

Case Study

District and school improvement planning

Prism assists school districts to set up an annual academic improvement process designed to ensure a clear focus on priorities and the optimal allocation of resources at both the district and individual school level. Designed to fit neatly into the annual district calendar, the planning process is intentional, information-driven and repeatable.

Sean Brady helped our school's Shared Decision-making Team create focused goals that directly impact student achievement. We attribute the positive trend in our student achievement data directly to this process, as staff members are working in a strategic manner towards the same goal. One teacher mentioned, "Sean has a simple procedure to help large groups of people, with different interests, make decisions for kids." I would highly encourage any school looking to improve their student's achievement to work with Prism Decision Systems.

Nicole Wolfe, Principal, Adams Primary, Whitney Point CSD

First, the district identifies its mission, performance targets, priorities and long-term strategies. In the context of that district-wide plan, individual schools develop improvement plans that include building-specific performance targets, activities and action plans. Because of the efficiency created by Sean Brady's facilitation and [Prism's group decision support system](#), the district plan is usually created in just two days and each building plan in just one day.

Creating the district academic improvement plan

In addition to mission, performance targets, priorities and long-term strategies, the district's one-page academic improvement plan can also include the district's vision, values and beliefs. This case study will use actual examples of district academic improvement plans. As you might expect, each is unique, both in design and content.

District planning team

The district planning team is comprised of energetic, knowledgeable members, who represent key stakeholder groups (e.g., parents, teachers, staff, students, community members, administrators, etc.). If this team does not exist, it must be formed. In some districts, naming the district team is an informal process, while in others it is more formal and may require the participation of union, Board of Education and PTA leadership, among others.

Sean Brady's facilitation skills are among the best I have experienced in 30 years in education."

Mark Mondanaro, Superintendent, Kenmore-Tonawanda UFSD

Performance trends

The district team begins by reviewing three- to five-year performance trends on all key academic indicators: early literacy assessments, state assessments, graduation rates, dropout rates, suspension rates, special education classification rates, advanced placement participation, among many others. Whether at the district, school or classroom level, academic improvement planning

is done within the context of three- to five-year performance trends. Single year data points should never be the basis of decision-making.

Performance targets

Having reviewed the key performance trends, the district team then sets performance targets. This is a two-step process. First, they select a set of measures to assess the performance of the entire pre-K to 12 system. Then, for each measure, they set three- or five-year targets.

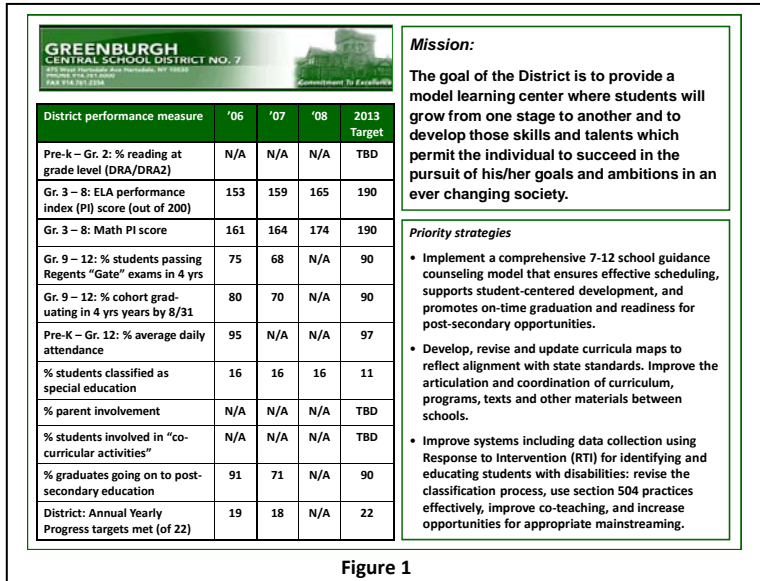


Figure 1

Typically, the set of measures is influenced but not exclusively driven by state assessments and No Child Left Behind requirements. Obviously, the district needs to track performance that it is accountable to achieve. But local control of education is a long-standing tradition in the United States. Therefore, the district team uses its discretion to select a combination of performance measures that is right for its community. For example, the Greenburgh 7 Central School District’s academic improvement

plan demonstrates a set of performance targets (Figure 1) that are a unique combination of NCLB and local measures. Local measures in the Greenburgh’s plan include early literacy, the percent parent involvement, and the percent graduates going on to post-secondary education.

