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Values, Visions, and Variation in American School Districts: A Computational Mixed Methods Analysis of School District Strategic Plans

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The decentralization of power is a defining feature of the American education system, allowing schools to reflect community values and needs. Yet, little is known about how values and visions for education hold constant or vary across districts. Through an analysis of 617 district strategic plans, combining qualitative coding and computational topic modeling, we provide insight into how local communities prioritize educational goals. Districts broadly converge on goals of academic learning, career readiness, climate and belonging, and family and community connection. Greater variability appears in the emphasis on student well-being, social-emotional skills, character development, and other student development goals beyond academics. Diversity, equity, and inclusion goals emerge as the theme that is most correlated with demographics, geography, and politics.

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A child's educational experience is inevitably shaped by the value judgements of adults. These values are reflected in the educational incentives laid out at the federal level, the standards and regulations set in place at the state level, and the day-to-day experiences determined at the district, school, and classroom level (Brighouse et al., 2016). Within a school district, community values influence resource distribution, course offerings, course content, class time use, and a multitude of other everyday decisions (Beyer & Liston, 1996; Brighouse et al., 2016). Variation in the values underlying these decisions is one reason that the provision of education has traditionally been a local district-based, rather than national, system in the United States (Hess & Meeks, 2010; Maeroff, 2010).

That power is granted to school districts at all is a unique feature of the American education system, representing a core value in American politics: local democratic control (Hess & Meeks, 2010; Land, 2002; Maeroff, 2010; Moe, 2003). While education is constitutionally a responsibility of states, states have long relinquished much of this power to democratically elected school boards and the districts they represent (Briffault, 2005). At their best, district boards represent the values and vision of a community, and are the mechanism through which communities have a say in the education of their children (Maeroff, 2010).

Community input over education is valued both because there are many reasonable approaches to education and because the goals of schools reach beyond simply maximizing academic achievement for the average student (Berner, 2017; Brighouse et al., 2016). Communities care about a wide range of what Brighouse et al., term educational goods: "knowledge, skills, dispositions, and attitudes that…have the potential to contribute to [student]

flourishing and the flourishing of others" (2016, p. 5). Further, school districts today are often expected to do more than serve students. For example, they are also frequently expected to serve their staff, provide neighborhood resources, and promote local economic development (Blank et al., 2003). Inevitably, school districts cannot do it all. Yet, we know little about which of these concerns are most important to communities, nor how priorities vary from one community to another.

To answer that question, we analyze the goals expressed by districts in strategic plans. *Strategic planning* is a formal process of deciding what an organization should be doing, why, and how (Bryson et al., 2018). The resulting *strategic plan* is the record of that process. School district strategic plans describe a district's chosen mission, values, and goals as identified by a committee made of a range of stakeholders commonly including board members, teachers, community members, and, sometimes, students. The process of strategic planning requires the committee to come to an agreement on which goals should be emphasized by the district in the coming years. Thus, strategic plans provide insight into which educational goods are most emphasized by districts, as well as the extent to which there is variation in local preferences and expectations for public education.

We use a computational mixed methods approach to analyze a sample of 617 strategic plans, stratified to represent districts of varying sizes and locales, identifying commonalities and variations in district priorities, and exploring the extent to which emphases vary with district characteristics including urbanicity/rurality, geography, student racial demographics, and the Democratic/Republican political leaning of the community. We begin with a qualitative content analysis to comprehensively identify distinct goals in a sample of 103 documents. Then, we scale this analysis using topic modeling via Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA). LDA allows us to: 1)

identify additional topics which may not have emerged during the human coding process; 2) create continuous indicators of the prevalence of a topic in a document; and 3) efficiently code the full sample of documents.

