

ADMIN & MANAGEMENT | LEADERSHIP

Have you tried restarting? Midyear is the ideal time to think about what next year will look like

By Dr. Dana Godek and Michael Moore January 4, 2024



Three of our favorite words are launch, reset and close. They describe moments in a time when leaders can step out of the whirlwind to confirm that the energy is going in the right direction. “Launch” might be the start of a new school year or the unveiling of a new initiative, but it’s all about moving forward. “Close” might be a leadership transition or a celebration of outstanding achievement results, but it’s about reflection and learning.

“Reset” has a bit of both. It raises the question: “We know what to do, but are we actually doing it?” This is the perfect time of year to reset.

At midyear, principals, and principal supervisors can step back to check on systems, culture, instruction and people. What do student attendance and discipline data look like? Which students need intervention? Which teachers need to improve their Tier 1 instruction? Are teacher evaluations on track? How are unfilled teaching positions harming student equity? Where has leadership attention slipped away from PLCs? Is each school optimizing its spending?

It’s worth taking time as a district team to create reflection prompts for principals, establish a process for reporting back, and then discuss what needs to be improved between the district and schools for the rest of the year.



District-level reset is more strategic. It requires:

- A focus on the future
- Sustained attention to strategic priorities
- Distributed leadership

Focus on the future

Begin with a robust discussion of what next year will look like. What will next year look and sound like? What opportunities will present themselves? Who will the “stars” be? What will outcomes look like in June 2025?

This vision of the future is your time horizon. At midyear, a principal's time horizon is the current year. Superintendents, boards and district leaders are already focused on next year.

Strategic priorities

With that time horizon in mind, identify 3-5 strategic priorities for the next year, not further out than that. Fewer than three and there won't be enough forward energy; more than five and the energy will be too dispersed and unfocused. The priorities might be in your strategic plan but they are just as likely to come from your state's new initiatives or board discussion. Conduct a pulse check on the progress of each initiative underway this year, based on the milestones you set earlier in the year.

Have other district leaders prepare brief but rigorous presentations of year-to-date progress for their work:

- Budget and financial projections, including federal and philanthropic funds
- Operational data such as facility, technology, and transportation
- Workforce trends and projections
- Student inputs such as enrollment and attendance
- Student outcomes by subgroup

We've provided an example of a tool for this purpose in the adjacent sidebar.

Using that data, with your top leaders map the forces that are moving the district in the direction of your priorities and the forces that may be inhibiting progress. Do this for each priority and then for the set of priorities. Refine the priority statements as needed to reflect these realities.

Distributing leadership

The budget process is detailed, demanding and distracting. Check your capacity. Who on the Board or cabinet will be going through this annual process for the first time? How will you teach them about the process? What support will all members need to move smoothly through debate and decision-making? Who has the best access to key stakeholders? What is the best timing for each step in the process and how can you avoid getting bogged down?

Assign clear roles and responsibilities to cabinet members and other key leaders. Have them identify data sources, create timelines, and design streamlined processes that enhance cross-team work and reduce the burden on principals. Consolidate this information into a coherent



and transparent plan for planning FY25: calendars, specific meetings, stakeholder engagement and transparent processes. While the board will be the final approver of the district budget, various other leaders will be responsible for key decisions along the way. Name those decisions and those leaders as part of this process.

Name the reset

Be explicit about the reset. In all your messaging, talk about next year's priorities. Celebrate this year's successes and challenges. Acknowledge resource constraints beyond your direct control, such as the loss of ESSER funds, reduced state funding, hiring challenges, smaller student enrollment, and so on. Use stories to get your points across.

All stakeholders—staff members, family, students, community members, local and state policymakers, and potential applicants—should be able to find the planning, budgeting, and staffing processes easily online and in hard copy.

As the process advances, extend your stories into scenarios: clear If-Then statements. Balance aspiration with reality. Keep the Board and internal leaders on message by returning to the priorities, the specific choices to be made, and the need for contingencies. Clear communication starting now, at midyear, is the key to success.

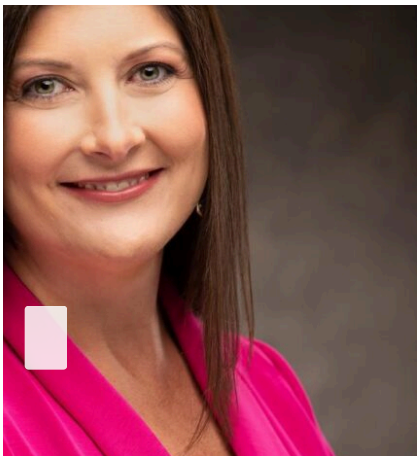
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