

The Strategic System Snapshot

Helping School System Leaders Maximize Scarce Resources to Prepare Every Child for Tomorrow



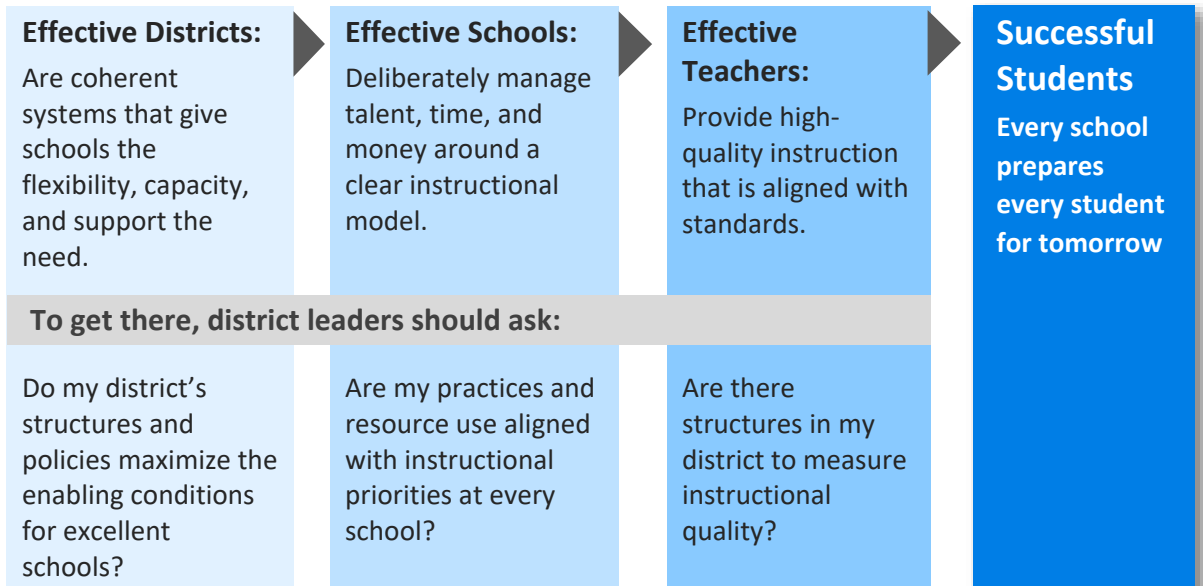
The Challenge

District leaders everywhere work hard to ensure that *all* schools succeed for *all* students, in the face of often challenging budget pressures. To get there, it is critical that every school has a clear vision for success and leverages every minute, every person, and every dollar to achieve that vision. To make that possible, district leaders need to ensure that the central office provides schools the conditions, resources, and support they need to succeed. This means identifying the instructional investments that drive student success, and then shifting resources to support those investments while ensuring fiscal sustainability.

The Strategic System Snapshot: A Tool for District Leaders

Building on more than a decade of experience working with a diverse array of school systems, our extensive collection of district data, and published research on what works best for students, Education Resource Strategies (ERS) has developed a diagnostic that can guide district leaders from assessment to strategic planning. **The Strategic System Snapshot is an integrated, comprehensive assessment of district conditions and resource use, compared to peer districts and research-based best practice.**