The set of district performance measures is analogous to a person's vital signs. That is, when viewed, the set of measures gives a quick, accurate and comprehensive assessment of the “health” of the school system at a point in time. By no means is it or should it be comprised of every data point tracked by the district.

Once the team agrees to the performance measures, they review the three- to five-year performance trends and then set targets for each measure. Target setting is unique to each district team. Some teams are happy with incremental targets while others prefer “stretch” targets.

Our work with Prism Decision Systems has been the most gratifying I have experienced as an educator. I was amazed at how the facilitated process produced such clear and effective results. Our collective attention is now organized, directed, and formalized. We are primed for improvement. Thank you very much!

Marge Clarkson, Principal, Greenburgh 7 CSD

Once established, the performance targets act as a key monitoring tool. Year to year, the district team can evaluate the effectiveness of their academic improvement plan by measuring their progress toward their targets.

Research and presentation plan

With the targets set, the district team quickly identifies the key performance gaps they need to close. They now generate a research plan: a set of key questions that, if answered well, will give them the information that they need to articulate strategies to close their performance gaps. This research can be external: they can seek best practices from benchmark schools, for example. Or the research can be internal: they can complete formal self assessments of their strengths and weaknesses. Subteams volunteer to complete the research and prepare the presentations that will be made at a subsequent district team meeting.

Generating strategies

The presentation of research findings is designed to seed the district team's strategy development by answering three questions:

- *What* does the research say?
- *So what* does it have to do with our school district?
- *Now what* do we need to do to improve student performance?

Armed with this information, the district team completes and then prioritizes a strength, weakness, opportunity and threat analysis (SWOT). With this as a rich platform, they launch into strategy development. Strategies clearly answer the question: What do we need to do to achieve our mission and performance targets? Each district team member articulates a set of strategies. These draft strategies are combined and clustered. The whole group then refines and agrees to a final set of improvement strategies.

I really look forward to the academic improvement planning we do every fall with Sean Brady. It is an opportunity for my Shared Decision-making team to come together, away from school, and focus on the challenges we face and opportunities we have as a staff. Our work with Sean helps to focus our energy on tasks that we can accomplish for the year. Decisions are made for the good of the group and the students. The best ideas and solutions are not always the principal's. There is complete buy-in from the group, who then present the results to the faculty. I am totally pleased with the process.

Mike O'Branski, Principal, East Middle, Binghamton CSD

Identifying priorities

Once they agree to the set of strategies, the team uses Prism's group decision support system to create a strategic profile by assessing each strategy in three "votes." The first is a paired comparison that allows participants to force rank the strategies in terms of their relative importance to achieving the mission and performance targets. The second—a 1 to 9 vote—allows them to assess the current performance on each. The third vote allows participants to identify strategies as "old" or as "new."

Voting results are displayed in a two-dimensional scatter diagram, which is basically a picture of the entire school system at a point in time. Simple interpretation of this [strategic profile](#) helps to distinguish between high- and low-leverage strategies—and therefore to identify immediate priorities. The planning team does not consider all strategies to be equal and does target limited resources at opportunities providing the "greatest bang for the buck".

For example, see Whitney Point's strategic profile (Figure 2). This two-dimensional scatter diagram displays how the district team assessed 13 strategies. The vertical axis indicates their relative importance; the horizontal axis indicates their current performance; old strategies are displayed in squares and new strategies, in circles.

The profile interpretation guide (Figure 3) helps the team to identify district priorities. Strategies #13, #6 and #1 dominate the remaining 10 strategies in importance and they are also underperforming. These very important, under-performing strategies are priorities: immediate, high-leverage opportunities that are ripe for resources and attention.

