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THE USE AND IMPACT OF STRATEGIC PLANNING IN  
NEBRASKA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

by

Jodi Frager

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska  
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements  
For the Degree of Doctor of Education

Major: Educational Administration

Under the Supervision of Professors Nicholas J. Pace and Shavonna Holman

Lincoln, Nebraska

February 2024

THE USE AND IMPACT OF STRATEGIC PLANNING IN  
NEBRASKA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Jodi Frager, Ed.D.

University of Nebraska, 2024

Advisors: Nicholas J. Pace and Shavonna Holman

In the landscape of modern education, the role of a superintendent has become increasingly complex, marked by demands for higher student achievement and round-the-clock communication. This complexity, underscored by technological advancements and evolving accountability measures, underscores the criticality of strategic planning for school districts. This dissertation aims to explore the relationship between superintendent engagement with strategic planning and student outcomes, particularly focusing on high school graduation rates and ACT scores in Nebraska public schools.

Drawing on theoretical frameworks such as Systems Theory, the study employs a quantitative approach, utilizing surveys administered to superintendents alongside publicly available archival data on graduation rates and ACT scores. Through analysis, the study seeks to ascertain the extent to which strategic planning impacts student achievement and whether superintendents are effectively implementing and engaging with strategic plans. The research questions center on the inclusion of essential components in strategic plans, the relationship between strategic planning and student outcomes, and the fidelity of plan implementation.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform strategic planning processes in school districts, providing insights into the effectiveness of superintendent engagement and its impact on student success. By addressing gaps in existing literature and focusing on Nebraska public schools, the research aims to guide decision-making and improve educational outcomes. However, the study acknowledges limitations such as subjective perceptions and the specificity of results to Nebraska, thus emphasizing the need for further research in this critical area of educational leadership and management.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

In today's world, the job of a superintendent is increasingly complex. In addition to demands for higher student achievement, superintendents lead when stakeholders have greater demands of round-the-clock communication. These technological advances and ever-changing accountability demands have led to the increased complexity and scrutiny of the tasks assigned to the role of the superintendent. Edwards (2006), acknowledges these complexities:

With its growing and competing demands, it is a profession that can baffle even the most knowledgeable and well prepared. Public education resources have become more limited. There are new national and state testing requirements. Social issues are being pulled into our school systems. Communities are losing faith in public schools and want more control over their operation. Add in politics and bureaucracy, and the result is unmanageable. (p. 23)

Today's superintendents are uniquely positioned to leverage their role in ways that can dramatically impact the success of staff and students. These leaders serve as "learning engineers" who seek to solve problems that are facing students, teachers and building principals. These learning leaders consider existing research and formulate more effective and efficient ways to promote and support teaching and learning across their unique districts (Hess & Saxberg, 2014). Thus, district leaders are charged with enabling their organizations, and the people within, to anticipate and respond to unique challenges and varied opportunities that are ever evolving in a learning community (Sanford, 2017).

As demonstrated, the 21<sup>st</sup> century tasks of a public-school superintendent represent a daunting job. The ability to gain the skills required to meet the demands of all

pertinent stakeholders becomes imperative not only for the success of the school district but also for the longevity of the superintendent. These complexities require superintendents to be the leaders of creating effective systems to bring all stakeholders to the table to create doable and purposeful outcomes for students and school districts.

According to Chang (2013),

All education systems, in varying degrees, are subject to rapid changes, most often driven by globalization, the marketization of some educational services, IT development, competitions, shift of traditional values and paradigms. The planning cycle has become shorter and more frequent. This involves the need for planning to be flexible and continuously adjusted to the changing demands of society and individuals. (p. 1)

While the job of a modern superintendent may present myriad challenges, there are strategies superintendents can employ to assist them in navigating ever changing, sometimes turbulent, waters. One strategy available is the development and implementation of a strategic plan. Strategic planning is not a new concept (Mintzberg, 1994) and has been in education for decades.

### **Strategic Planning**

The early 1990s marked a significant push for the development of a strategic planning process for public schools (Jasparro, 2006). Strategic planning is intended to help governments, communities, and organizations deal with and adapt to their changing internal and external circumstances. It can help clarify and resolve the most important pressing issues they face and enables leaders to build on strengths, take advantage of opportunities, and become much more effective. Effective implementation of strategic planning can result in the changes needed by the public school to meet the rapidly changing needs of society.

After the decision is made for a school district to engage in the strategic planning process, the action begins. A strategic plan must reflect the thoughts, feelings, ideas, and wants of the developers and mold them along with the organization's purpose, mission, and regulations into an integrated plan. According to Jasparro (2006), some components of the process may include the development of a mission statement, operating plan, and budget; involvement of stakeholders, and strategic planning logistics.

A strategic plan helps a school define what it intends to achieve when it comes to their student success objectives and organizational goals. According to Ong (2016), a combination of good planning and communication will ensure that all stakeholders including parents, teachers, administrators, principals, board members and community are all striving for the same goals. Successful strategic plan implementation requires proper management of budgetary and time resources, the creation of high-output teams and the consistent monitoring of all progress.

Often, the strategic planning process is a key strategy in adapting to, managing, and instituting change around school improvement. It can be a process of organizational renewal that allows a school district to anticipate and react to change in a proactive manner (Canole, 1999). Gwang-Chol Chang (2013) identifies strategic planning for education as a strategic plan in the education sector is the physical product of the strategic planning process and embodies the guiding orientations on how to run an education system within a larger national development perspective, which is evolving by nature and often involves constraints.

The ECRA group (2015) described the motivation behind strategic planning. Successful organizations proactively initiate strategic planning so they can be more responsive to changing circumstances, underlying trends, and shifting demands. Strategic planning in school districts differs significantly from the planning process in the private sector because the notion of products, markets, timelines, and clients is not relevant to the mission of schools. The motivation for strategic planning falls into two categories: those that result in concrete structures and systems for the district and those that manifest themselves in broader, abstract effects within the organization. Schools often develop long-range plans; however, this process generally involves making decisions about the future based on present data. School planning tends toward internal analysis, toward planning as a separate institutional function. Long-range planning assumes a closed system within which organizational five- and ten-year plans could be constructed. Conversely, strategic planning is a disciplined, research-based method of inquiry that allows school districts to create their own futures through rigorous organization assessment and long-range planning, followed by operational execution. The strategic planning process needs to be dynamic, responsive, and focused on changes that are successful, sustainable, and scalable.

To develop a strong and workable strategic plan, superintendents must understand systems thinking. A systems thinking approach for school improvement assists district and school leaders from becoming overwhelmed and the process from becoming chaotic for all. Strong leadership at all levels of the education system applying a systems thinking approach that utilizes equity and quality lenses when making data-informed



decisions ensures that structures and processes are in place (Garland, 2018). Operating within a systems thinking mindset promotes consideration and use of multiple perspectives, open mindedness, creative thinking, deeper questioning, and effective communication skills (Behl & Ferreria, 2014).

As the factors surrounding public schools continue to change and evolve, superintendents must also continue to refine their skills and reflect on their impact as a systems leader. Nowhere is this more important than in the role that school leaders play in enacting strategic plans, and in studying the results of their plans.

There are many reasons school districts turn to strategic planning. Some districts have a rich history of documenting and monitoring goals. For these districts, strategic planning is a continuation and updating of their traditional systems. Other districts turn to strategic planning when faced with the potential and challenge of new leadership, to address changing student populations, or to end a cycle of ineffective management and programming. For these districts, the strategic planning process provides a values-based, systematic approach to reassess community values and planning (ECRA Group, 2015).

### **Statement of the Problem**

After establishing that strategic planning is important and critical to the job of superintendents, there is a need to examine its impact to determine to what extent the perceived and proclaimed effects of strategic planning are being realized in actual practice. More specifically, there is a need to determine whether strategic planning efforts are resulting in school improvement that can be measured in terms of student performance. Since strategic planning is time-consuming and potentially expensive, it is

key to ensure that the process is achieving desired outcomes and where it is not, triaging why that is.

Without an established mission and subsequent goals, public school districts will be severely limited in their ability to influence the future of their district and meet the federal academic requirements demanded of them. Districts must be able to deliver a well-rounded education to a diverse student population and demonstrate an annual increase in student achievement under fiscal, regulatory, and labor restraints. In sum, the problem under examination is whether a relationship can be seen between superintendent's engagement in strategic planning and student achievement as measured by the graduation rate and ACT.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the proposed study is to evaluate the relationship between the superintendent's implementation of and engagement with a school district's strategic plan and the ultimate achievement of students. The level of implementation and engagement is determined by multiple factors including, if the essential components of the strategic plan are included, what stakeholders were included in the planning and how current the strategic plan is. The study will also evaluate if the strategic plan is implemented with fidelity. High school graduation is an important indicator of educational success and an essential milestone on the road to college or a career with a living wage (Banda, 2016).

Previous studies about strategic planning were conducted involving school districts in Kentucky (Bashman, 1988), Nebraska (Heller, 1997) and New York (Linehan, 2006). The framework for this exploration will be guided by and is similar to

Bashman's, Heller's and Linehan's research. This previous research explored how superintendents engaged with strategic planning and student outcomes within various school districts across the United States.

### **Research Questions**

As previously stated, there is a need to explore further the relationship between the level of development and engagement by the superintendent with a school district's strategic plan and the ultimate achievement of students. There is a need to examine its impact to determine to what extent the perceived and proclaimed effects of strategic planning are being realized in actual practice. As such the proposed research will address the following questions:

1. Are superintendents including the essential components of a strategic plan when undertaking and engaging with the strategic planning process?
2. What is the relationship between superintendents' utilization of strategic planning and the percentage of graduation students receiving diplomas after four years of high school?
3. What is the relationship between superintendents' utilization of strategic planning and student performance on ACT test?

