

# ADVISORY

## STRATEGIC ISSUES WORKBOOK

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*This workbook contains guidelines, templates, and tools to help independent school research and strategy teams compile and analyze internal and external data in order to determine a school's strategic agenda.*

### **Strategic Issue Identification**

When you think about a sustainable future for your school, what's at stake? Alternatively referred to as strategic issues, drivers, or critical issues, surfacing and addressing these priorities is the thrust behind a strategic plan. Strategic issues are critical to the future of the school and are most likely to significantly influence its performance and sustainability in the coming five years, or whatever planning horizon is being used. By limiting issues to three to five, planners force prioritization of those issues that will have the most impact – positive or negative – on shaping the future.

What external changes and trends does our information indicate may have the greatest potential impact on the people we serve over the next three to five years? What external changes and trends does our information indicate may have the greatest potential impact on our ability to fulfill our mission and hold to our values over the next three to five years?

What does our information point to as the most important expectations of our constituents over the next three to five years? How well are we prepared to meet those expectations? What other schools are equally or more prepared to meet them?

It is in the connecting of the internal scan results to the external scan results that the critical issues are identified. Neither set of data is viewed in isolation, but rather in tandem, connected through the common thread of interdependence. So even as a school remains to a certain extent at the effect of its external environment, it can in turn impact that very same environment through the realization of its envisioned future.

### **Criteria to identify those issues that are truly the most critical**

One way to identify strategic issues is to look at impact. When doing so, you might consider two main and inter-related categories: macro and direct impact drivers. Direct impact drivers have the most influence on the school; macro drivers have influence on the school's capabilities and outcomes through their influence on the direct impact drivers. So whereas a national teacher shortage would be a macro driver, recruiting quality faculty aligned with values and mission is a direct impact driver. Similarly, while public perception of private school education is a macro impact, the changing applicant pool is a direct impact.



## Dangerous Intersections

In looking for the top three to five issues, watch for two critical intersections; 1) where a critical issue impacts a core competency, and 2) where a critical issue impacts a critical success factor in fulfilling mission. Because core competencies – those few areas

that your school excels in - and critical success factors, that is, those elements that are absolutely essential to your school’s success, are core to sustainability, any strategic driver that affects them becomes a de facto priority.

## Common Influencers of Independent School Strategic Issues

Organizational infrastructure	Faculty recruitment and retention	Professional excellence
Admissions excellence	Global economy	Global and technological future
Academic quality of life	Effective communications	Innovation and change
Faculty retention	Changing applicant pool	Internal communication
Affordability and accessibility	Mission fuzziness	Diversity
Teacher shortage	Financial stability	Technology infrastructure
Managing parent expectations	Facilities expansion	Academic program
Demographic shifts	Multiculturalism	Values misalignment
Changing definition of 21 <sup>st</sup> educated individual	Public perception of private education	Advocacy and marketing

## Core Competencies

Core competencies are those one or two distinctive advantages that a school has when competing in the marketplace (whether for students, faculty and staff, board leadership, funding or position in the community), overcoming threats and taking advantage of opportunities, and/or providing programs and services. Core competencies, not to be confused with core products/programs or services, can be calculated along five dimensions of superlatives.

Your study of the results of a stakeholder survey question “What three things does our school do best?” will help identify your core competencies. Plot the research results on the matrix that follows and assess against the five dimensions listed above. Where an educational product, program, service, institutional strength hits all the criteria markers, highlight it as a core competency.

A core competency is something that:

1. we are *excellent* at, and
2. have been excellent at for *some* time, and
3. can continue to be excellent at, that
4. constituents *value greatly*, and
5. others would find *very hard* to imitate.

## Strategic Issues

Strategic Issues are those three to five critical issues that this strategic plan will address. These are the priority internal or external forces or factors that significantly impact positively or negatively on our school's ability to deliver its mission and/or core competencies. Ultimately, they are shaped into strategic issue statements or framed as strategic issue questions, but begin now with a search for themes based on review and analysis of research findings. The following worksheets serve as a guideline to help the planning team work through the task of identifying the issues.

### A. Directions for Internal Survey Analysis Workgroups

1. Leader: Divide internal data packets by survey question, then constituency group.
2. Team: Identify who will work with what survey question and who will work with the parent forced-choice survey (Forced-choice group, your findings will complete the parent row of the Core Competencies Matrix).
3. Individuals:
  - a. Scan the entire body of research pertinent to your question; look for recurring themes.
  - b. Using a colored highlighter, go back and begin to differentiate themes by color-coding. Count the frequencies of recurring themes.
4. Use the appropriate chart in this document to record your themes and their relative counts. Report your findings to the group.
5. Team: Complete the grid as individual team members report their findings.
6. Team: When all are recorded, discuss commonalities among themes.
7. Team: Identify and build consensus around priority themes.

### B. Directions for External Scanning Workgroups

1. Leader: Assemble packets of external data, including but not limited to the data distributed at team meetings.
2. Team: Scan data and identify external opportunities and threats present in the data. Complete External Scan Matrix.

### C. Internal and External Workgroups Together

1. Agree on a strategic agenda of three to five macro issues based on the results of your internal and external research analysis, recalling that an issue rises to the strategic priority level if it has the ability to dramatically impact – positively or negatively – the school's ability to deliver its mission and/or core competencies.
2. Present your findings to the Strategic Planning Team.