Whitney Point profile

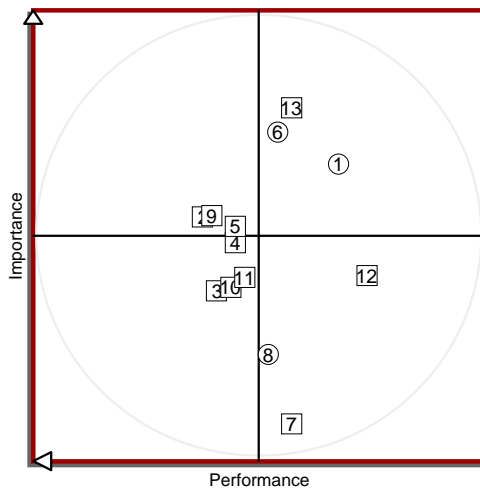


Figure 2

The strategic profiling process helps ensure strong agreement regarding where to target limited resources. See the Binghamton City School District plan’s 2007-2008 District Priorities (Figure 4) for an example of a clear set of priorities. These five priorities were among a set of 12 strategies that the district team assessed in its own strategic profile.

Achieving final consensus

As a final check, the district team uses Prism’s group decision support system to facilitate the consensus process and ensure final, explicit support for the academic improvement plan. In this way, there is a record that each member of the planning team agrees to publicly support

the implementation of the plan. For example, see the successful consensus vote by a 34 member Albany City School District team (Figure 5).

Communicating the improvement plan

The district team’s succinct, one-page academic improvement plan clearly articulates the path forward—that is, what the district will do to get from where it is to where it wants to be and how it will measure and monitor success or failure along the way. The one-page district plan becomes

- The primary communication vehicle with all district stakeholders: it can be presented at board meetings, PTA meetings, faculty meetings, Rotary club meetings, etc.
- A powerful management tool for the administration and board to identify, track, monitor and update the district priorities so that they may allocate resources optimally.

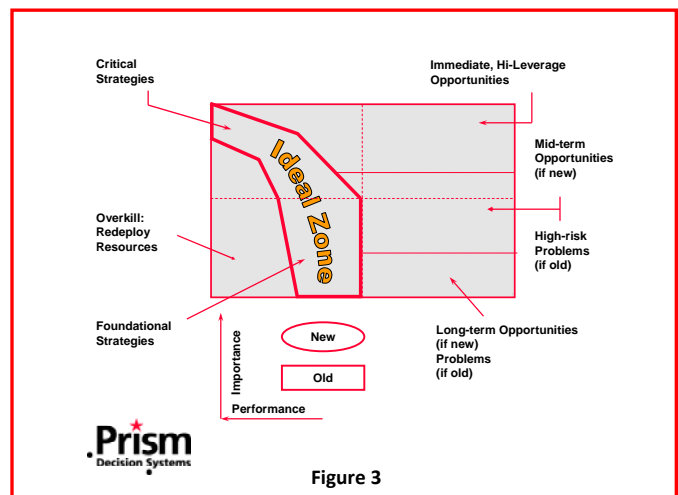


Figure 3

Monitoring and reporting the district plan

Unrelenting focus on the district plan will maximize its positive impact on student achievement. There should be regular progress monitoring and reporting. For example, the Board of Education

should be updated regularly on progress implementing the district's priorities. Other stakeholders should be updated on a less frequent basis. And, obviously, progress against the district's performance targets should be reported at least annually and more often where the data is available.

Creating school academic improvement plans

With the district plan as context, school teams produce their own succinct plan with performance targets, key activities, and detailed action plans including specifically who will do what by when with what resources.

School planning team

The planning team is usually the shared decision-making team (SDM). If this team does not exist, it must be formed in a process similar to that described previously.

School performance targets

The school team begins its one-day planning session by reviewing the district academic improvement plan and then its three- to five- year student performance trends. Building from the district performance targets, they then set a small number of school-specific performance targets.

See the excerpt of the Chenango Forks Kenyon Elementary 2007 – 2008 Academic Improvement Plan (Figure 6) for examples.

