Connecting the Mission, Annual Plan, and Operation of Islamic Schools

# Involving the community - Planning Process Matters.

The fact is most institutions are stuck in a cycle of being reactive and having to “put out fires” to solve immediate issues.  Weather it is managing or acquiring resources (funding, facilities, or workforce), dealing with regulation, responding to parents, or recruiting the right person to do a certain job.  Our school principals and in most cased Board members are constantly reacting to events and situations that require their attention daily.  This makes it very difficult to think strategically while one has so much to deal with right now.  This is why it is essential for a group to specialize and focus on strategic planning while another group manage the daily operations of a school. Traditionally the Board of Trustees or Board Directors has the ownership of the strategic plan, while the administration is responsible for implementation of the plan and for the daily operation of the school.

Even though the workload is divided among school Administration and Board, the two must work together to ensure that daily operations are connected to strategic goals, and that the strategy is driving decision making and priorities at all levels.

The Board owning the Strategic Plan does not mean they develop it in a vacuum.  All stakeholders must be involved in the process at some point.  The teachers, the administration and office staff, the parents, and the students should all provide input to the analysis and development of the plan.  Surveys, focus groups, and general town hall meetings can be useful tools to incorporate comments and brainstorm together as a community.  Data should be collected about the community strengths and resources, needs, challenges, and opportunities.  All layers of the organization should have a way to express their ideas in the process of establishing strategic goals.  Then the Board has the responsibility to sort all the data and feedback and assemble specific strategic goals.  It does not have to be a huge list of goals; 2 or 3 big goals are plenty.  Once the community agrees on strategic goals, specific strategies can be developed that become the foundation for annual plans.  Working in full partnership with the Administration, the Board can develop annual objectives which constitute the annual operational plan for the school.  Many institutions may have a strategic plan but they fail to connect it annual operational plans. This step of turning strategies into annual objectives is critical and must be repeated every year to maintain connectivity to the strategy.

At the end of the day, planning is not about just a document, the process of planning as even more important. It is during the process that the leaders discover what is important to the school community and what is hindering the staff from excelling. It is during the planning process that you discover the gems in your school community it may be a parent with high level of expertise in a certain filed that can help the school, or it may be a creative ideas the students or the staff will come up with when thinking how to manage challenges. If the planning process is carried out thoroughly and with a wide circle of stakeholders you will find that the process itself is so valuable, maybe more valuable than the plan produced.

# From Mission to annual Plan

The classic steps of developing a strategic plan are:

1. Review and revisit the Mission statement if necessary. Some call it statement of purpose. Regardless of what we call this process, it is essential, from time to time, to step back and reflect on what the school is doing, what is the purpose of the organization, and what is the unique mission that it can serve. Everything else you do in the planning process should flow from the mission.
2. Understand the environment: through analyzing strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. This should be a group exercise to involve people who view the school from different lenses and are aware of what is happening in the larger community. After all what happens in the larger community impacts and impacts your school. Even national and international events have an impact on our institutions.
3. Develop goals: Not too many 2-3 big strategic goals the school would like to accomplish over the next three years. This is the part where it is important to building consensus among as many stakeholders as possible. The Goals should connect to the Mission of the school. In some cases schools may develop one strategic goal to address each of the different elements of the organization. For example: one goal to focus on learning, one goal to focus on human resources and funding, and one to focus on community.
4. Create a list of strategies: Ask yourself, how can we accomplish the goals? Strategies can be programs, initiatives, or events that help the school reach the big goals. This exercise must have a wide participation of experienced teachers and committed parents work together and come up with a list of robust strategies. The Board and administration should participate and use their experience to make sure the strategies are realistic and are relevant to the goals and mission.
5. Create Annual Objectives: Once the school has a set of strategies the Annual planning can start be deciding which how much of each strategy will the school accomplish this year. These objectives should be specific to the year, and should be measurable and realistic.
6. Develop Metrics: The last element that is needed to have a useful plan is a set of performance metrics for each objective.

Normally, in any organization Annual Planning should be conducted at least three months before a year starts. In a case of a school, because of the summer break planning should start in February-March of the previous school year. The annual planning process should include a quick review of steps 1 through 4 above. Then a review of the previous year accomplishments, and finally steps 5 and 6 above can be done to develop the core of the annual plan.

# How do we connect everyday decisions to strategy?

A school strategic plan does not have to be a large 100 page document. It must be simple and direct. It should articulate and Goals, strategies and objectives briefly. A strategic plan does not have to have details about how to accomplish every single objectives. The “how’ should be left to the administration to insert into the annual plan to keep the process nimble.

A good practice is to have a summary of the goals. Strategies and objectives brief enough to fit on one page or one poster so it can be handy and even display. The last thing we want to do is to make the plan so complicated and detailed that it takes a long time to read through it. The more easy, accessible and convenient we make it the more likely for it to be used. Big plans that fill a 3 ring binder are often found on shelves collecting dust. Rather, you want your plan to be handy enough to bring up and point to frequently. It needs to be familiar to many stakehodlers and available on the schools website.

Another tool that we find to be useful in our decision making is what we call the “strategic screen”. These are a set of questions designed to be asked at decision points. They can be used when there is a proposal for a new program or new initiative. These commonly include questions like: does this support our mission? Is it connected to one of the strategic goals? Is it sustainable? is it consistent with the school culture? A set of these questions that is most relevant to the school can be developed and agreed to by the planning team. Then they can be used by all decision makers in the school when having to make a decision about any proposed program, idea, or initiative. The screen serves as a quick tool for decision making and keeps the strategic priorities directly connected of how decisions are made. Operational matters become more and more aligned with the strategy. Another benefit to the strategic screen is that decision makers will have a simple way to make choices and stay focused on strategic priorities without anyone accusing them of making random decisions or choices.

In summary planning is essential to lift the Islamic school community out of being reactive. Strategic planning should involve a broad set of stakeholders. Strategic goals can be reviewed annually to make sure they are still relevant and to keep the plan connected to operations. Annual operational planning should start early and should stem out of the strategies set in the strategic plan. Lastly, measures is the most important of all. We must be able to measure progress to allow us to celebrate success as well as tweak the plans moving forward.