Ultimately, I hypothesize that if Nebraska public school superintendents implement all the components of a strategic plan, involve the stakeholders in the planning, and implement with fidelity, districts will have increased academic achievement and higher graduation rates.

## **Significance of the Study**

Exploring the relationships between superintendents' engagement with strategic planning, graduation rates, and student ACT scores is critical because there are currently demands at the local, state, and national levels for accountability and school improvement. In general, the superintendent is charged with leading a system to ensure the success of a strategic plan. Fostering this collective leadership is a daunting challenge when one considers there are often varying views among the stakeholders as to what challenges should be addressed. It is vital to evaluate and understand the impact of the strategic planning processes upon the student body, educators, administration, and external communities as well as the criteria for successful continuation of the strategic planning process.

While there has been research on the impact of strategic planning in those districts where it has been mandated by the state, studies of the school districts that have a choice whether to utilize it are sparse. Nebraska specifically has not mandated districts implement strategic plans. This study seeks to fill this gap in the literature and will aid superintendents in the strategic planning process by collecting their perceptions and measuring those perceptions with collected outcome data. This information will guide superintendents in future decision making regarding systematic planning.

## **Introduction of Methods**

The research design for this study is a quantitative approach using a survey design. According to Creswell and Cresswell (2018) a survey design provides a quantitative description of trends, attitudes and opinions of a population, or test for

associations among variables of a population, by studying a sample of the population.

The population base for the study is all superintendents in Nebraska public schools. As reference earlier Bashman (1988), Heller (1997), and Linehan (2006) conducted a previous study that this study seeks to build upon. This study seeks to expand that work by Bashman's (1988), Heller's (1997), and Linehan (2006).

A survey will be developed by the researcher and emailed to each of the Nebraska superintendents. The list of superintendents will be obtained through the Nebraska Department of Education website. The researcher will use publicly available archival data from the State of Nebraska to collect graduation rates and ACT scores. Independent T tests will be used to determine the results of this study.

### **Theoretical/Conceptual Framework**

The overall framework for this study was based on Systems Theory. According to Germain (2015),

Systems Theory is the study of simple and complex systems, their structure, and their behavior. It is concerned with identifying the elements and interconnections within systems. It focuses on the interrelationships and interaction of elements through their interconnections, which helps in understanding how systems work and makes physically different systems comparable, enabling insights across disciplines. (p. 8)

Over the years there have been numerous school reform movements, and most have brought about little or no significant change. The key reason for the failure of these reform movements is that their designer tried to change one piece of the component of the educational system at a time and did not recognize the interlocking nature of the components within a system (David, 1991). Fullan (1992) further elaborated on the systemic nature of educational systems and the change process, stating that,

It is simply unrealistic to expect that introducing reforms one by one, even major ones, in a situation which is basically not organized to engage in change will do anything but reform a bad name. You cannot have an educational environment in which change is continually expected, alongside a conservative system, and expect anything but constant aggravation. (p. 3)

### **Definition of Terms**

To provide clarity for readers, I have provided several definitions of key terms that appear throughout this research.

*Fidelity*—For this study, the definition provided by Keller-Margulis (2012) of fidelity will be used. Specifically, “fidelity of implementation, often called treatment integrity, is the act of monitoring whether all elements of an intervention or plan were implemented as originally intended” (p. 334).

*Strategic Planning*—A strategic plan in the education sector is the physical product of the strategic planning process and embodies the guiding orientations on how to run an education system within a larger national development perspective, that is evolving by nature and often involves constraints. The strategic plan process in public schools typically addresses the mission, vision, values, priorities, assessments, and plan to reach the desired goals. For each objective and implementation plan is developed, monitored, and modified (Chang, 2008).

*Organizational Effectiveness*—The measure of how successful organizations are achieving identified missions and advancing stated visions through core strategies. The importance of being able to define and determine an organization’s effectiveness cannot be overlooked in the strategic planning process (Chang, 2008).

*Systems Leader*—(person) responsible for building organizations where people continually expand their capabilities to understand complexity, clarify vision, and improve shared mental models (Chang, 2008).

*Systems Thinking*—is an approach to problem-solving that comes from systems theory. It is the orientation to or awareness of the whole rather than a singular event or activity. Groups using systems thinking seek to understand the patterns, cycles, or structures an event or activity exists within as a starting place for examining how to improve an event or activity or resolve a problem (Lynch, 2011, p. 1).

*Beliefs*—An organization's purpose and function (Cook, 1994, p. 45).

*Mission*—The organization's purpose and function (Cook, 1994, p. 45).

*Mission Statement*—The organization's intentions of what it has envisioned to be accomplished in preparation for the future (Kaufman & Herman, 1991, p. 134).

### **Assumptions**

Inherent in doing quantitative survey research are several assumptions. First, we assume that the survey instrument being used to conduct the research is sound and reliable since the survey is being adapted from prior research studies. Second, the assumption is made that superintendents will provide truthful and accurate responses to the survey instrument. While these are not all assumptions associated with quantitative research, they provide a basic outline that readers should keep in mind.

### **Limitations**

All research studies contain limitations. For this study, several limitations exist. First, the data collection procedure involves the use of a questionnaire. Responses to the

questionnaire are subjective, and they do not allow for interpretation or clarification of the questions or responses. Second, the data gathered will be the perceptions of the superintendents. Because superintendents are responsible for the initiation and implementation of strategic planning efforts in their districts, an argument could be made that they have a vested interest in the success of these programs. As a result, superintendents might report the impact of the strategic planning efforts in a more favorable light than would other individuals within the districts. Finally, another limitation is the results and conclusions reflect the situation as it exists in Nebraska and cannot necessarily be generalized to other states or parts of the country.

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations are generally considered the boundaries of a particular research study. As the researcher I have made several decisions to narrow the scope of my study. First, I have limited my achievement outcomes to high school graduation and ACT scores rather than including additional educational outcomes such as college going status or state testing for elementary age students. Second, I am using a simple independent t-test to conduct my analysis. There are more robust statistical analyses that could have been used but, since this is a preliminary study a less complex statistical analysis will be conducted. Finally, while this study focuses on superintendents in the public sector, there are certainly private schools in Nebraska that have superintendents that engage in strategic planning. This study does not include their data.



**Summary**

Unprecedented change is taking place in our nation's education system. Without effective strategic planning, school leaders will be involved in crisis management, spending their time putting out fires instead of lighting fires of passion and learning in students. School leaders should embrace the importance of strategy by developing plans that are focused and that provide consistent monitoring and evaluation. Most importantly, the administrators who implement strategic plans should begin the process with confidence that their tactics and action plans will support the district vision and goals and profoundly influence student success (ECRA Group, 2015).

This chapter has introduced the basics and background for the study that I propose. Most importantly the chapter has demonstrated the need for further research on the relationship between superintendent of development and engagement with student outcomes, specifically ACT scores and graduation rates. Chapter 2 will explore the literature that underpins the roots of strategic planning and theoretical foundations that are pertinent to this work. Chapter 3 will outline my proposed methodology for conducting this work.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Review of Literature**

This literature review presents a framework for the proposed study on strategic planning that will evaluate the relationship between the superintendent's implementation of and engagement with a school district's strategic plan and the ultimate achievement of students. The literature's content will give the reader an understanding of strategic planning and clarify the importance of strategic planning to K-12 public education. As a starting point, this literature review begins with an examination of the literature surrounding what strategic planning is. After the basics of strategic planning are established, I will review the historical roots of strategic planning, the benefits of strategic planning for educational institutions and stakeholders (with a particular focus on superintendents) and examine the steps that are traditionally involved in the strategic planning process. Finally, the literature review will conclude with the exploration of the premise of my research question: how engagement with the strategic plan by superintendents plays a role in student achievement.

#### **What is Strategic Planning?**

As introduced in Chapter 1, strategic planning is the process of looking at all aspects of one's school and planning how to move the school forward. It provides the big picture of where an organization is, where it is going and how it is going to get there. The point of a strategic plan is to improve the school or organization by outlining the direction for the school to take, identify issues impacting the school and deciding on the priorities for action (Collins, 2017).

A strategic plan helps a school define what it intends to achieve when it comes to its student success objectives and organizational goals. According to Ong (2016) a combination of good planning and communication will ensure that all stakeholders including parents, teachers, administrators, principals, board members and community are all striving for the same goals. Successful strategic plan implementation requires proper management of budgetary and time resources, the creation of high-output teams and the consistent monitoring of all progress.

When executed appropriately, a strategic plan should make the work of everyone easier. Ideally, strategic planning reduces the number of decisions senior management must make since most decisions are made based on whether they fit with the school's pre-established vision and goals. Additionally, it ensures that school staff focus on the essentials as determined by key stakeholders. Strategic planning also provides a direction, so all stakeholders have a clear vision of what the school is trying to achieve, and some understanding of the strategies agreed upon (Collins, 2017).

Strategic planning is "a disciplined effort to produce fundamental decisions and actions that shape and guide what an organization (or other entity) is, what it does, and why it does it" (Bryson, 1995, p. 14). Strategic planning is essential to the growth, improvement, and survival of all organizations. The costs and consequences of failing to plan are great. Organizations cannot become high performing and sustain that performance without effective strategic planning. Strategic planning should be an active process that identifies the future desire of the organization. However, planning cannot be done in isolation as a separate activity, it must be an integral function of the organization.

Organizational leaders must not just understand the process but be able to provide effective leadership.

