The U.S. economy may be on its way back to prosperity... or it may not be. The indicators remain mixed at best, a confounding condition which, in turn, has put constant pressure on independent schools to examine their missions within the financial exigencies of the times. As the theme of this issue of Independent School illustrates, it’s not all sturm und drang, nor is it time to batten down the hatches, since the pressures have led to promising new visions of how to sail smartly forward. For independent schools, this means, among other things, a new focus on managing enrollment, developing new pricing strategies, and finding creative solutions for increasing revenue streams.

Most important, under the weight of such stressors, it’s time to be highly strategic.

The thinking on “strategic thinking,” of course, has evolved significantly over the years. In the previous century, the independent school strategy was to focus on long-range planning, blithely projecting 10 years into the future. For decades this worked well enough, but in the late 20th century, as we watched most of those plans crumble short of their goals, we shifted to “strategic planning,” with its curtailed three- to five-year planning cycle. But given the increasing volatility of the economic and social landscapes, even a five-year planning cycle turned out to problematic. In the immediate aftermath of the market crash in September 2008, to put it bluntly, many schools’ five-year plans, at least in part, were rendered irrelevant.

At that point, all schools set aside their published plans in order to re-think how to think — how best to proceed in a constantly shifting landscape, or what Fast Company Editor Robert Safian calls “the Age of Flux.”

The New Strategic Process

In the words of the guru of strategic thinking, Henry Mintzberg, “Strategic planning is an oxymoron.” What he means is that the minute a formal strategic planning process codifies into goals and action steps, it ceases to be strategic.

The new strategic process, Mintzberg argues, requires that we remain in a strategic posture at all times. This is not a radical departure from the old process, since it relies on the same essential early steps: brainstorming, SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analyses, data collection and analysis, assessment of the internal and external landscapes and culture issues, etc. What is different, however, is that the planning team now produces a five-year vision as well as the first 12 months of strategies and tactics to actualize the vision. At the same time, the team proposes steps for the following 24 to 36 months, and yet leaves these latter strategies and tactics in the parking lot, so to speak, until team members see what happens in the first 12 months. This process of projecting and implementing in short-term steps allows the team to periodically reconsider the original list of next steps based on the external and internal exigencies that weren’t anticipated.

This process is crucial because, in the current economic and social climate, there undoubtedly will be external and internal exigencies that we haven’t anticipated. So, when something big changes the course of our plans (think the devastation of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, or the economic meltdown of 2008), the team can develop new strategies that hadn’t been needed originally. The longer-term (three- to five-year) vision is still the goal, but remaining in a continual strategic posture allows the enterprise to nimbly correct the course to the vision, in small and large ways.

We still formally articulate an emerging vision every three to five years, and try to keep that vision intact,
even when conditions on the ground change. For instance, a school’s vision may focus on expanding enrollment, adding a new division, creating a satellite campus, and offering branded online courses. However, if local conditions change at the end of the first year, the school will hold on to its vision, but may need to find a different path to the same destination. To that end, the school’s strategy-making task force needs to commit to annual gatherings to evaluate progress against the vision and goals, address unanticipated disruptions, identify new opportunities, and modify the path forward accordingly.

In short, the strategic process today must be ongoing, not episodic.

I am reminded of President Eisenhower’s now-famous remarks at the National Defense Executive Reserve Conference in 1957. Speaking to this group about the problem of planning for war and defense, Eisenhower recalled a story about a group of military planners at Leavenworth Staff College who objected to the college’s use of maps of the Alsace-Lorraine and Champagne regions of France as suitable for working out defense strategies. Instead, they produced maps of the Leavenworth area and Gettysburg and proceeded to work out logistics on these maps. About two years later, we had entered World War I and were fighting in the Alsace-Lorraine and Champagne regions. Eisenhower said, “I tell this story to illustrate the truth of the statement I heard long ago in the Army: ‘Plans are worthless, but planning is everything.’”