## Internal Survey Results Matrix

Question	1	2	3
1. What 3 things do we do best?			
2. What 3 things need the most improvement?			
3. If you could change one thing tomorrow what would it be?			
Q 4. On what three things should we focus the next three to five years?			

**Priority Results from External Scan of Opportunities and Threats (*examples in italics*)**

	<b>Specific Factor</b>	<b>Salient Insight</b>	<b>Opportunity or Threat</b>
<b>Social Factors</b>	<i>Translating brain/teaching research to classroom and parenting practices.</i>	<i>The steady stream of new research offering insight as to how the developing mind works is readily available via staff development, online courses, workshops and seminars.</i>	<i>Failure to incorporate research and best practices in favor of a traditional college preparatory lecture style classroom may result in our school quickly falling behind competitors. Examples may include single sex classes, awareness of individual learning styles and recognition of developmental stages.</i>
<b>Technological Factors</b>	<i>Distance Learning</i>	<i>Increasing opportunities to take online courses through public school and other institutions, give students many alternative learning opportunities.</i>	<i>In order to implement distance learning classes, teachers must be given support in training and advanced degrees pertaining to educational technology.</i>
<b>Economic Factors</b>	<i>Emerging Economic Trends</i>	<i>Because of tough economic times, parents are becoming increasingly concerned about ability to finance an independent school education. About half of the respondents to an NAIS 2009 survey have decided against private school education and half of high income families are seeking financial aid.</i>	<i>The threat of decreasing enrollment appears legitimate.</i>
<b>Environmental Factors (including changing demographics and competition)</b>	<i>Demographic Forecast</i>	<i>NAIS Demographics forecast for the 5 years 2009-2014 project a decline in Student Age population across all divisions in the Census Tracts we draw upon</i>	<i>We will be competing for students in a smaller market in the future.  Significantly negative impact unless we step up innovative marketing efforts.</i>
<b>Political Factors</b>	<i>Public school system</i>	<i>Our county's School Board has also recently announced additional plans under consideration to increase the option for higher caliber public school options and accessibility. Enrollment in our county's new niche public schools for 2010/2011 was at 7,176 students, an increase of 1,480 students from the prior year, and up more than 4,600 students from about 2,500 five to six years ago. These new niche public schools stress discipline and academics and require parent participation in children's education.</i>	<i>These new niche schools and IB schools are public school tuition-free options that some parents choose rather than a private school. Insofar as they represent an option that pulls some prospective students away from our school, they represent a threat.</i>

## Identifying Strategic Issues

Complete the following strategic issues tables to help identify the top three to five critical issues – those internal or external forces or factors that significantly impact positively or negatively on your school’s ability to deliver its mission and/or core competencies – as identified by internal research and STEEP Factors.

**Table 1. Findings and Insights Matrix**

What 3 Things Does Our School Do Best?	Experience Descriptors	Change One Thing	What 3 Things Need Most Improvement	Focus Areas Next 3-5 Areas	Expectations vs Satisfaction
<b>Social Issues</b>		<b>Technological Issues</b>	<b>Economic Issues</b>	<b>Environmental Issues</b>	<b>Political Issues</b>

**Table 2: Strategic Issues Matrix**

Using your completed *Findings and Insights Matrix*, identify the most critical strategic issues that emerge from our internal and external data gathering and analysis, and support your selection with references to the data.

<b>Proposed Strategic Issue</b> <i>(Given...we must address...)</i>	<b>Findings that Support Selecting the Issue and Key Underlying Assumptions Related to the Proposed Issue</b>	<b>Possible questions that should be asked about the issue that will help to inform actions that need to be taken to address the proposed strategic issue</b>
Strategic Issue 1		
Strategic Issue 2		
Strategic Issue 3		
Strategic Issue 4		
Strategic Issue 5		

## Framing Strategic Issues

Successful processing of your school’s researched-based priority strategic issues results in an institutional strategic plan. Here is a way to approach framing the issues to provide context and direction think strategically about the vision of what success will look like when your issues are resolved and what steps your school must take to achieve your vision through goals, strategies, and initiatives. Examples are in italics.

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Strategic Issue</b> What is at issue? What is at stake?</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Strategic Issues Framed</b> What is at issue? What is at stake? Given....we must...</p>
<p><i>Providing the utmost value for our educational experience</i></p>	<p><i>Given economic trends that negatively impact enrollment, increasing competition, changing demographics, and consumerism, our school must ...</i></p>
<p><i>Financial Sustainability</i></p>	<p><i>Given the school’s ambitious goals for academic excellence, accessibility to new families, technological enhancement, improved communications, as well as physical facilities that reinforce these goals, we must...</i></p>
<p><i>Marketing and Communications</i></p>	<p><i>Given national and local projections for a slow-down in enrollment growth for elementary school children in the coming decade, an increasingly competitive educational environment, the lack of public understanding about the value of independent schools, relative ignorance about our school’s reputation and accomplishments in the local community, and the continuing need for timely and accurate communication with current families, our school must...</i></p>
<p><i>Multiculturalism, Global Perspectives &amp; Inclusivity</i></p>	<p><i>Given the increasing multicultural makeup of society and the significant value placed on possessing a global outlook in both education and professional careers, our school must...</i></p>
<p><i>Physical Resources</i></p>	<p><i>Given the school’s commitment to academic excellence, technological advancement, environmental sustainability, safety, security, and strong community values and participation and in order to successfully compete for students in the future, we must...</i></p>