Fehnel (2000) aptly noted that strategic planning involves a systematic process in which an organization assesses its basic reason for being, what its strengths and weaknesses are, and what opportunities and threats it might face in the immediate and near future. The organization then uses this assessment to decide whether to make changes in what it does, how it does it, and with whom it interacts to fulfill its purpose. Yepwi (2007) concluded that strategic planning is a comprehensive statement of an organization's mission, objectives and strategies, adding that it is a detailed roadmap that an organization intends to follow in conducting its activities. Strategic planning and thinking involves making choices and decisions about the long-term future of an organization (Pearce & Robinson, 2007). Taken together, these authors laid the foundation for this study. As demonstrated, strategic planning is a complex, but important, process worthy of study at the K-12 level.

### **Defining Strategic Planning**

Before proceeding with the proposed research, a formal definition of strategic planning is called for. Johnson and Scholes (2002) define strategic planning as a means that determines the directions and scope of an organization over the long term, matching its resources to its changing environment, and particularly its markets, in ways that meet stakeholders' expectations. Further, Yepwi (2007) asserts that strategic planning is a comprehensive statement for an organization's mission, objective and strategies, a

detailed road map of the direction and course that an organization intends to follow in conducting its activities.

The latest definition aligns with earlier definition already proffered. Strategic planning is therefore an organization's process of defining its strategy or direction of making decisions on allocating its resources to pursue the strategy. Goodstein et al. (2008) defined it as the process by which the guiding members of an organization envision its future and develop the necessary procedures and operations to achieve that future. The strategic planning process involves a belief that aspects of the future can be influenced and changed by what we do now. It helps the organization to create its future. Strategic planning is a process that builds the strategic-management capacity of the organization.

### **History of Strategic Planning**

To understand strategic planning, it is important to examine its roots. The history of strategic planning begins in the military. Strategy is defined by Guralnik (1986) as "the science of planning and directing large-scale military operations, of maneuvering forces into the most advantageous position prior to actual engagement with the enemy" (p. 15). Although our understanding of strategy as applied in management has been transformed, one element remains key: the aim to achieve competitive advantage. According to Wall and Wall (1995), taking its name and roots from the military model, early models of formal strategic planning:

reflected the hierarchical values and linear systems of traditional organizations. Undertaken by elite planning function at the top of the organization, its structure was highly vertical and time bound. A certain period would be set aside to analyze the situation and decide on a course of action. This would result in a

formal document. Once this was done, the actual work of implementation - which was considered a separate, discrete process - could begin. (p. 21)

These basic foundations continue to be present in today's strategic planning processes, but like most things, the basics would adapt and change with time.

Strategic planning in organizations originated in the 1950s and was extremely popular and widespread between the mid-1960s to mid-1970s. It was believed that strategic planning was the answer to many problems, and corporate America was "obsessed" with it. Following that "boom," strategic planning was cast aside and abandoned for over a decade. Few people fully understand that strategic planning is not strategic thinking. The 1990s brought the revival of strategic planning as a "process with particular benefits in particular contexts" (Mintzberg, 1994, p. 23).

Newer models of strategic planning were focused on adaptability to change, flexibility, and the importance of strategic thinking and organizational learning. "Strategic agility" is becoming more important than the strategy itself because the organization's ability to succeed "has more to do with its ability to transform itself, continuously, than whether it has the right strategy. Being strategically agile enables organizations to transform their strategy depending on the changes in their environment" (Gouillart, 1995, p. 3). Organizations demonstrated strategic agility recently when they had to rapidly adapt in response to the COVID-19 pandemic while also continuing to meet goals. Undoubtedly, strategic planning processes will continue to evolve in response to the challenges faced in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to succeed.

## **Strategic Planning in Education**

After understanding the historical roots and definition of strategic planning, it is critical to examine how strategic planning processes made their way onto the K-12 education field. This section provides a timeline of the evolution of this process and sets the stage for the important contribution that this study can make to the literature on strategic planning in the K-12 sphere. This section will specifically focus on how schools develop, engage with, and learn from strategic planning.

In the late 1960s, the American Association of School Administrators established the Commission of Administrative Technology to examine the issues of education planning and systems and the relationship between planning, programming, and budgeting as it applied to the nation's public schools. They emphasized the importance of program budgeting in allocating resources to objectives within the schools (Tanner, 1971). In the late 1970s and early 1980s, school leaders explored the possibility of adapting strategic planning models to the educational sector. In 1973, the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education produced a voluminous work that contained many examples of the strategic planning functions as they might be used in higher education (Johansen & Samual, 1977).

In recent years, strategic planning in schools has moved away from the traditional business model towards a 'strategic thinking' approach. This is a strategy that is less a fixed design and more a flexible learning process that relies on school managers constantly listening and synthesizing what they hear and learn from all sources. This does not rule out a formal strategic planning process, but it assumes that any formal plan

can be changed and refined, so the school leader can always respond. As Collins (2017) states, the strategic plan should arise from pragmatic, flexible strategic thinking that relies on judgment as much as on spelling out action steps and the measurement of benchmarks. Recently, school districts have proactively shifted their strategic planning process to include and involve parents and other constituents. At the school district level, strategic planning requires community engagement and support both functionally and legislatively. Collaborative leaders in education know that without community support and the insight that goes with community engagement their strategic plans are likely to fail (Billingham, 2012, p. 6).

According to Dolph (2016), strategic planning is a process that organizations such as school boards may use to transform and improve how they function. A strategic plan offers direction in how school systems develop a vision, mission, goals, and actions plans aimed at organizational improvement (Wilkinson et al., 2007). A well-constructed strategic plan focuses on the school system's future. The process considers the surrounding environment and should be heavily reliant on both internal and external data. Strategic planning explores the status of a district, how it managed to get where it is, where it is headed, where it should/could be going, and finally, how it will get there.

Strategic planning helps school managers to acknowledge the future, spot significant trends and tendencies, and the need to respond to them skillfully, adapt, modify systems and structures to tackle new challenges and circumstances (Kiprop et al., 2015). According to Chukwumah (2015), a school's strategic plan is a physical document that embodies the guiding orientation regarding how to manage the school



within a larger national and local development perspective. Such a plan can lead to school effectiveness, improvement and development when properly implemented.

As stated by Chang (2008), a strategic plan is a living document that includes policy direction, implementation strategies, actions and benchmarks for implementation, monitoring, and evaluation, as well as the expenditure framework which allows adjustments in areas for development during implementation. This plan entails the school's analysis of its strategic issues for development, prioritization, planning to address such issues and, finally, implementing a plan to address these identified issues for development. It ensures that learners receive quality education in terms of holistic development and academic achievement.

As this section discussed, strategic planning is important to the foundation of any school system. It is a critical process that requires engagement and input from a wide variety of stakeholders while also ensuring that fundamental principles, as discussed in an earlier section, are adhered to. Now that it has been established that strategic planning is a critical component of K-12 educational systems, an exploration of the specific benefits associated with the process in schools is warranted. The next section will outline the benefits associated with using strategic planning processes in K-12 schools, specifically related to the job of the superintendent, to prepare for a more robust discussion of how superintendent engagement with strategic planning plays a role in student achievement.

### **Components of a Strategic Plan**

In general, strategic plans come in many different shapes and sizes. There are many opinions about the most important components of a strategic plan. There are

common elements of a strategic plan that Mittenhal (2017), Olsen (2012) and Sission (1992) have identified. Below are the common aspects of strategic plans agreed upon by the three authors. They are presented in the order that they would be found in a formal, written strategic planning document.

### ***Vision Statement***

The vision statement is a short, concise statement of the organization's future that answers the questions of what the company will look like in five or more years. The head of the organization has a focused vision for its current and future. It is imperative that the vision is shared with stakeholders.

According to Hawthorne (2019), vision statements help to describe the organization's purpose. Vision statements give direction for employee behavior and help provide inspiration. Strategic plans may require a marketing strategy, which could include a vision statement to also help inspire consumers to work with the organization. A vision statement is a view into the future with hope and a positive outlook. It describes a company's inspirational, long-term plan for what they will be able to accomplish, who they will help, and how the company will then be perceived. It is often out of reach for now, but not so far out of reach as to be unattainable. The vision statement gives everyone a description of what they are working towards.

### ***Mission Statement***

According to Mittenhal (2017), the mission statement is an overarching, timeless expression of an organization's purpose and aspirations, addressing both what it seeks to

accomplish and the way the organization seeks to accomplish it. It is a declaration of why you exist as an organization.

The mission should be much more than a politically correct “feel good” statement. The mission statement should embody the values of the organization, to which you will always remain true. A good mission statement should include a clear, concise expression of the organization’s purpose, philosophy, and commitment.

Hawthorne (2019) states leaders should emphasize the current mission statement to employees, which clarifies the purpose and primary, measurable objectives of the organization. A mission statement is meant for employees and leaders of the organization. Strategic plans may involve changing the mission statement to reflect a new direction of the organization. Highlighting the benefits of the change and minimizing the deficits will help employees and the public buy into the change. Another way to look at it is that mission statements describe the organization’s mission as it is now and for the near future. So, if the organization is undergoing major changes, it would make sense to revise the mission statement as part of the strategic planning process, so it is current.

### ***Short-Term Goals***

These items convert the strategic objectives into specific performance targets that fall within the one-to two-year time horizon. They state what, when and who and are measurable. Goals express a desired outcome and may be focused on discrete parts of the organization’s programming or internal operations. Like the short-term goals themselves, progress toward achieving goals and objectives should also be measurable. While the terms are often used interchangeably, goals are more comprehensive or far-reaching than

objectives? Framed clearly, they answer the question “What do we want to accomplish?” (Olsen, 2012).