In conducting our analyses, we make three key contributions. First, by identifying and examining variation in district priorities, we shed light on the role of local control in shaping public education, providing evidence on how and the extent to which educational values differ between communities. Second, our analysis both draws on and illuminates the theory of educational goods (Brighouse et al., 2018) by demonstrating how districts articulate and prioritize specific educational capacities (the knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions they aim to develop in students), distributive principles (how resources for those capacities are allocated), and independent values (commitments beyond student capacities or experiences). Finally, given the multiple and sometimes competing mandates districts face, examining how they interpret and prioritize responsibilities can inform the design of programs and resources that align with local priorities and respond to community needs.

Background

District Strategic Planning as an Approach to Reconciling Complex Expectations

While in the first half of the 20th century Americans were largely content with a focus on the "basics" in education (Cohen & Spillane, 1992), in the later half, politicians, academics, and the public began to push for more ambitious and varied instructional programs. This includes vocational education, gifted education, Advanced Placement programs, and instruction for students with disabilities (Goldin & Katz, 2007). Even beyond academic programs, Americans today often hope and expect that schools will provide an array of educational goods; this may

include cognitive skills like critical thinking, social skills like the ability to work with others, and attitudes and dispositions like an appreciation of art or literature (Brighouse et al., 2016).

Further, schools have to balance the priorities of many stakeholders, including state and federal governments, local economic influences, mayors, unions, parents, teachers, and students (Cohen et al., 2017). These stakeholders may bring in values which have less to do with the experiences and outcomes of students yet nonetheless are expected to be upheld by schools. This includes political interests, the well-being of teachers and staff, and the economic development of a community.

Ultimately, deciding how to distribute limited resources to meet these goals requires tradeoffs and value judgements (Brighouse et al., 2016). In a world of finite resources, the process of strategic planning is one way to make priorities explicit. Strategic planning is a process of identifying objectives and mapping out a strategy for meeting those objectives (Bryson, 2015). By making goals and objectives explicit, organizations allow themselves to be held accountable to their own definition of success (Bryson et al., 2018). Because of this accountability aspect, organizations are incentivized to be selective in naming goals and objectives. Thus, strategic planning encourages an organization to discuss and decide among many competing priorities.

District Strategic Planning Processes

Strategic planning is commonly identified as a practice of effective school boards (Walser, 2009) and as a key function of school boards according to board members themselves (Ford & Ihrke, 2020). Many states require that school districts engage in some form of strategic planning process (Beach & Lindahl, 2004). For example, Texas statute requires that school boards “adopt a policy to establish a district- and campus-level planning” (Specific Powers and Duty of Board,

2024). South Carolina requires that plans are developed every five years (and updated annually), with involvement from parents, teachers, and principals (South Carolina Department of Education, 2025). And Pennsylvania requires that districts submit their plan to the state Secretary of Education every three years (22 Pa. Code § 4.13. Strategic Plans., 2025). The assumption underlying strategic planning is that an organization cannot successfully meet its objectives if it has not taken the time to identify "exactly what those objectives are and how they will be accomplished" (Ford & Ihrke, 2020, p. 598). Evidence on the effectiveness of school district strategic planning is limited but Ford & Ihrke have found that districts with board members who place a higher priority on strategic planning tend to have higher student achievement, even after controlling for available confounders such as student economic status (2020).

Though strategic planning processes can vary, there is a large body of practitioner literature which outlines similar components (Beach & Lindahl, 2004). Most often the process begins with the formation of a strategic planning committee. In the best cases, the formation of the committee is either followed or preceded by an input gathering stage that includes focus groups, interviews, surveys, and listening sessions (Lane 2005). Then, the committee reviews this data alongside district administrative data and begins drafting the document.

The plan itself is commonly composed of at least three components: *goals* (broad statements focused on a single issue), objectives (which should be measurable), and *activities* (approaches to meeting those objectives) (Lane et al., 2005). The more comprehensive plans also contain a potentially revised mission, values, and vision statement, a district overview, a SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats; Beach & Lindahl, 2004), and key details on the resources needed and person responsible for each activity aligned to an objective and goal.

Once the plan is drafted, it is adopted by the board and, ideally, used by both administrators and board members to guide decision-making across the district (Beach & Lindahl, 2004).