The Strategic System “theory of action” for ensuring all students succeed



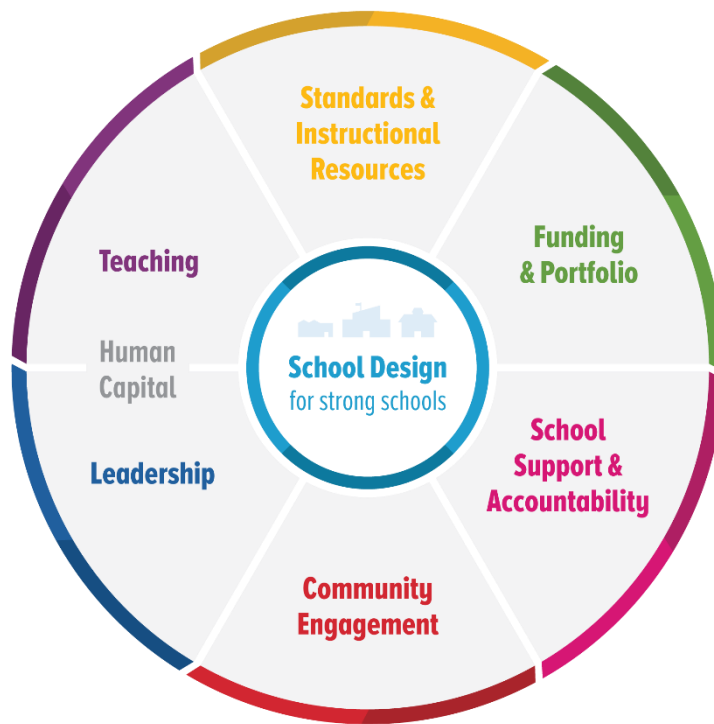
The Snapshot provides a rich fact base about how people, time, and money are allocated at the district and school level, as well as how state and district policies and structures encourage or hamper school-level success. This fact base can serve as foundation for discussion and a baseline against which to measure progress. The Snapshot helps leaders answer key questions that can inform district priorities and key decisions. For example:

- **Student performance:** How do our most pressing student performance challenges compare to peer districts? What is the magnitude of the difference, and how does it vary by/within specific schools or student groups?
- **Funding levels:** How do funding levels relate to student need, and how does this compare to other local districts, or peers across the country? How has this changed over time?
- **Talent distribution:** How are excellent teachers and leaders distributed across different kinds of schools and students? What about novice teachers? How does this compare to districts nationally?
- **Talent retention:** How do our teacher and leader retention patterns compare to districts nationwide? How does this vary by school and student performance level? What are other districts doing to address these issues?
- **Time and talent at the school level:** How do schools organize the time and talent they have? Do struggling students get enough time to catch up? Are the best teachers focused in the highest priority schools, subjects and courses?
- **Resource equity:** How equitably are our people and money distributed across schools and student groups?
- **Resource trade-offs:** Where can we free resources to increase equity and invest in key initiatives?

What Is A Strategic System?

The Strategic System Snapshot is based on [The Strategic System](#)—ERS’s vision for how school systems can transform resources (people, time, and money) to enable every school to prepare every child for tomorrow. It was developed over a decade of deep partnership with school, system, and state leaders.

The Strategic System is built around six transformational areas (the outer ring on the image below) which create the “enabling conditions” for what’s at the center: Strategic School Design. These areas should not be viewed as best practices or as success factors that can be implemented independent of each other. Instead, they are an integrated set of strategies, each needed to transform education.



In each area, we have identified best practices and related metrics, which form the Snapshot. That assessment and the discussions around it allow districts to understand their specific opportunities for transformation.

We work with school systems to move from traditional models that may no longer work to strategic practices that drive student learning, as captured on the next page.

The Strategic System “From- To”

From This:	To This:
Standards and Instructional Resources	
Inconsistent standards that don't prepare kids to think critically, creatively, or collaboratively.	All students can access rigorous curricula and assessments aligned with college-and career-ready standards.
Teaching	
An isolated job, uneven distribution of expertise and experience, and career paths and compensation that are unconnected to results or contribution.	Teachers have the time and support for team collaboration and learning, they are strategically hired and assigned, and their career paths and compensation enable growth and reward contribution.
School Design	
A one-size-fits-all learning environment with rigid schedules and class sizes that don't accommodate different learning needs.	School roles, teams, and schedules are structured to enable personalized time and attention, teacher collaboration, and professional learning.
Leadership	
Limited autonomy, flexibility, and support that do little to develop and promote strong leadership.	Leadership roles have clear goals, accountability, and career paths, with flexibility and support to achieve results.
School Support & Accountability	
A central office focused on compliance and oversight rather than productive partnerships with schools.	The central office is a service and strategy partner in sharing best practices and ensuring all schools reach learning goals.
Funding & Portfolio	
Wide funding differences across schools, with unplanned and inconsistent school sizes, program offerings, and locations.	School funding is equitable, flexible, and transparent; and the portfolio of schools reflects student and community need, equity of access, and cost.
Community Engagement	
Schools struggling to deliver learning outcomes on their own, without a systematic approach to partnering.	Partnerships with families, community institutions, youth service organizations, and online instructors effectively serve students' needs.

