

Preface

THE MOST IMPORTANT QUESTIONS

School leaders enter the education profession because they dream of touching children's lives and building a love of learning, not creating budgets or strategic plans. So, a book on school budgets and resources might not be the passionate educator's choice for bedtime reading. However, we hope this one will make the list, because the link between resource use and student performance may be the key to realizing those dreams that brought us here in the first place.

This relationship between school spending, organization, and student achievement is one of the most unexplored and untested areas of education. Across the country, from one very different community to the next, school budgets and organizations look remarkably similar. When school budget time comes around, most district and school leaders make minor adjustments to the previous year's budget, hoping to preserve existing positions and perhaps purchase some new instructional materials. Most districts use separate processes for budgeting and school planning. Both tend to be unimaginative and routine efforts enacted against the backdrop of looming deadlines, in ways that leave little room for reflecting on or rethinking current practice to help students reach the hopes we have for them.

But what if the budget season were a time for dreams and visions? What kind of schools would we imagine for our own children and for the talented teachers in them? When we ask teachers and principals this question, they get wistful. Elementary school teachers speak of class sizes as small as 15 and time to sit cross-legged on the floor, listening to each child read aloud. Secondary school teachers wish for the opportunity to know their students, to enjoy teaching loads lower than 50 (instead of the current 125-plus), and to spend time working deeply with students on their writing. Both groups envision expert help diagnosing assessment data and hours during the school day to work with other teachers to learn and plan how to adjust their instruction so they challenge each student to his or her limit.

Too often, budget discussions end with the conclusion that there is just not enough money and a clamor for more. Perversely, as important as more resources can be, this response perpetuates the problem. The quest for increased funding implies that if schools did more of what they are already doing, somehow more students would read at grade level and excellent schools would be the norm instead of the widely heralded exception, and that the primary problem lies in the level of funding and not in the nature of how schools are organized.

This book shows how strategic schools have realized these seemingly impossible dreams by reprioritizing and reorganizing their existing resources—people, time, and money. It aims to help school leaders, and the district leaders and policy makers who support them, grapple with a different question. Instead of “How do schools get more?” we ask, “How can schools best use what they already have?” This second question challenges leaders and policy makers to manage resources strategically, be explicit about their priorities for student learning, and reorganize to meet those priorities. It asks school leaders to look closely at their current use of resources first. Adding new resources on top of the old without understanding the answers to these questions ignores evidence that schools can and do improve performance when they prioritize their goals and restructure their resources to match them. Until we rethink the use and organization of resources, we perpetuate a system that does not always serve our purposes very well.

THE NEED FOR COURAGE AND PERSISTENCE

Reorganizing school resources around instructional priorities to transform student performance requires a kind of courage and persistence of will that is hard to muster and harder to sustain. We say “courage” because the primary resource in schools and school districts is people—mostly teachers. So any significant change in the use of resources means teacher and other staff jobs *will* be affected. Using school resources more effectively takes courage because it means setting priorities and being strong enough to say that some things are simply more important than others—even when these priorities demand ending a cherished program. As the examples in this book show, the best choices for children aren’t always the favorite options of all of the adults currently working in schools.

Making the most of resources takes courage because it requires schools to increase the impact of the teachers and instructional practices that generate better results than others. Doing this typically means

xii • The Strategic School

expanding opportunities for expert teachers and supporting less accomplished teachers as they improve their practice. But when school leaders acknowledge the expertise of some teachers over others and mandate specific instructional practices, they challenge deeply ingrained school norms of teacher equality and autonomy. Teachers become uncomfortable. Potential conflicts emerge.

Why persistence? Reorganizing resources takes persistence because rethinking the jobs of teaching staff and restructuring the use of time during the school day enables teachers and other staff to play new roles but does not ensure any magical transformation. An expert teacher must now coach his or her peers; another must learn to mentor new teachers. Learning to play new roles takes time. Investing to grow new capacities takes money.

Designing powerful school organizations takes persistence because it is a continuous and never-ending process. Just as improving teachers learn to adjust instructional practice in response to student need, so do highly effective school organizations reinvent themselves through continuous introspection and discussion. As we will discuss, highly effective school leaders are not content to wait until budget time to readjust their use of time and staff; they tinker constantly, and they do not shy away from making enormous reallocations. They find ways to provide intensive support for struggling students, to adjust time to support instructional needs, and to mobilize teachers to address common challenges.

Creative and flexible resource use demands persistence because a host of regulations, contractual provisions, and district practices combine to thwart changes in school organization. For example, the improved organization might call for the replacement of instructional aide positions with expert reading teachers or perhaps for the purchase of new instructional materials for each classroom. In most districts, these moves would require negotiation with the union, the human resources department, and the budget department. They might have to mount a challenge to legal, policy, and cultural barriers against stout resistance or apathy.