### ***Values Statement or Guiding Principles***

The values statements are enduring, passionate, and distinctive core beliefs. They are guiding principles that never change and are part of the strategic foundation of an organization. A values statement presents the principles on which an organization is built, and that guide its planning, operations, and programs. Sission (1992) states that it answers the question “What do we believe in?”

### ***Action Plans***

Sission (1992), states clearly, great vision and mission statements are useless if not acted upon. Action plans are the engines that make strategic plans succeed. Creating detailed action plans that include what is to be done, who is accountable for it, and when it is due, is an ingredient commonly glossed over in strategic planning. Too many organizations create outstanding strategies without attaching specific action plans, and so they gather dust until the next strategic planning meeting.

### ***Implementation Plan***

The implementation plan is an organizational “user’s guide” to the strategic plan. It spells out the cost, duration, priority order and accountability for each strategy and tactic. The implementation plan answers the questions “What are our specific priorities?” and “How can we pursue our plan in a logical and feasible fashion?” (Olsen, 2012).

### *Strategies*

According to Mittenhal (2017), strategies are the general umbrella methods one intends to use to reach one's vision. This is the "how" you will achieve your goals and objectives. While strategic planning groups often express different ideas of how to reach the outcomes of your strategies target, brainstorming and free discussion typically results in agreement on a business strategy or strategies that should work. Even in smaller organizations, CEOs should try to involve as many people as possible. This is more important than just keeping everyone on the same page. You often learn that staff members have winning ideas that need to be considered. Perhaps more important, though, is that inclusion creates buy-in, and any winning strategy will need engaged employees to be successful. These consist of approaches or sets of activities needed to achieve goals and objectives. They answer the question "How will we actually accomplish our work?"

### **Benefits of Strategic Planning in Education**

According to Cote (2020), one significant benefit of strategic planning is that it creates a single forward-focused vision that can align a school-district and its shareholders. By making everyone aware of the district's goals, how and why those goals were chosen, and what they can do to help reach them, school leadership can create an increased sense of responsibility throughout their organization. Billingham (2012) states that nothing affects a school district more than its ability to create and execute a strategic plan. A good strategic plan can improve student outcomes, keep great teachers, and enhance the reputation of district leadership. School districts of all sizes use strategic

planning to achieve the broad goals of improving student outcomes and responding to changing demographics while staying within the funding box they are given. The nature of these goals and restrictions suggests that strategic planning in education is, and must be, different than the process used in the business sector. In the business sector the goal is to get more customers or make more money. For the schools, it is to improve student outcomes.

Floyd (2020) suggests that strategic plans can be an effective tool for educators and administrators. Utilized correctly, they can provide students, teachers, coaches, staff members, parents, administrators, and community member guidance on how the school district plans to achieve its short-term and long-term initiatives, achieve its annual goals, and continuously improve student outcomes. Every educational organization needs a road map to follow in attempting to achieve its goals and aspirations. One of the best ways to do that is to develop and implement a strategic plan. Through careful planning, schools will be able to produce appropriate strategies as an effort to achieve goals, the essence of planning as a strategic management process is decision making by sorting and selecting alternative activities to be carried out so that they are effective and efficient (Nawawi, 2005). Quality is an important part of the institution and must be approached systematically by the strategic planning process of total quality management, without clear long-term direction, an institution cannot plan for quality improvement (Sallis, 2012).

Since the proposed study will focus on superintendents, it is important to understand how superintendents specifically benefit from engaging in strategic planning

and further, how that engagement links up with student achievement. Superintendents need to approach strategic planning as a way of thinking, not a set “product” or “plan” that has value in and of itself. The next section will elaborate further on the relationship between superintendents and student achievement.

In summary, there are myriad benefits associated with effective strategic planning in schools. These include creating buy-in from all stakeholders, influencing professional practices and improving student achievement (Sallis, 2012). If it can be established that superintendent engagement with the strategic planning process is influential on student achievement, school systems may be more likely to take this important process seriously and continuously engage in it, thereby leading to an overall more successful educational organization.

### **Impact on Achievement with Strategic Planning**

Ultimately, a school district’s strategic plan typically always includes one especially important goal--the improvement of student achievement. This area of a strategic plan is critical since superintendents state that a motivating factor for accepting the role was the potential impact, they could have on students in terms of improving achievement (Hough, 2014) and thereby they need a solid plan to achieve that goal for themselves and their district. A consistent vision that addresses student achievement is a critical component in helping a system leader decide what will be changed, what will be added, and what will be eliminated (Boozer et al., 2011). According to Marzano and Waters (2009), high achieving school districts set targets not only for the district but also specific buildings and student populations within those buildings. Petersen and Barnett

(2005) also provided support for the importance of the superintendents' accountability behaviors. Superintendents in high-achieving districts developed collaborative goals, evaluated the effectiveness of instruction, and monitored results. All these actions can and should be guided by the development and execution of a strong strategic plan.

### ***Outlining the Strategic Planning Process in K-12 Schools***

Now that it has been established that strategic planning is critical for superintendents in K-12 schools, discussion can turn to what the strategic planning process should look like. At the very core of successful strategic planning lies a fundamental conviction: the good of the whole exceeds in importance the good of any of its parts. It is an approach that is significantly optimistic in that it asserts the possibility of creating a culture where priorities are agreed upon, and of encouraging a climate within which colleagues rejoice, not only in their own accomplishments, but in the accomplishments of others in the belief that the success of one rebound to the success of all (Ekong & Plante, 1996). Specifically, the strategic planning process must include a situation assessment and a strategic review.

**Situation Assessment.** According to Kennedy (2022), a plan is only as good as the facts on which it is based. For this reason, a situation assessment is essential to support informed decision making in strategic planning. It is essential to know the board's appetite for change. After all, the board will ultimately be asked to approve the strategic plan and the allocation of resources to support its implementation. If the board does not agree with the plan, the strategic planning process could come to an inglorious end, when presented to that very same unsuspecting board by the soon-to-be-ex-head.



With the board on your side, at least you can do some proper advance preparing and lobbying on issues you know the board finds difficult to accept. Another issue to address in the situation assessment is to document the way things work today. Assuming anyone understands the way things happen in the school is a critical step when developing a sound strategic plan. It is important to prepare a detailed description of every major functional area and include everything from the administrative functions through to the academic functions. Without these descriptions in hand, it becomes almost impossible to describe how any change proposed in the strategic plan will impact the school.

**Strategic Review.** A second crucial step to conduct when developing the strategic plan is the act of thinking of strategic planning as a review rather than a development process (Kennedy, 2022). Strategic planning is not as much about developing new strategies as a review of basic strategies. Connecting the strategy to the existing organization structure of the school is important. There are several initial steps needed to begin the strategic planning process, as outlined above. While we have focused on the preparatory steps, it is also imperative to this study is that the various components of a strategic plan are carefully defined and understood. The next section outlines the major components of any strategic plan.

### **Barriers to Strategic Planning**

Between the ideal of strategic planning and the reality of implementation lie many barriers to the effective implementation of strategic planning. Beer and Eisenstat (2000) stated that leaders must engage in an honest conversation about the barriers and their underlying causes. Research indicates that organizations can face significant barriers

before and during strategic planning that can potentially outweigh any benefits.

Organizations need to build the necessary capacity to do strategic planning. The skills and resources to do strategic planning should match the complexity of the processes and practices involved (Poister & Streib 2005).

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter has examined the literature that is relevant to my study about the relationship between school superintendents, their engagement with strategic planning efforts, and ultimately the academic achievement of students. This chapter brought forth several areas of literature that are relevant to strategic planning and laid the foundation for why the proposed study is needed. As demonstrated, strategic planning is an ongoing, in-depth, and critical process that has implications for student achievement and outcomes. My study will help demonstrate the role superintendent engagement with strategic planning has on student achievement as measured by standardized test scores and graduation rates within Nebraska public schools. The results will hopefully allow for further scholarly research at the national level to further explore this relationship. The next chapter focuses on the methodology utilized in this study including the research design, sampling procedures, instrumentation, data collection, data analysis, and researcher bias and validity.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methods**

#### **Introduction**

According to Dolph (2016), strategic planning provides a process that organizations such as school boards may use to transform and improve how they function. A strategic plan offers direction in how school systems develop a vision, mission, goals, and actions plans aimed at organizational improvement (Wilkinson, 2007). A well-constructed strategic plan focuses on the school system's future. The process considers the surrounding environment and should be heavily reliant on both internal and external data. Strategic planning explores the status of a district, how it managed to get where it is, where it is headed, where it should/could be going, and finally, how it will get there.

The strategic planning process is a key strategy in adapting to, managing, and instituting change in school improvement. "Strategic planning is a process that involves stakeholders in determining priorities and setting future direction. It is a process of organizational renewal that allows a school district to anticipate and react to change in a proactive manner" (Goodin et al., 1988, p. 12). If educators do see the need for planning as a key element in school reform and school improvement and if strategic planning is a vehicle for bringing about school reform and school improvement, then there is a need to examine the impact of strategic planning as it relates to school reform and school improvement.

School strategic planning can help an organization to clarify future direction, to establish priorities, to diversify its products or services, and to deal effectively with rapidly changing circumstances. A strategic plan must reflect the thoughts, feelings, ideas, and wants of the developers and mold them along with the organization's purpose, mission, and regulations into an integrated document. Strategic planning practices examined include the development of a mission statement, operating plan, and budget; involvement of stakeholders, and strategic planning logistics.