Theoretical Framework

Our analysis of school district strategic plans is in part guided by the distinction between educational goods, distributional values, and independent values outlined by Brighouse et al. (2016). In this conceptual framework, educational goods are the "knowledge, skills, dispositions, and attitudes that inhere in people and have the potential to contribute to their own flourishing and the flourishing of others" (Brighouse et al., 2016, p. 4). The authors identify six such goods:

- Economic productivity*:* the capacity for adult participation in the economy
- Autonomy: the capacity to identify and act on who one is and what matters to them
- Democratic competence: the capacity to be an effective and moral citizen
- Healthy personal relationships: the capacity to foster lasting and meaningful relationships
- Personal fulfillment: the capacity to engage in "complex and satisfying labor and projects that engage one's physical, aesthetic, intellectual, and spiritual faculties" (Brighouse et al., 2016, p. 11).
- Treating others as equals: internalizing an understanding of all people as "equal in moral status", and addressing systematic factors that limit equality (Brighouse et al., 2016, p. 10)

Beyond educational goods, Brighouse et al. (2016) also emphasize the role of independent values: goods that contribute to human flourishing but may be separate from, or even in tension with, the development of educational capacities. For example, they describe "childhood goods," which lead to a happy childhood regardless of their impact on future capacities (e.g., purposeless play). Other independent values extend beyond children themselves,

such as protecting parents' interests and ensuring freedom of residence. All of these values involve trade-offs, whether made explicit or not. For example, time spent developing economic productivity may limit time spent developing capacities for healthy personal relationships, or time spent in purposeless play.

In addition to deciding which goods should be prioritized when trade-offs arise, decision-makers also shape how goods are distributed. Brighouse et al. (2016) identify three *distributive* values that guide this allocation: adequacy, equality, and benefiting the less advantaged. *Adequacy* requires that all individuals receive a minimum threshold of a good. *Equality* requires that each student receive the same amount of educational goods through schools. And, the principle of *benefiting the less advantaged* requires that goods be distributed so as to maximize the gains for those who are least well-off, whether in terms of human flourishing itself or the resources that enable it. Brighouse et al. posit that distributive values are at the heart of many debates surrounding schooling – for example, debates around tracking into different courses – and argue that "explicit and careful attention to [such] tensions can lead to better policy decisions" (Brighouse et al., 2016, p. 4).

Limitations of Strategic Plans

While strategic plans may not directly acknowledge tensions in priorities, they offer one approach to identifying which educational goods, independent values, and distributive principles are emphasized by districts, and the extent to which they vary from one district to another. However, the content of strategic plans will also undoubtedly reflect other influences – beyond local preferences – including state mandates. For example, districts may prioritize meeting state accountability standards on standardized tests not because they value student performance on those exams (or on the skills they test) but because they wish to maintain funding or autonomy.

Further, some states require that school boards conduct a strategic planning process and offer suggested language; other require such a process for failing school districts (MASB, 2023; TASB, 2023). To partially address this, and identify variation that is exogenous to state mandates, we include controls for state fixed effects, strategic plans that appear to be standardized (using a state template), and strategic plans that are labelled improvement plans.

Data

Sample

We use the Common Core of Data to construct a sample stratified by state census division (New England, East North Central, West North Central, Mountain, Pacific, Middle Atlantic, South Atlantic, East South Central, and West South Central) and locality (large city, midsize city, small city, large suburb, midsize suburb, small suburb, distant town, remote town, fringe town fringe, remote rural, distant rural, and fringe rural). Then, within each of the 108 strata, we sample 10 districts generating a total sample of 1031 districts (as a few strata had fewer than 10 districts). Approximately 40 percent of districts in our stratified sample (n = 414) did not have a publicly posted strategic plan, indicating either that the district did not engage in strategic planning or that it did not post or publicize the plan on the school district website. Thus, our final analytic sample consists of 617 districts. We analyze 108 of these by hand (one plan randomly sampled from each stratum) and the remaining using LDA.