Impact of the Snapshot

Since its introduction in 2015, the Snapshot has been conducted in 20 districts across the country, ranging in size from 6,000 to 600,000 students. District leaders have found the insights to be valuable in helping to gain consensus around the biggest challenges and prioritize opportunities to reallocate resources to drive improvement. For example:

- In an **urban California district**, the Snapshot revealed that current high school schedules made it extremely difficult for students to accumulate sufficient course credits to qualify for the state university system. Based on this analysis, the district was able to shift schedules from a six- to a seven-period day, thereby making it much easier for students to graduate with the requisite number of credits. The same analysis indicated a large number of the highest-performing 5th graders left district schools to attend charter middle schools, resulting in a much higher-need population of 6th graders in district schools. At the same time, teacher turnover was highest in middle school, pairing less experienced teachers with those higher-need students. This finding helped district leaders prioritize hiring, support, and retention of middle school teachers as well as pursuing opportunities to retain more high-performing 5th graders within district schools.
- In a **small district in the Northeast**, data indicated that the performance of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch was similar to students in comparison districts, despite those districts spending significantly more per pupil. Further investigation revealed that the total hours in elementary school were substantially less than in comparison districts. ERS helped district leaders develop a vision of how the additional time could be spent, which helped garner support from the school board for revisiting previously denied requests to lengthen the school day.
- In a **mid-sized New England district**, data indicated that the high number of very small schools was not only likely increasing costs but, more importantly, was severely limiting the options available to school leaders to provide a broad offering of academic and enrichment programs. This work proved valuable in rallying support for revisiting and reimagining the school portfolio. A five-year plan that reconfigured schools in the district to provide high-quality options in all city neighborhoods was approved by the school board within eight months of the Snapshot analysis.
- A **small, rural southern district** was struggling to attract and retain quality teaching candidates. The Snapshot revealed that over half of their new hires were emergency certified or long-term subs, and that teacher turnover was almost twice as high compared to local and state numbers. Additional analysis indicated that the district's average teacher salaries were approximately \$5,000 lower than the neighboring district. As a result, the district was able to secure a grant from the state to pursue a teacher residency program, and the school board planned to seek a local tax increase to raise salaries.

The Snapshot Process

The Strategic System Snapshot process usually takes two to three months and is designed to require minimal up-front time from district leaders. Results are shared with the team in a series of two to three in-depth meetings to review findings and discuss implications. In these sessions, district leaders will receive:

1. A high-level scorecard
2. Comparisons to peer districts
3. Insights into their data
4. Customized facilitation by ERS for the superintendent and cabinet to reflect on the most relevant issues for their district

The scorecard and snapshot metrics provide a comprehensive assessment of district conditions and resource use relative to peers and research-based best practices. Metrics can provide a baseline to track progress over time and serve as leading indicators of district performance improvement moving forward. While our basic diagnostic is standardized, we also adapt our analysis to dive more deeply into areas of interest or that are identified as opportunities by the first round.

Education Resource Strategies (ERS) is a national nonprofit that partners with district, school, and state leaders to transform how they use resources—people, time, and money—so that every school prepares every child for tomorrow, no matter their race or income.

Learn more at ERStrategies.org.

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