Strategic planning is intended to help governments, communities and organizations deal with and adapt to their changing internal and external circumstances. It can help clarify and resolve the most important pressing issues they face. Strategic planning enables them to build on strengths, take advantage of opportunities, and become much more effective. Proper implementation of strategic planning can result in the changes needed by the public school system to meet the rapidly changing needs of society.

The job of a superintendent has changed over the last several decades to include budgets, buildings, managing school boards as well as collaboration, communication, curriculum, and community building (Boozer et al., 2011). Superintendents can use strategic planning to improve decision making by establishing a process that raises issues and resolves them in ways that positively affect the organization, stakeholders, and society (Bryson, 2018). The importance of strategic planning is derived from its capability to help leaders efficiently anticipate and address change effectively (Bryson, 2018). According to Bryson and Alston (2005) there are many benefits to strategic

planning, they include: increased effectiveness and efficiency, improved understanding and learning, better decision making and organizational capabilities, improved communications and public relations and increased political support.

In this research project, superintendents from Nebraska public schools were surveyed. Questionnaires were emailed to the superintendents. The questionnaire (Appendix A), developed by the researcher, will contain questions relating to the district's strategic plan, the degree of implementation and the fidelity of the strategic plan being implemented. The study is focused on superintendents because, as the chief executive officer, the superintendent has primary operating responsibility for strategic planning.

This chapter outlines the research design, instrumentation, data collection, and data analysis used in the proposed study. The researcher sought to find areas of agreement and areas of disagreement among school district superintendents relating to the practice and effectiveness of strategic planning. There is a need to examine the impact of strategic planning in Nebraska school districts to determine the extent the perceived and acclaimed effects of strategic planning are being realized in actual practice. More specifically, there is a need to determine if the strategic planning efforts are resulting in school improvement that can be measured in terms of student performance and graduation rates.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions will guide this work:

1. Are superintendents including the essential components of a strategic plan when undertaking and engaging with the strategic planning process?
2. What is the relationship between superintendents' utilization of strategic planning and the percentage of graduation students receiving diplomas after four years of high school?
3. What is the relationship between superintendents' utilization of strategic planning and student performance on ACT test?

The null hypothesis for this research study is as follows:

Ho = There are no relationships between strategic planning and graduation rate.

Ho = There are no relationships between strategic planning and student ACT scores.

### **Research Design**

According to Creswell (2003), quantitative research in the social sciences employs strategies designed to develop operational definitions of variables to study a variety of phenomena by making fundamental connections between empirical observations and the mathematical expressions of those relationships (Creswell, 2003). Quantitative researchers use of a survey and survey methodology allows them to conduct their study in a logical collection and analysis of the data to answer the research question. Survey methodology allows gathering many quantitative data responses from a sample of participants. This allows for inferential and descriptive analysis that may be interpreted by the researcher. The analysis allows for generalizations to a larger population if the

predictors are found to be statistically significant by social science standards (Dillman et al., 2009).

The research design for this study is a quantitative approach. The population base for the study is all Nebraska public school superintendents. The list of Nebraska public school superintendents and their emails were obtained from the Nebraska Department of Education website. Before the survey adapted from Bashman (1988), was officially deployed, the researcher piloted the survey with a few current superintendents to ensure that it was collecting data correctly and that respondents understand the questions. The pilot indicated there were no issues with the survey, therefore no modifications were made to the survey.

### **Population and Sample Selection**

As previously discussed, the population for this study was every public-school superintendent in Nebraska. The Nebraska Department of Education website lists the names of the superintendents and their email addresses. The superintendents of each of these 248 school districts were emailed a cover letter and an electronic survey through Google Docs. Creswell and Creswell (2018) state that a single-stage sampling procedure is one in which the researcher has access to names in the population and can sample people or other elements directly (p. 150). A follow-up survey was emailed to those individuals who did not respond to the initial email within two weeks.

Superintendents were chosen as the ones to survey because they are the chief executive officer responsible for creating and implementing strategic planning that ensures others know, understand, accept, and support the mission of the district. This is a

complex task that requires not only a strong understanding of educational policy and best practices, but also excellent leadership, communication, and problem-solving skills. By developing clear, well-defined policies that align with the district's mission and goals, superintendents can provide a framework for thinking, planning, and decision-making that helps to ensure the success of the institution and the students it serves. As Ricci (2011) notes, critical thinking is an essential component of this process, and by fostering a culture of critical thinking within the district, superintendents can help to ensure that all stakeholders are engaged and invested in the success of the institution.

### **Instrumentation**

The survey used in this research (Appendix A) was adapted from Bashman (1988). The researcher modified the survey to address more current issues in public schools. The questionnaire was utilized to measure the extent of strategic planning in Nebraska public schools. It consisted of 20 items with a forced-choice approach to measure the degree of implementation of strategic planning. Scores ranged from a low of 0 indicating the lowest degree of utilization to 211 indicating the highest degree of utilization of strategic planning.

The instrument was initially developed by Bashman (1988) and his colleagues at the University of Louisville Graduate School of Education. The instrument's focus was to measure behavior regarding strategic planning and not to gather data about beliefs and feelings. The questionnaire utilized in this study did not alter the approach developed at the University of Louisville; however, modifications were made pertaining to Nebraska's achievement measures.



### **Data Collection**

This study involved human subjects and thereby adhered to the standards set forth by the institutional review board (IRB) at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. The survey was built within Google Docs and disseminated via email to the superintendents in Nebraska public schools. Participants were told the survey would take about five minutes to complete and all answers would be kept confidential. The responses and data were stored in Google Docs. By agreeing to take the survey and attesting to the procedure outlined in the introductory script to the survey, participants consented to participate.

### **Data Analysis**

Survey data was downloaded from Google Docs at the end of the collection period and analyzed using analysis software IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences Version 25 (SPSS) for Windows for analysis SS. To analyze the data, it was downloaded from the Google Docs platform and inputted into the analysis software IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences Version 25 (SPSS) for Windows for analysis. Two methods of analysis will be conducted, descriptive and relational. Descriptive analysis, according to Creswell and Creswell (2018), is used to identify typical characteristics and tendencies in the data. First, descriptive statistics, in this study, was used to create a profile of the sample. Second, correlational analysis (Vogt & Johnson, 2016) was used to determine relationships between the following variables:

1. Which strategic planning practices use by superintendents were most effective,

2. If a relationship exists between superintendent strategic planning and student achievement.

From the ratings that were derived from tabulating each superintendent's response to the questionnaire, school districts were categorized as having a high degree of utilization of strategic planning placing in the upper 25% of all districts responding, or a low degree of utilization of strategic planning placing in the lower 25% of all districts responding. Standard descriptive statistics such as mean, median, standard deviation and percentages was used to answer the research questions as to what degree school district was engaged in strategic planning, whether they had an existing written plan or not, did they use components of the strategic planning process in their district's planning. A correlation analysis was performed to see if a relationship existed between strategic planning scores and ACT scores and graduation rate. According to Creswell, quantitative research in the social sciences employs strategies designed to develop operational definitions of variables to study a variety of phenomena by making fundamental connections between empirical observations and the mathematical expressions of those relationships (Creswell, 2003). The researcher's use of a survey and survey methodology allowed the researcher to conduct this study in a logical collection and analysis of the data to answer the research question. Survey methods allowed for gathering many quantitative data responses from a sample size of participants' responses. This allowed for inferential and descriptive analysis that was interpreted by the researcher. The analysis allowed for generalizations to a larger population if the predictors are found to be statistically significant by social science standards (Dillman et al., 2009).

## **Researcher Bias**

The researcher hypothesized that there will be a correlational relationship between a superintendent's strategic planning practices of superintendents and student achievement. Also, the researcher is a school leader in a system that has used a strategic planning process to improve student achievement. As such, the researcher's belief correlates to research from Dolph (2016), who states that a strategic plan focuses on the future and offers direction in how school systems develop a vision, mission, goals, and action plans aimed at organizational improvement. Researcher bias was mitigated by having a consistently designed research protocol that outlined data collection methods (Smith & Noble, 2014). All procedures outlined in the methodology were followed and the districts were selected based on the parameters of the study to minimize any possible response bias (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

## **Summary**

This chapter describes the research design, the sample, instrumentation, and the data collection and analysis that I used in this study. This quantitative study surveyed all superintendents in Nebraska public school using publicly available data from the Nebraska Department of Education website. After accounting for these criteria, there are 248 superintendents that were sent the 20 item Qualtrics survey via their publicly available email addresses. The purpose of the proposed study was to evaluate the relationship between the superintendent's development and engagement with a school district's strategic plan and the achievement of students. The level of development and engagement was determined by multiple factors including if the essential components of

the strategic plan are included, what stakeholders were included in the planning and how current the strategic plan is. Chapter 4 will analyze the collected survey data and address the study's research questions by using descriptive and correlational statistics.

## Chapter 4

### Analysis

#### Introduction

The study's purpose was to evaluate the relationship between the superintendent's implementation of and engagement with a school district's strategic plan and the ultimate achievement of students. The level of implementation and engagement was determined by multiple factors including if the essential components of the strategic plan were included, what stakeholders were included in the planning, and how current the strategic plan is. The survey data was collected through a Google survey emailed to Nebraska public school superintendents. The ACT data and graduation rate data were collected from the Nebraska Department of Education website. The data was downloaded into the statistical analysis software IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences Version 25 (SPSS) for Windows for analysis. This chapter provides the analysis of the collected survey data and addresses the following research questions:

1. Are superintendents including the essential components of a strategic plan when undertaking and engaging with the strategic planning process?
2. What is the relationship between superintendents' utilization of strategic planning and the percentage of graduation students receiving diplomas after four years of high school?
3. What is the relationship between superintendents' utilization of strategic planning and student performance on ACT test?