We link the data extracted from strategic plans to three additional data sources. The Common Core of Data provides information on geography, enrollment, and student demographics for each district in our sample, Harvard's Voting and Election Science Team provides information on the partisanship of the surrounding geographic area (2020), and the Stanford Education Data Archive provides information on district-level student academic

outcomes (Reardon et al., 2016). Appendix A provides descriptive characteristics of the original stratified sample, analytic sample of districts with publicly posted strategic plans (as of time of data collection), and the sample of districts for hand analysis.

Methods

We used a mixed methods approach to analyzing strategic plans, conducting inductive and deductive content analysis on a select subsample and computational topic modeling on the full sample. In doing so, we build on the burgeoning literature applying computational text analysis to educational data (e.g., see recent articles including Bartanen et al., 2023; Borchers et al., 2025; Choi et al., 2025), and to educational policy documents specifically (Sun et al., 2019). With the hand-coded content analysis, we aimed to comprehensively identify each goal put forth in our sub-sample of plans. With our automated topic modeling, we created continuous measures of goal prevalence and extend the analyses to the full sample.

Hand-Coded Content Analysis

We began with an inductive coding process applied to a random sample of 30 strategic plans. For each plan in this pilot sample, two of the authors each identified unique goals contained in the plans, labelling them with a word or short phrase. Then, we analyzed these codes holistically, grouping similar codes, and removing redundant ones (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). For each code, we created a working definition and identified representative examples, creating our codebook (MacQueen et al., 1998). We then piloted this codebook by recoding the 30 pilot strategic plans, clarifying definitions and grouping codes which could not be reliably distinguished. This resulted in a final codebook containing 37 unique goals. Trained undergraduate research assistants deductively coded 78 additional strategic plans, coding independently only once they demonstrated at least 80% agreement with an author's codes and fewer than 10% unconfirmed

codes relative to the author's coding. The final product of this process was a series of indicators for whether each of 108 plans contained an instantiation of each code. Appendix B contains the definition of each code, alongside examples.

Computational Coding of Strategic Plans

We treat computational topic modeling – here implemented using LDA – as a complementary approach to qualitative coding. LDA is a probabilistic model that infers latent topics by analyzing word co-occurrence patterns across documents. The researcher provides the cleaned corpus (represented as word counts) and the number of topics, and LDA groups words that co-occur across documents into topics. LDA models result in two important outputs: the prevalence of each topic within each document and the probability of each term being used when a topic is invoked. The former output is used to identify the topics within documents, and the latter is used to understand the meaning of those topics.

Because LDA outputs vary with preprocessing choices and the number of topics, we tested 75 model specifications. Using a development sample of ten district strategic plans, we evaluated the five most distinctive topics from each model – identified with a weighting scheme that adjusted topic prevalence using a topic-frequency, inverse corpus-frequency metric (analogous to tf-idf; Sparck Jones, 1972) – on how well they represented each plan. We then selected the specification with the highest overall ratings. The final model contained 23 topics and was applied to a corpus segmented into 150-word segments, with terms dropped if they appeared in more than 40% of segments or fewer than five segments, and with multi-word phrases (e.g., "professional development") preserved as single terms. We aggregated segment-level outputs to the plan level by averaging topic prevalence across segments. We interpreted the content of the topics by examining random subsamples of high-prevalence (top decile) segments alongside the

keywords associated with the topic. Of the 23 topics, we categorized three as uninterpretable, seven as procedural, and 13 as substantive district goals. To avoid penalizing districts that devoted more space to procedural details, we normalized prevalence scores to be proportions of goal-oriented content.

Analysis

Using our hand-coded subsample, we calculated the proportion of documents containing each of our 37 goals. In this sample, we identify both common goals appearing in a majority of plans and uncommon goals, appearing in a minority of plans and which may speak to more local and less universal concerns.