What Eisenhower was saying reinforces the point of the new strategic model: While the planning process is key to seeking consensus and divergent thinking, modeling plans and contingency plans, once complete, are merely Plan A, a first draft.

War aside, the same need to adapt quickly arose for all organizations, including independent schools, in the fall of 2008. The ground rules for educating students began to morph and shake — and continue to change seemingly daily now. With the multiple eruptions and disruptions not only on the operational side of schools but also on the delivery side — especially with the emergence of game-changing computer technology, new research into emotional and intellectual development, the growing importance of creative thinking and problem-solving skills, and the need for global and cultural literacy — the various and competing forms of 21st century schools began to develop. In such an era, we need to be attentive. We need to be flexible enough to adjust our approaches to meeting our goals.

NAIS itself is experimenting with the strategic thinking model. Five years ago, we developed a national vision,1 but have had to pause recently to rethink our strategies and tactics, building on and refining the vision in a way that better serves school leaders on all fronts.

Given the challenges schools face, we believe NAIS must remain true to its vision and mission of being the

---

**Strategic Planning vs. Strategic Thinking**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategic Planning</th>
<th>Strategic Thinking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Combines two fundamentally different ways of thinking into a single process</td>
<td>Leverages variety and divergent thinking in the name of creating value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs stability/predictability</td>
<td>Capitalizes upon instability and uncertainty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Driven by calendars and events</td>
<td>Continuous cycle of learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Produces plans rather than actual strategies</td>
<td>Prefers strategies characterized by simplicity, clarity, and focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executes plan by publishing document and implementation schedule wedded to a three- to five-year cycle</td>
<td>Executes &quot;road map&quot; (vision of destination and proposed routes) by developing five or so 12-month priorities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fixed and inflexible goals sometimes fail to reflect changing conditions and priorities</td>
<td>Notes 24-month and 36-month goals, but places them in a planning parking lot for successive R&amp;D consideration</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from: Jeff De Cagna, consultant, Principled Innovation, "Making the Shift in Thinking" (Workshop for NAIS Board)
Pilots do a routine check of all the gauges before taxiing to takeoff, as schools should do each year in August, before the school year launches. But for airline pilots and school pilots (school boards and leaders), unless one or more of the gauges are flashing a red danger signal, they know to focus on the three most important gauges. For airline pilots, those three gauges are speed, altitude, and distance. For school pilots, those gauges are the equivalent of speed, altitude, and distance, typically: hitting targets on enrollment, annual giving, and staffing (by various filters, such as number, quality, diversity, etc.). Falling short on any of the targets should set off flashing lights that require the administration and board team to re-engage in order to re-think tactical and strategic emphases: i.e., better market segment analysis, more experimentation with pricing, clearer demonstration of the value proposition of the school, and allocation of resources away from less important matters to the critical functions.

Which three of the many goals of your vision planning are the three primary drivers for everything else you do in your school today? What renewed, embellished, or new tactics and strategies will this year bring? Will you launch some signature programming for each grade or division level to demonstrate investment in adding value? Will you profile successful graduates to illustrate your student outcomes? How about investing in new revenue generating programs to reduce the dependency on tuition and giving alone? Is an overseas franchise or sister school a possibility?

When we remain in a strategic posture — when we stay attentive, nimble, and opportunistic — we can be true to our missions and visions, and can navigate in the Age of Flux with greater confidence and uncommon success.

Patrick F. Bassett is president of NAIS.

Notes
2. For Eisenhower’s complete speech, see www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=10591#axzz212DfHkZ7q.

Resources for Schools
The Strategic Process: 10 Steps for Planning Your Independent School’s Future shows schools how to plan strategically in a world of constant, unexpected change. What’s key is shifting from seeing strategic planning as an isolated event to embracing an ongoing strategic posture. The book’s pamphlet companion version for trustees, A Trustee’s Primer on the Strategic Process, highlights the responsibilities of independent school trustees in developing and implementing a strategic planning process using 10 simple steps. Both are available at the NAIS online bookstore at www.nais.org.