# The Benefits of Short-Cycle Planning

(Originally titled “The Best-Laid Plans *Can* Succeed”)

In this *Educational Leadership* article, Coby Meyers (University of Virginia) and Bryan VanGronigen (University of Delaware) acknowledge the cynicism that principals often have about mandated school improvement planning – and the fact that many central-office leaders tolerate a bureaucratic process and don’t insist on high-quality planning. The result is “satisficing” behavior: settling for a “good enough” plan that suffices to satisfy the boss’s requirements. Yet another problem with traditional plans is that they frontload activities and budget lines at the beginning of the school year, scheduling very little for subsequent months despite the likelihood that unexpected developments will create the need for mid-course corrections or new planning.

Meyers and VanGronigen believe that short-cycle operational planning is an “empowering departure” from, and a “powerful supplement” to, traditional strategic planning. Quarterly 90-day plans can be “living documents” that are widely visible, involve key stakeholders, inform daily operations, and are constantly tinkered with in light of new data. From their work with school districts over the last five years (and seeing plenty of short-cycle plans that weren’t effective), Meyers and VanGronigen suggest five fundamentals:

• *Driving purposes* – “The most empowering aspect of any planning process is envisioning what can be,” they say. “Short-cycle planning requires a long-term, ambitious vision that can inspire change.” But short-cycle plans follow up by focusing on a few immediate priorities, signaling what must change quickly – for example, teachers using on-the-spot assessments to measure and respond to students’ daily reading progress – in service of the long-range goal of improving reading instruction.

• *Root cause analysis* – This is essential “to pinpoint foundational reasons why success has been interrupted or not yet achieved,” say Meyers and VanGronigen. “Without identifying root causes, subsequent stages of the planning process either respond to symptoms or are likely unrelated to what changes need to occur to realize meaningful change.” For example, a principal might bemoan that she is not getting into classrooms; a deeper analysis would reveal that the problem was not getting an assistant principal to take care of certain responsibilities that would free up the principal to observe instruction.

• *Action steps* – Traditional plans often have lists of “loosely related things that fail to build toward organizational change,” say Meyers and VanGronigen, as well as lists of routine tasks (like holding PLC meetings) without details of how they will be improved. Good short-cycle plans have specific, high-leverage leadership moves that will improve classroom teaching and school culture, the *what, how,* and *why* of school improvement – for example, how many classroom visits, using look-fors decided by the faculty, with what kind of follow-up with teachers afterward – and why this will be helpful, rather than being seen as infringing on teachers’ autonomy.

• *Measurement* – “While measures do not have to be complex or burdensome,” say Meyers and VanGronigen, “they should be continuous, attainable, and understandable. Anyone in a school should be able to track progress with action steps and understand when goals have been met.” Rather than waiting for end-of-year test scores to judge a new curriculum, short-cycle plans would look at initial teacher buy-in, then interim measures of implementation, and benchmark measures of student gains.

• *Alignment* – Effective plans have a through-line from vision to results: “The driving purposes are clear,” say Meyers and VanGronigen. “Root causes emerge from evidence that strongly suggests addressing those causes will help realize driving purposes. Action steps are coherent and hang together in ways that build toward addressing root causes. Meaningful measures are in place to understand whether action steps are working and highlight the extent to which the school has changed or is changing… A high-quality plan results in everyone understanding change efforts, why they matter, how they will be achieved, and how schools know these efforts are making a difference.”

[“The Best-Laid Plans *Can* Succeed”](http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational_leadership/apr21/vol78/num07/The_Best-Laid_Plans_Can_Succeed.aspx) by Coby Meyers and Bryan VanGronigen in *Educational Leadership*, April 2021 (Vol. 78, #7, pp. 50-55); the authors can be reached at [cvm2x@virginia.edu](mailto:cvm2x@virginia.edu) and [bvg@udel.edu](mailto:bvg@udel.edu).