In our computational sample, we examine the content of the topics, the distribution of topic prevalence, and the relationship between topic prevalence and district characteristics. We estimated ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions of the form:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \boldsymbol{\beta_X X_i} + \boldsymbol{\beta_P PlanChars}_i + \gamma + \varepsilon_i,$$

where Y_i is the topic prevalence score of interest and $\boldsymbol{X_i}$ is one of four vectors of subgroup indicators: 1) urban, suburban, town, and rural districts; 2) Northeastern, Midwest, West, and Southern districts; 3) quartiles for the percentage of Black and Hispanic students, and 4) quartiles for 2020 Republican vote share in the presidential election. $\boldsymbol{PlanChars}_i$ is a vector of controls for plan characteristics, including whether the plan appears to be in a standardized format, whether it is designated as an improvement plan (either of which may signal state requirements to emphasize certain topics such as student achievement), and the total document word count. Here, controlling for word count allows us to compare the relative emphasis of distinct topics within strategic plans that are of a similar length. γ is a vector of state fixed effects controlling for variation due to state requirements (excluded in models examining regional differences).

Because we estimated multiple models across topics, we controlled the false discovery rate using the Benjamini–Hochberg procedure.

Results

Majority Goals Identified in the Hand-Coded Strategic Plans

Table 1 lists the most common goals in the 108 hand-coded strategic plans. As might be expected, a large majority (82%) of strategic plans prioritize improving student learning in core academics, with related goals of enhancing teacher knowledge (80%), improving curriculum and instruction (71%), and strengthening teacher hiring and retention (55%). Because a student's knowledge and skills in academic subjects can increase their capacity for multiple educational goods – including economic productivity, democratic competence, and personal fulfillment – we do not make claims about which educational capacities underlie the above goals. However, 58% of districts make economic productivity a more explicit priority, operationalized through college and career preparation.

Beyond academics, 66% highlight climate, culture, and belonging, possibly as a mechanism for improving learning (e.g., "dedicated to creating a school environment that is nurturing, safe, and conducive to learning"), or as a good in itself ("A district where each child feels valued, inspired and has a sense of belonging"). Speaking more to distributive values, about half of districts in our hand-coded sample include goals related to student intervention and differentiation, most often through a multi-tiered system of support framework (e.g., "Build a multi-tiered system of supports that equitably meets the academic and behavioral needs of all students"). Two additional priorities – reflecting independent values – appear across most plans: strengthening community ties (65%) and enhancing family communication and involvement (62%). Representative examples for each of these codes can be found in Appendix B.

Minority Goals Identified in the Hand-Coded Strategic Plans

Table 2 lists all goals that appear in fewer than 50% of our hand-coded plans. These goals more directly reflect district values beyond raising average student achievement in core academics. Some emphasize economic productivity, such as cultivating 21st century marketable skills (29%). Others align with values of personal fulfillment, including expanding extracurricular opportunities and electives (39%). Still others highlight the kinds of students that districts aspire to develop: 36% include goals related to social and emotional skills, 22% to character or ethical development, and 22% to student leadership and advocacy.

Other goals relate to current student needs. For example, 37% aim to improve student wellness (often using that term), 30% aim to address student mental health (e.g., through suicide prevention, trauma-informed care, and counselor services), 18% aim to improve physical health, and 11% aim to eliminate substance abuse. We also identified two districts (2%) with the goal of providing sex education and one (1%) with the goal of preventing dating violence.

Among less common goals, two directly address distributional values. Thirty-three percent of districts explicitly prioritize reducing achievement gaps, and 41% include broader diversity, equity, and inclusion goals. To examine distributive goals further, we coded references to specific student subgroups (Appendix C). The most frequent are English language learners (20%), students with IEPs (20%), “at-risk” students (13%), socio-economic status (12%), and gifted and talented students (10%). We also identify a unique independent value reflected among the minority goals: one district explicitly prioritizes revitalizing a local Indigenous language. Additional minority goals include improving district governance (46%), raising graduation rates (35%), addressing student behavior and discipline (34%), increasing attendance (27%),

improving preschool quality and access (22%), reducing bullying (7%), and increasing the availability of high-quality paraprofessionals (6%).