School action planning

The performance targets focus the school planning team for the remainder of the day. They complete and prioritize a modified SWOT. Then they identify key improvement activities that answer the question: How will we achieve our performance targets? Whereas the district plan

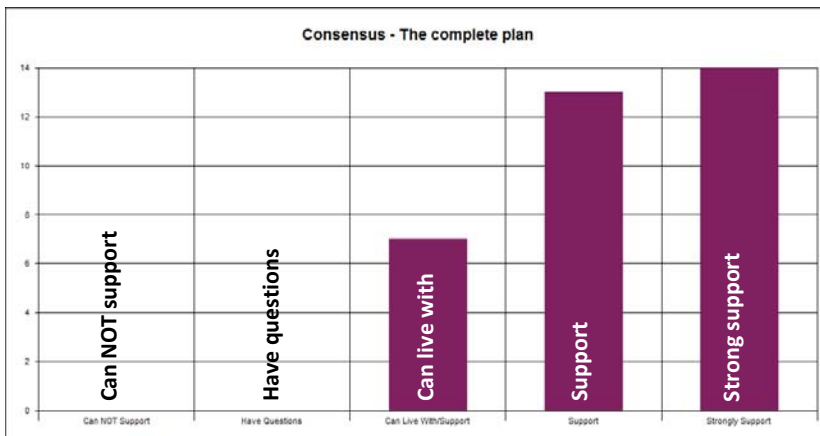


Figure 5

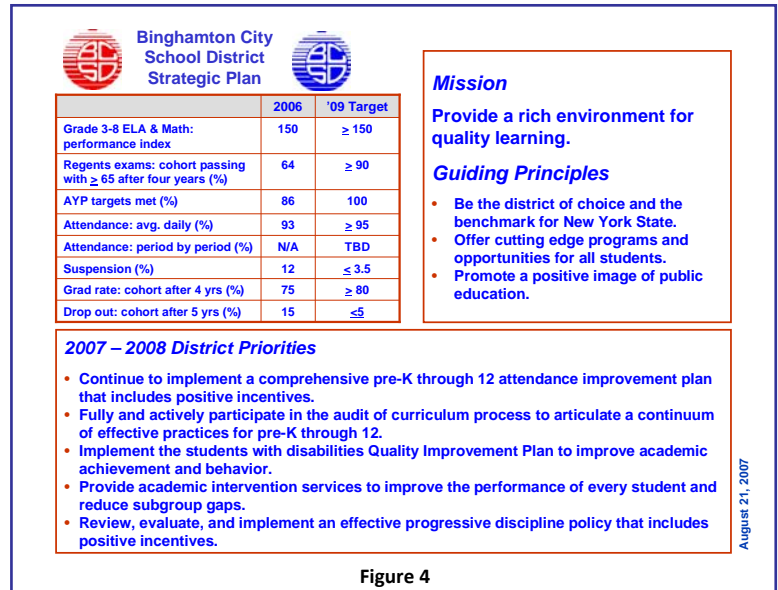


Figure 4

articulates broad strategies, the building plan articulates the specific actions necessary to improve student performance. By the time the team leaves for lunch, they have prioritized the improvement activities and drafted action steps to implement them.