The null hypothesis for this research study is as follows:

Ho = There are no relationships between strategic planning and graduation rate.

Ho = There are no relationships between strategic planning and student ACT scores.

Two approaches to analysis were used in analyzing the research questions. First, descriptive statistics were used to create a profile of the sample. Descriptive analysis according to Creswell and Creswell (2018) was used to identify typical characteristics and tendencies in the data. Second, correlational analysis (Vogt & Johnson, 2016) was used to address the research questions. This includes what relationship exists between superintendent strategic planning and ACT scores and graduation rate.

### **Descriptive Analysis of the Sample**

A 14-item survey was emailed to 244 superintendents in Nebraska public schools. There were 91 superintendents who completed the survey, for a response rate of 37.2%. The questionnaire ranged from a low of 0 to a maximum of 211 points representing a high degree of strategic planning. Also, while not counted toward any point contribution, the survey also provided questions on demographic data.

### **Demographic Data**

The respondents were asked to indicate the number of years they had served as a superintendent. Of the 91 superintendents responding to the survey, 37 (40.6%) had served as superintendent from 1 to 5 years, 22 (24.1%) had served as a superintendent from 6 to 10 years, 19 (20.8%) had 11 to 15 years of service, and the remaining 13 (14.2%) had 16 to 35 years of service. The responses of the number of years a superintendent have served are reported in Table 1.

**Table 1***Number of Years Served as Superintendent*

Years Served	Frequency	Percent
1-5	22	24.1
6-10	19	20.8
11-15	13	14.2
16-20	9	9.8
21-25	2	2.1
26-30	0	0
30-35	2	2.1

The respondents were asked to indicate the number of years they had served as a superintendent in their current school district. Of the 91 superintendents responding to the survey, 60 (65.9%) had served as a superintendent in their current district from 1 to 5 years, 14 (15.3%) had served as a superintendent from 6 to 10 years, 13 (14.2%) had 11 to 15 years of service, and the remaining 4 (4.2%) had 16 to 35 years of service in their current district. Table 2 shows responses of the number of years a superintendent served in their current district.

**Table 2***Number of Years Served as a Superintendent in Their Current School District*

Years Served	Frequency	Percent
1-5	60	65.9
6-10	14	15.3
11-15	13	14.2
16-20	2	2.1
21-25	1	1
26-30	0	0
30-35	1	1

***Survey Question #1: Does your school have a strategic plan?***

Of the 91 superintendents responding to the survey, 77 (84.6 %) indicated that their school district had a strategic plan while 14 (15.4 %) indicated that their school district did not have a strategic plan. The responses of the superintendents to question #1 are reported in Table 3.

**Table 3**

*Districts with a Strategic Plan*

Had a Strategic Plan	Frequency	Percent
Yes	77	84.6
No	14	15.4

***Survey Question #2: What period does your school district's strategic plan cover?***

Fifty-nine superintendents (75.6%) reported their school district's strategic plan covered a period of 5 years or more. Eight superintendents (10.2%) reported that their written strategic plans cover a period of 4 years. Six superintendents (7.6%) reported over a period of 3 years. Five (6.4%) superintendents reported that their written strategic plans cover 1 year. The responses of the superintendents to question #1 are reported in Table 4.

***Survey Question #4: If yes, what year did your school district first implement a long-range strategic plan?***

Sixty superintendents (76.9%) implemented strategic plans between 2014-2022. Twelve superintendents (15.4%) first implemented a long-range strategic plan between 1999-2013. One superintendent (1.3%) implemented a long-range strategic plan between



**Table 4***Years of Coverage for a Strategic Plan*

Years	Frequency	Percent
1 year	5	6.4
2 years	0	0
3 years	6	7.6
4 years	8	10.2
5 or more years	59	75.6

1989 and 1993. Five districts implemented their plans prior to 1994. Table 5 illustrates the first year of implementation among the Nebraska Public Schools superintendents that responded.

**Table 5***Year of First Implementation of Strategic Plan*

Years	Frequency	Percent
2014-2022	60	76.9
1999-2013	12	15.4
1994-1998	0	0
1989-1993	1	1.3
Prior to 1994	5	6.4

***Survey Question #5: Which of the key areas of your school district are included in the strategic plan?***

This questionnaire was subdivided into seven categories (see Table 6). The category of instructional programs and services was highest with 72 or 92.7% of the

**Table 6***Key Areas Included in Strategic Plan*

Years	Yes	Percent	No	Percent
Student Performance	70	89.7	8	10.3
Organizational Management	44	56.6	34	43.4
Community Involvement	58	74.3	20	25.7
Professional Evaluation and Training	60	76.9	18	23.1
Innovations	38	48.7	40	51.3
Instructional Programs and Services	72	92.3	6	7.7
Facilities	68	87.1	10	12.9

superintendents reported it was a key area in their strategic plan. Student performance was next highest with 70 or 89.7% of the superintendents that responded affirmed their plan in this area. The third highest key area included in the strategic plan was facilities with 68 or 87.1% of the superintendents reported it was included in the strategic plan.

The next two key areas included in the strategic plan was professional evaluation and training and community involvement with 60 or 76.9% of the superintendents and 58 or 74.3% of the superintendents respectively reported it was included in the strategic plan. Forty-four, or 56.6% of the superintendents reported organizational management was included in the strategic plan. The category of innovation rounded out the seven categories. Forty-four, or 56.6% of the superintendents indicated they planned for innovation.

***Survey Question #6: Does your school district have a designated coordinator/director of planning?***

Results from item five indicated that few of the superintendents responding had designated a staff position to the strategic planning function. Only 19 superintendents, or 24.3%, had a positive response to this question. The result could reflect the fiscal limitations districts face in allocating resources to planning (see Table 7).

**Table 7**

*Designation Coordinator for Planning*

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	19	24.3
No	59	75.7

***Survey Question #6: If yes, what percent of his/her time is spent on planning?***

Of the 19 superintendents who responded “yes” to the previous item, 27 superintendents indicated that they limited the designated planning role to a maximum of 25% of the total job function. Six superintendents indicated that they had their strategic planning designee dedicate up to 50% of their time toward planning. Table 8 shows that the planning position in school districts is often limited by resources or competing priorities.

**Table 8***Percentage of Time Spent of Planning Strategic Plan*

Response	Frequency	Percent
Up to 25 percent	27	34.6
26 to 50 percent	6	7.7
51 to 75 percent	2	2.6
76 to 100 percent	1	1.3
NA	42	53.8

***Survey Question #7: Does your school district have a budget for strategic planning?***

The overwhelming majority of superintendents responded they did not budget for planning. Fifty-eight, or 74.4% of the superintendents, chose “no” regarding their having a budget for planning. The low percentage of districts dedicating fiscal resources to the planning process reveals the lack of priority school districts place on planning when compiling their annual budgets (see Table 9).

**Table 9***Budget Included for Strategic Planning*

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	20	25.6
No	58	74.4

***Survey Question #8: What groups are represented in the school wide planning committee?***

Analysis of the data indicates that most groups are well represented. The superintendents who responded to this item reported that teachers, administrators, school

board members, parents and the superintendent are on their committees. Forty-nine or 62.8% of the superintendents include students on the planning committee (see Table 10).

**Table 10**

*Groups Included in Strategic Planning*

Group	Yes	Percent	No	Percent
Teachers	72	92.3	6	7.7
School Administrators	78	100	0	0
School Board	75	96.2	3	3.8
Superintendent	77	98.7	1	1.3
Students	49	62.8	29	37.2
Parents	67	85.9	11	14.1
Other Community Representatives	55	70.5	23	29.5

***Survey Question 9: Does your school district provide the strategic planning committee training in strategic procedures?***

Only 29, or 37.2% of superintendents reported that their districts provided training in strategic procedures for the members of the district-wide planning committee. Of the districts that had district-wide committees, most of them, 62.8%, did not offer training in the strategic planning process (see Table 11).

**Table 11**

*Training Provided for Strategic Planning*

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	29	37.2
No	49	62.8

***Survey Question #10: Does your district have a local school board policy governing strategic planning?***

Only 32.1% of the superintendents who responded indicated they had a local school board policy regarding strategic planning.

**Table 12**

***Local School Board Policy Governing Strategic Planning***

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	25	32.1
No	53	67.9

***Survey Question #11: Does strategic planning in your school district include a critical analysis/needs assessment?***

Sixty-nine percent (69%) of district superintendents reported that they included a critical analysis/needs assessment in their planning process (see Table 13). Assessing needs and establishing goals based upon priorities is a basic tenet of planning; therefore, the rather high percentage affirming this practice supports the belief that districts rely on some process of planning. It would be difficult for the twenty-four superintendents who reported that they do not do a needs assessment to engage in any form of strategic planning.

**Table 13***Critical Analysis/Needs Assessment Included in Strategic Planning*

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	54	69.2
No	24	30.8

***Survey Question #12: If yes, what internal environmental data is collected and analyzed?***

The internal environmental data refers to the data resultant within the operations and personnel of the school district. This data would be collected as part of the needs analysis. The data illustrated in Table 14 indicates high emphasis on programs and services offered by the district. The areas of academic achievement and school climate ranked highest at 94% and 96%, respectively.

***Survey Question #13: What external environmental data is collected and analyzed?***

Seventy-five (75) or 96.2% of all the respondents cited parents as a source of external data. This was the largest subgroup for the collection of external data. Community groups were an external data source for 64, or 82.1%, of the superintendents that responded. State and federal mandates comprised the next largest group with 71.8% of superintendents reporting they use state and federal mandates as an external data source. Industrial-business input and economic status was used by 56.4% of the superintendents (see Table 15).