Finally, improving school organization takes persistence because deep changes in instructional practice rarely lead to immediate leaps in standardized test scores. Detractors of change efforts often use this lag between implementation and performance improvement to insist that a school reinstate more familiar routines and structures. It takes both courage and persistence to stay the course.

Finding ways to design more effective school organizations will demand more than school leaders can accomplish on their own. Funding levels, union regulations, and state and district regulations and policies combine with traditional conceptions of what schools should look like to limit the design options available to school leaders. Concerted effort to

change the systems that surround and regulate public schools must accompany the deep school-level work we describe here. In this book, we focus on school designs, hoping that the tremendous successes of these strategic-minded, resource-savvy schools will inspire school leaders, teachers, and parents to lobby, push, goad, exhort, and otherwise impel the changes that may be required to create a strategic school.

OBJECTIVES AND ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

Together with our colleagues at Education Resource Strategies, the authors have worked for more than 15 years with leaders of public schools to diagnose their current use of resources, learn together about more effective alternatives, and help them choose new and better ways of organizing their people, time, and money. We have enjoyed support from numerous foundations and have analyzed resource use in high- and underperforming schools across the United States. These experiences have convinced us that there is no one right way to organize a school. On the other hand, we find that successful schools share many of the same strategies for organizing people, time, and money in their schools.

The purpose of this book is to provide school leaders and the administrators who support them with a deep understanding of how strategic schools leverage their available people, time, and money to impact student learning. We share both our research—extensive reviews of the literature, in-depth case studies, and district analysis—and our experience in partnering with urban schools and districts across the country to give readers both the academic and practical support they need to make strategic resource decisions in their own schools.

We hope that readers use this book in an active way—rather than skimming it quickly beginning to end. We intend for principals and other school leaders to use this as their own workbook, highlighting ideas that are applicable to their school, entering their own school data into the worksheets and tools provided, and scribbling concrete strategies that could be adapted or implemented in their own school. This book is meant to not only answer the question “What does research say about strategically using people, time, and money to improve learning?” but to also answer the follow-up question—“and how do I get started in my school?” This book is meant to be a tool for change.

The remainder of the book is organized into three parts:

- Part I: The “Big Three” Guiding Resource Strategies
- Part II: How Strategic Schools Use People, Time, and Money
- Part III: How to Make the Most of Your School’s People, Time, and Money

xiv • The Strategic School

In Part I, we make the case for more strategic use of school resources to fit our new goals and learning technologies. We outline a brief history of how and why resources have come to be poorly organized in typical American schools; why it is imperative for schools to reexamine and reconsider how they use the people, time, and money they already receive; and why now is a good time to get started. We also describe a gap in the body of research on successful schools as it relates to providing guidance for how schools might best organize and allocate resources—a gap this book aims to begin to fill.

At the end of the first section, we introduce the framework that will be used throughout the rest of the book. First, we introduce the “Big Three” guiding resource strategies that describe how the strategic schools we have studied organize their people, time, and money. These strategic schools are schools that achieved high performance by purposefully allocating their resources to better meet their biggest needs.

Part II dives more deeply into each of the Big Three guiding resource strategies. In each chapter, we describe each strategy, chart key differences between typical and strategic schools, and discuss why these differences matter. We also present case examples that illustrate how each principle contributed to the success of one or more strategic schools.

Part III is the practical application section of the book and deserves special mention here because we hope that users will stop, gather some information about their school, and then use the framework to develop a resource strategy that meets their school’s particular needs.

Chapter 6, “Tools for Strategic Schools: How Well Does Your School Use People, Time, and Money?” uses a case example to walk readers through the process of inventorying current resource use and considering strategies for reallocation. This chapter includes three practical tools to record your school’s resource data and evaluate whether your school follows the principles outlined in Part II.

Chapters 7 through 9 are designed to guide the reader through three interrelated planning processes that are essential to creating a strategic school plan:

- How to group students and assign teachers (Chapter 7)
- How to craft a master schedule that works (Chapter 8)
- How to strategically improve teaching quality (Chapter 9)

The three processes described in these chapters are so interrelated that decisions in one chapter will invariably affect decisions reached in other chapters. Chapter 10, “Putting It All Together,” will challenge the reader to integrate the various aspects of the strategic planning process to

Preface • xv

create a schedule, staffing plan, professional development plan, and student assignment policy that work together to meet a school's needs.

In this book, we focus on the school as the center point for effective resource use while being very clear that schools operate within a larger system that can either facilitate or seriously frustrate strategic resource allocation. We begin here not because districts and states shouldn't rethink their paradigms and practices, but because those who work to support schools need to have a clear vision of what they are trying to enable—strategic resource use that leads to student success—and that begins from the school up. With this vision in mind, reformers and district leaders can more effectively identify what needs to change to better support strategic school resource use. Whenever possible, we at Education Resource Strategies work with school leaders at the same time as we work with district leaders, believing that revolution must happen from the bottom up and the top down at once.