/Alaskan Native, multiracial, English language learners (this group's rate grew more than 16 percentage points in one year, from 60% to 76%), and economically disadvantaged.

Results

SFSD's Strategic Plan has been serving as the blueprint for the work being done in the district. It is more than a bound document with a statement of vision and mission; instead, it is driving the daily work in the district. This focused work is already showing positive impact. In January 2018, the district provided an update to the board with highlights of the many action steps currently in progress in each of its priority areas. In addition, the district provided an update on progress from SY2016-17 as follows:

- The district's overall four-year graduation rate has increased from 80.55% to 83.79%.
- The district's overall high school completion rate has increased from 86.75% to 87.50%.
- The four-year cohort graduation rate for each subgroup increased.
- The difference in the district's four-year cohort graduation rate between FRPL students and students without economic disadvantages has decreased by 5.94 percentage points.
- Students proficient in math at the eighth-grade level increased by 2.32%, outpacing the state average by 7.61%.
- The percentage of students scoring a 3 or higher on the AP exam increased from 70.6% to 71.6%.
- The number of graduates scoring 24 or higher on the ACT increased from 46.1% to 47.1%.

Conclusion

New to Sioux Falls School District but aware that the district had been facing many new challenges in recent years, Dr. Maher began his tenure by creating a new strategic plan for the district. The process he followed in conjunction with DMGroup made for a positive entry



SFSD

plan. The initial needs assessment allowed Dr. Maher, the Strategic Planning Steering Committee, and key stakeholders in the district to gain a clear and shared view of the state of the district. And the planning process allowed Dr. Maher to organize the work of the district and rapidly align its efforts around key priorities. Now in the third year of his tenure, Dr. Maher is already beginning to see positive results.

SFSD's strategic plan does not sit on a shelf, but instead serves as a guiding document for all decisions that are made within the district and by the board. "There isn't a board meeting that goes by where we are not talking about how we are addressing our strategic plan," says Dr. Maher. "We are always referring back to our strategic plan. Even those who disagree with us will refer back to the strategic plan in making their point." Dr. Maher points out that the strategic plan and the community engagement effort around the strategic plan are also helping to set the stage for an upcoming bond election. The strategic plan is creating focus and a broad understanding in the district and the community about the priorities at SFSD. Dr. Maher believes the plan will help push the work forward, and is hopeful that it will help rally support from the community for the district and its students. ♦

NOTES

1. Megan Raposa, "Sioux Falls Schools Larger, More Diverse Than Ever," *Argus Leader* (Sioux Falls, SD), October 23, 2017, <http://www.argusleader.com/story/news/education/2017/10/23/sioux-falls-schools-larger-more-diverse-than-ever/791950001/>
2. Brady Mallory, "Getting to Know the New SF School District Superintendent," *Keloland* (Kearney, NE), April 1, 2015, <http://www.keloland.com/news/article/education/getting-to-know-the-new-sf-school-district-superintendent>
3. Stu Whitney, "New Superintendent for Sioux Falls Was a Unanimous Pick," *Argus Leader*, March 31, 2015, <http://www.argusleader.com/story/stu-whitney/2015/03/31/brian-maher-superintendent-sioux-falls-schools/70714400/>
4. Ibid.