**Table 14***Environmental Data Collected and Analyzed in Strategic Planning*

Group	Yes	Percent	No	Percent
<b>Teacher</b>				
Teacher options	75	96.2	3	3.8
Teacher holding power	17	21.8	61	78.2
Student/teacher ratio	49	62.8	29	37.2
Teacher rank and experience	30	38.5	48	61.5
Teacher performance	43	55.1	35	44.9
<b>Students</b>				
Student options	67	85.9	11	14.1
Student attendance	69	88.5	9	11.5
Holding power	8	10.3	70	89.7
Retention rate	39	50	39	50
Student work status	31	39.7	47	60.3
Dropout	59	75.6	19	24.4
Student enrollment	72	92.3	6	7.1
<b>School Funds</b>				
Teacher salaries	56	71.8	22	28.2
Administrators salaries	52	66.7	26	33.3
Classified salaries	55	70.5	23	29.5
Source and amount of revenue	64	82.1	14	17.9
Per-pupil expenditure	57	73.1	21	26.9
Other line-item expenditures	50	64.1	28	35.9
<b>Administrators</b>				
Administrator performance	54	69.2	24	30.8
Administrator holding power	24	30.8	54	69.2
<b>Programs and Services</b>				
Curriculum	73	93.6	5	6.4
Academic achievement	74	94.9	4	5.1
School climate	75	96.2	3	3.8
Post-high school education	54	69.2	24	30.8
Student services	61	78.2	17	21.8
Extracurricular participation	66	84.6	12	15.4



**Table 15***External Environmental Data Collected and Analyzed in Strategic Planning*

Group	Yes	Percent	No	Percent
Parent opinion	75	96.2	3	3.8
Community opinion	64	82.1	14	17.9
Dropout opinion	14	17.9	64	82.1
Graduate opinion	46	59.0	32	41.0
Non-public schools	11	14.1	67	85.9
Economic status	44	56.4	34	43.6
Industrial-business trends	44	56.4	34	43.6
State and federal mandates	56	71.8	22	28.2

***Survey Question #14: What planning components are included in your school district planning?***

Seventy-five (75) or 96.1%, linked goal setting with their planning process. Ninety-four percent (94%) and 91% of the superintendents reported respectively that a mission statement and vision statement were a component in their planning process. A high number of districts indicated that they established annual objectives, 71%, and utilized timelines, 64%, to maximize their planning outcomes. Also, a high percentage of the districts, 67%, had a vision statement to guide them in their planning. Twenty-five (25), or 60%, of districts noted that they used a statement of needs as part of their planning process. It is noteworthy that 69 more than half of the districts, 57%, planned by not including assumptions regarding the future (see Table 16).

**Table 16***Components of a Strategic Plan Included*

Component	Yes	Percent	No	Percent
Vision statement	71	91.0	7	9.0
Specific Strategies	62	79.5	16	20.5
Mission statement	74	94.9	4	5.1
Statement of Needs	46	59.0	32	41.0
Evaluation procedures	55	70.5	23	29.5
Activities	62	79.5	16	20.5
Timelines	67	85.9	11	14.1
Assumptions about the future	54	69.2	24	30.8
Persons responsible	63	80.8	15	19.2
Core Values	63	80.8	15	19.2
Goals	75	96.1	3	3.9
Reporting procedures	46	59.0	32	41.0
Annual Objectives/Outcomes	58	74.4	20	25.6

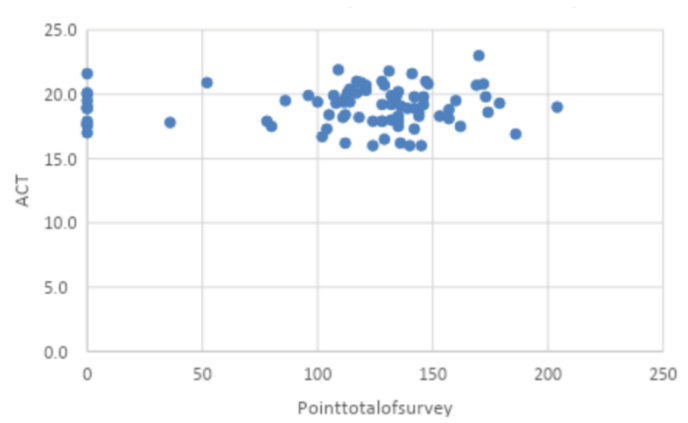
To determine whether a relationship existed between the implementation of the strategic plan and the ACT scores and graduation rate, a Pearson correlation analysis was calculated. The null hypotheses set for this statistical test indicated no relationships between strategic planning and graduation rate and that there are no relationships between strategic planning and ACT scores (see Table 17).

Additionally, scatterplots illustrating the relationships are presented in Tables 18 and 19 for a visual representation of the data.

**Table 17***Correlations*

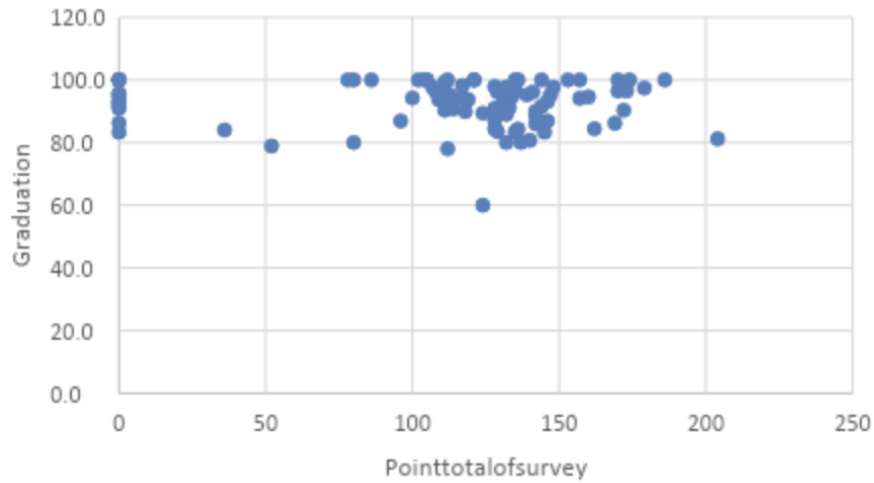
		ACT	Graduation	Point Totals of Survey
Pearson Correlation	ACT	--		
	Graduation	0.349**	--	
	Point Totals of Survey	0.066	-0.045	--
Sig. (2-tailed)	Graduation	0.001		
	Point Totals of Survey	0.543	0.673	
N	ACT	87		
	Graduation	87	91	
	Point Totals of Survey	87	91	91

\*\* . Correlation is a significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

**Figure 1***Scatter Plot of ACT by Point Total of Survey*

**Figure 2**

*Scatter Plot of Graduation by Point Total of Survey*

**Summary**

Chapter 4 of the dissertation focuses on examining the relationship between survey responses, ACT scores, and graduation rates. The determination of this relationship was based on the total scores obtained from survey questions. A correlation analysis was conducted to assess the association between the total survey scores and both ACT scores and graduation rates. The null hypothesis was accepted, indicating that there is no significant correlation between the variables under investigation. These findings will be expanded upon in Chapter 5.

## Chapter 5

### Findings, Implications, Further Investigations and Recommendations

#### Introduction

The study's purpose was to evaluate the relationship between the superintendent's implementation of and engagement with a school district's strategic plan and the ultimate achievement of students. The determination of implementation and engagement levels depended on many factors, such as the inclusion of essential components from the strategic plan, stakeholder involvement in the planning process, and its currency. The survey data was collected through a Google survey emailed to Nebraska public school superintendents. The ACT data and graduation rate data were collected from the Nebraska Department of Education Website. The data was downloaded into the statistical analysis software IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences Version 25 SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) for Windows for analysis. In Chapter 5, I will discuss the findings, implications, further investigations, and recommendations. This chapter provides an analysis of the collected survey data and addresses the following research questions:

1. Are superintendents including the essential components of a strategic plan when undertaking and engaging with the strategic planning process?
2. What is the relationship between superintendents' utilization of strategic planning and the percentage of graduation students receiving diplomas after four years of high school?

3. What is the relationship between superintendents' utilization of strategic planning and student performance on ACT test?

The null hypothesis for this research study is as follows:

Ho = There are no relationships between strategic planning and graduation rate.

Ho = There are no relationships between strategic planning and student ACT scores.

### **Findings**

The culmination of the dissertation's investigation into strategic planning in educational leadership yields insightful findings. These findings, derived from analysis of superintendent practices and their impact on academic outcomes, provide a foundation for the recommendations outlined in this chapter. The comprehensive examination of superintendent practices and their impact on academic outcomes has led to recommendations and implications in relation to superintendents' implementing strategic plans and its correlation with ACT scores and graduation rates.

- Superintendent Fidelity and Academic Outcomes:
  - The study investigated the fidelity of superintendents in implementing strategic plans.
  - Contrary to expectations, the analysis revealed no statistically significant correlation between the fidelity of superintendent implementation of a strategic plan and ACT scores or graduation rates.

- ACT Scores and Graduation Rates:
  - The examination of ACT scores and graduation rates across districts did not show a discernible pattern related to the degree of fidelity in strategic plan implementation.
  - The lack of correlation challenges the assumption that the thorough execution of strategic plans directly translates into improved academic outcomes, as measured by standardized testing and graduation rates.

### **Implications**

The absence of a statistically significant correlation between superintendent fidelity in implementing a strategic plan and academic outcomes carries important implications for educational leadership.