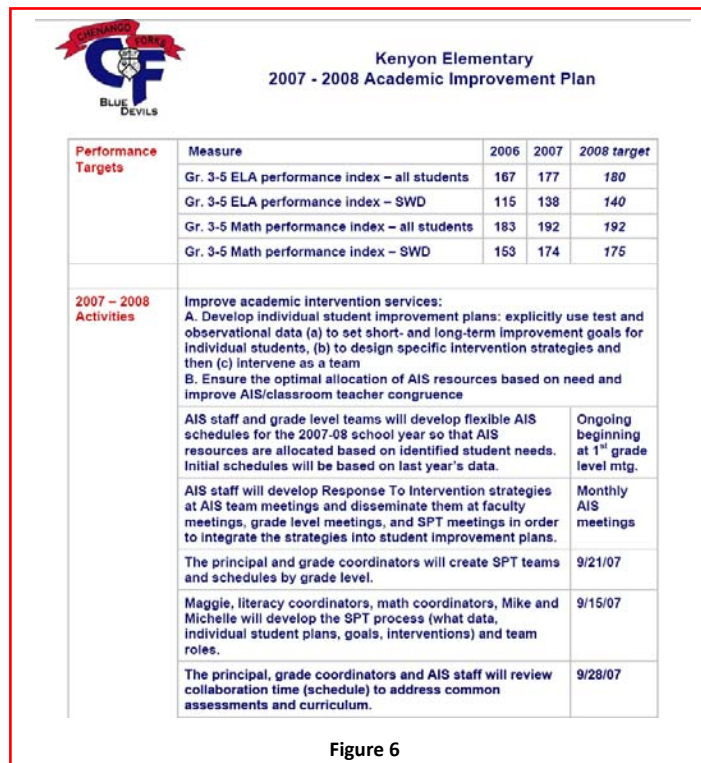
Sharing accountability

High functioning school teams do not depend upon the principal or other administrators to implement their academic improvement plan. Instead, they volunteer to put their names beside activities with clear time scales. This shared accountability not only increases the likelihood that the work will get done but also builds strong teams that are committed to support one another in their efforts to improve student achievement. See the excerpt of the Chenango Forks Kenyon Elementary 2007 – 2008 Academic Improvement Plan (Figure 6) for examples.

Monitoring the school plan

Each school's improvement plan becomes a critical communication vehicle ensuring that everyone knows what the key performance targets are, what activities are being implemented, who is responsible, and what the key milestone dates are. The plan should be the first item on each SDM meeting agenda. Where there is no SDM team, the school planning team should meet monthly.

Implementation progress should be monitored and any obstacles problem solved.



The table is titled "Kenyon Elementary 2007 - 2008 Academic Improvement Plan". It features a logo for "Blue Devils" on the left. The table is divided into two main sections: "Performance Targets" and "2007 - 2008 Activities".

Performance Targets	Measure	2006	2007	2008 target
	Gr. 3-5 ELA performance index – all students	167	177	180
	Gr. 3-5 ELA performance index – SWD	115	138	140
	Gr. 3-5 Math performance index – all students	183	192	192
	Gr. 3-5 Math performance index – SWD	153	174	175
2007 - 2008 Activities	Improve academic intervention services: A. Develop individual student improvement plans: explicitly use test and observational data (a) to set short- and long-term improvement goals for individual students, (b) to design specific intervention strategies and then (c) intervene as a team B. Ensure the optimal allocation of AIS resources based on need and improve AIS/classroom teacher congruence			
	AIS staff and grade level teams will develop flexible AIS schedules for the 2007-08 school year so that AIS resources are allocated based on identified student needs. Initial schedules will be based on last year's data.	Ongoing beginning at 1 st grade level mtg.		
	AIS staff will develop Response To Intervention strategies at AIS team meetings and disseminate them at faculty meetings, grade level meetings, and SPT meetings in order to integrate the strategies into student improvement plans.	Monthly AIS meetings		
	The principal and grade coordinators will create SPT teams and schedules by grade level.	9/21/07		
	Maggie, literacy coordinators, math coordinators, Mike and Michelle will develop the SPT process (what data, individual student plans, goals, interventions) and team roles.	9/15/07		
	The principal, grade coordinators and AIS staff will review collaboration time (schedule) to address common assessments and curriculum.	9/28/07		

Figure 6

Repeating the district and school planning cycle annually

These plans do not belong on a shelf. The entire planning cycle should be repeated annually at the district and school level. Performance targets should be modified and updated. Strategies should be refreshed, modified or replaced. Building action plans should be reinvigorated.

Once this planning cycle is in place and repeated year-to-year, the planning becomes iterative. The district plan initially informs each school's plan. But over time the school plans begin to influence the district plan. The flow of decision-

making becomes symmetrical: top-down *and* bottom-up. The planning process becomes deeply embedded in the culture of school improvement. The plans live, breath and dynamically guide the district and each building on the rich path to improving student achievement.

For more information, please contact

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