- Reassessment of Strategic Plan Efficacy:
  - The findings prompt a reconsideration of the assumed direct impact of strategic plan fidelity on academic achievements. Findings suggest that the mere implementation of a strategic plan, regardless of the fidelity with which a plan is developed and implemented, may not be the sole determinant of success in terms of ACT scores or graduation rates.
- Complexity of Academic Outcomes:
  - Academic outcomes, measured by standardized testing and graduation rates, are influenced by many factors beyond the fidelity of strategic plan implementation.

- This complexity necessitates a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between various elements, including teaching practices, student engagement, socio-economic factors, community dynamics, and others.
- Focus on Strategic Planning Quality:
  - The study underscores the importance of not only considering fidelity but also the quality and relevance of the strategic planning process itself.

Future research and educational policies may benefit from shifting the focus towards identifying the specific components of strategic plans that contribute most significantly to positive academic outcomes and the degree to which school boards and district level leaders understand the planning process, its importance, etc.

- Holistic Assessment of Leadership Impact:
  - While strategic planning is a critical aspect of educational leadership, results of this study suggest a need for a broader and more comprehensive approach to assessing leadership impact.
  - Academic success may be contingent on leadership practices, resource allocation, teacher quality, and community involvement.

### **Areas for Further Investigation**

The findings in this dissertation open avenues for further exploration:

- In-depth Analysis of Strategic Plan Components:
  - A deeper analysis of specific components within strategic plans may reveal which elements, when prioritized or implemented effectively, contribute most to academic success.



- Longitudinal Studies:
  - Conducting longitudinal studies could provide insights into the long-term impact of strategic planning on academic outcomes, considering the evolving nature of educational environments, including funding changes, political issues, and other disruptions such as the COVID-19 Pandemic.
- Qualitative Exploration:
  - Qualitative research methods, such as interviews and case studies, may offer a more nuanced understanding of superintendent practices and their influence on academic outcomes. A deeper understanding of the ways local school boards and superintendents approach the strategic planning process could help illuminate the ways in which districts and leaders approach the process, strengths, and weaknesses of the process, etc.
- Complexity of Academic Outcomes:
  - Socioeconomic factors, district demographics such as English Language Learners, other student descriptors have an impact on academic outcomes. The same is true of the experience levels of teachers and school administrators. Further research into the correlation with these and other factors would add to what is known about the impact of strategic planning and its implementation on student outcomes.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

In this chapter, the dissertation not only presents findings but also delves into strategic recommendations aimed at enhancing the efficacy of strategic planning within

educational leadership. Each recommendation for practice addresses key facets of strategic planning, thereby contributing to the advancement of impactful superintendent educational leadership.

***Recommendation 1: Fostering Ongoing Professional Development for Superintendents and School Boards***

The initial recommendation emphasizes the crucial role of continuous learning for district leaders. Encouraging local boards of education to actively support superintendents in attending professional development sessions on strategic planning is envisioned as a catalyst for the implementation of best practices highlighted in Chapter 2. Recognizing the superintendent as a system leader responsible for articulating a comprehensive, long-term plan, the recommendation calls for tailored professional development opportunities. Local boards of education play the key role in empowering and supporting superintendents to prioritize and engage in professional development. These sessions, although not exclusively focused on education, can be customized to various professional fields, broadening the superintendent's perspective and skill set.

***Recommendation 2: Embedding Formal Strategic Planning Processes***

The second recommendation underscores the importance of consistently utilizing a formal strategic planning process by superintendents and district stakeholders. Drawing from Chapter 2, the recommendation emphasizes collaborative approaches, clear communication, flexibility, and accountability as integral elements of strategic planning. The recommendation to incorporate an understanding of strategic planning in school district leadership certification programs reflects a commitment to establishing a

foundational knowledge base among educational leaders. Graduate programs that prepare superintendents have a key role to play in equipping future district leaders with the necessary skill sets and awarenesses to effectively facilitate and drive strategic planning processes.

***Recommendation 3: Implementing Resource Accountability Through Administrators***

Moving to the operational level, the third recommendation calls for the appointment of an administrator as a dedicated point person to ensure the effective implementation of the strategic plan. While the superintendent shoulders the primary responsibility for strategic planning, introducing an additional layer of accountability ensures that resources are precisely directed to their intended targets. This dual-layered approach aims to enhance the overall efficiency of resource allocation within school districts. This process situates the strategic planning process as something that is not tied solely to one leader. It also helps grow strategic planning skills and awareness of other district leaders.

***Recommendation 4: Integrating Strategic Planning into Superintendent Evaluations***

The final recommendation aligns with regulatory expectations, proposing the integration of strategic planning into the annual evaluation of superintendents. School districts would do well to prioritize progress on strategic planning and implementation into the annual evaluation process for superintendents. This holistic evaluation approach provides a platform for collaborative discussions on the district's status, future aspirations, and the pathways to achieving them. Moreover, tying strategic planning to

the evaluation process motivates superintendents to actively seek out literature and engage in professional conversations, fostering continuous improvement.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, while this dissertation did not identify a correlation between superintendent fidelity in implementing strategic plans and ACT scores or graduation rates, it lays the groundwork for a more nuanced exploration of the multifaceted factors influencing educational leadership and student achievement. These findings contribute to the ongoing dialogue surrounding effective educational leadership practices and the complex nature of academic success.

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**Appendix A**

**Questionnaire Utilization of Strategic Planning**

## Questionnaire Utilization of Strategic Planning

1. Do you have a strategic plan for your school district?  
 Yes  
 No
  
2. What period does your school district's strategic plan cover?  
 One year  
 Two years  
 Three years  
 Four years  
 Five years or more
  
3. What year did your school district first implement a long-range strategic plan?  
 2014-2022  
 1999-2013  
 1994-1998  
 1989 -1993  
 Prior to 1994
  
4. Which of the key areas of your school district are included in the strategic plan?  
 Student Performance  
 Organizational Management  
 Community Involvement  
 Professional Evaluation and Training  
 Innovations (Improvements Through Change)  
 Instructional Programs and Services  
 Facilities  
 Other List \_\_\_\_\_
  
5. Does your school district have a designated coordinator/director of planning?  
 yes  
 no
  
6. If yes, what percent of his/her time is spent on planning? (Check one)  
 up to 25 percent  
 26 to 50 percent  
 51 to 75 percent  
 76 to 100 percent
  
7. Does your school district have a budget for strategic planning?  
 Yes  
 No

8. What groups are represented in the school wide planning committee? (Check all groups that apply.)

- Teachers  
 School Administrators  
 School Board  
 Superintendent  
 Students  
 Parents  
 Other Community Representatives  
 Other (List) \_\_\_\_\_

9. Does your school district provide the strategic planning committee training in strategic procedures?

- Yes  
 No

10. Does your district have a local school board policy governing strategic planning?

- Yes  
 No

11. Does strategic planning in your school district include a critical analysis/needs assessment?

- Yes  
 No

12. If yes, what internal environmental data is collected and analyzed? (Check all types that apply.)

- a. Teacher
- Teacher opinions
  - Teacher holding power
  - Student/teacher ratio
  - Teacher rank and experience
  - Teacher performance

b. Students

- Student opinions
- Student attendance
- Holding power
- Retention rate
- Student work status
- Dropout
- Student enrollment (current and projected)

## c. School Funds

- Teacher Salaries
- Administrators Salaries
- Classified Salaries
- Source and amount of revenue
- Per-pupil Expenditure
- Other line-item expenditures

## d. Administrators

- Administrator performance
- Administrator holding power

## e. Programs and Services

- Curriculum
- Academic achievement
- School climate
- Post-High School education
- Student services
- Co-curricular/extracurricular Participation

## 13. What external environmental data is collected and analyzed? (Check all that apply.)

- Parent opinion
- Community opinion
- Dropout opinion
- Graduate opinion
- Non-public schools
- Economic status
- Industrial-business trends
- State and federal mandates
- Others (List)

## 14. What planning components are included in your school district planning?

- Vision statement
- Mission statement
- Statement of Needs
- Evaluation procedures
- Activities
- Timelines
- Assumptions about the future
- Persons responsible
- Core Values
- Specific strategies
- Goals
- Reporting procedures



\_\_\_\_\_ Annual Objectives/Outcomes  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Other (List)

A Survey  
Score Key

Item	Answer	Points
1	Yes	10
2	1 year	2
	2 years	4
	3 years	6
	4 years	8
	5 years	10
3	2014-2022	2
	1999-2013	4
	1994-1998	6
	1989 -1993	8
	Prior to 1994	10
4	Yes	9 for each type up to 72 possible points
5	Yes	10
6	up 25%	2
	26% to 50%	4
	51% to 75%	6
	76%to 100%	8
7	Yes	10
8	1 for each group up to 8	
9	Yes	10
10	Yes	5
11	Yes	10
12	1 for each type of data up to 26	
13	1 for each type of data up to 9	
14	1 for each component up to 13	

Maximum Points = 211

**Appendix B**

**Letter to Superintendent**

Dear Superintendent,

You are being asked to take this survey as part of the doctoral dissertation by Jodi Frager, Doctoral Candidate in Educational Leadership at The University of Nebraska at Lincoln. The purpose of this project is to understand the use and impact of strategic planning in Nebraska public schools. You have been selected to participate in this survey because you are a superintendent in Nebraska public schools.

All your responses are completely anonymous. No identifying information will be connected to your answers. The survey is completely voluntary and is expected to take no more than 5 minutes to complete. If some unforeseen circumstance should occur, please feel free to me.

Jodi Frager  
Elementary Principal