Highly Prevalent Goals Identified in the Computationally Coded Strategic Plans

Table 3 presents the goal-oriented topics identified through LDA, represented by their highest-probability words and ordered by average prevalence. The three most prevalent topics align closely with majority topics identified above. *Climate and Culture* emerges as the most prevalent topic overall, accounting for 21% of goal-related content, and characterized by keywords such as *learning, environment,* and *community*. One high-prevalence excerpt, for example, states: "create a climate where students feel safe, valued, and supported." Although broadly shared, emphasis varies widely, ranging from 7% prevalence at the 25th percentile to 31% at the 75th. The second most prevalent topic, *Communication and Partnerships* (14%), is defined by keywords such as *community, families,* and *communication* and includes phrases like "We will collaborate with our families, community and business partners to ensure the vibrancy and future of the [district]." This topic also varies substantially in prevalence, reaching 22% at the 75th percentile. Finally, *Academic Achievement* (12%)—an aggregation of two related topics with keywords including *grade, math, year, data, performance,* and *improvement*—is illustrated by excerpts such as "Formative and summative assessments are aligned to standards" and "improve from the bottom quartile of [exam] reading and writing performance." Together, these three topics account for nearly half of all goal-related content, underscoring their centrality across district plans.

Variation by District Characteristics

Tables 4 through 7 display differences in topic prevalence by district subgroups defined by urbanicity, region, student racial demographics, and community political leaning. The first

columns report the average prevalence for the reference group (urban districts, northeastern districts, or first-quartile districts), and subsequent columns present coefficients from the state fixed effect model indicating subgroup differences relative to the reference group. Given Table 5 examines differences by region, this table results from models that exclude state fixed effects but retain controls for improvement plans, standardized plans, and word count. The final two columns show p-values for an F-test of joint significance and the Benjamini–Hochberg adjusted p-values that control the false discovery rate. In these tables, we combine the two academic achievement topics.

The most salient pattern in topic prevalence by district characteristics concerns the *Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)* topic, marked by keywords such as *equity*, *every*, and *community*. Representative excerpts include commitments to "fair systems, procedures, and resource distribution that will create equitable opportunities, eliminate barriers to access, and ensure every child has an equal chance for success." On average, DEI accounts for 8% of substantive plan content, but prevalence varies sharply across contexts: urban districts devote about twice as much attention to DEI as rural districts, Northeastern districts about twice as much as Southern districts, predominantly Black and/or Hispanic districts about three times as much as predominantly white districts; and heavily left-leaning districts nearly twice as much as heavily right-leaning districts.

Other patterns are less stark but still notable. First, *Curriculum Alignment* (mean prevalence = .06), characterized by keywords such as *curriculum*, *data*, and *instruction*, with representative phrases like "data-based instructional strategies", is somewhat more prominent in rural districts, predominantly white districts, and right-leaning districts. Second, Northeastern districts devote greater attention to *Professional Development* (14%, compared to 9% in the

Midwest, West, and South), while Southern districts devote more to Teacher *Recruitment and Retention* (9% versus 4% in the Northeast). Political context yields the largest set of subgroup differences: in addition to lower emphasis on DEI and greater emphasis on Curriculum Alignment, Republican-leaning districts devote slightly more space to *Non-Academic Skills and Characteristics* (keywords including *technology*, *learning*, *skills*, *21st Century*) and to *Attendance, Behavior, and Mental Health* (keywords including *attendance*, *services*, *programs*). Though, some of these differences likely reflect reallocation, as reduced emphasis on DEI in Republican-leaning districts necessarily increases the relative share of other topics.

Discussion

Convergence and Variation in Priorities

Taken together, the findings above offer new evidence on areas of convergence and variation in school district priorities and values. Figure 1 summarizes these patterns, showing how the goals articulated in strategic plans map onto educational goods, independent values, and distributive values. In doing so, the figure illustrates how local communities define what schools should provide, and for whom.

Districts show widespread convergence on four domains of priorities. First, nearly all emphasize student learning and most explicitly reference economic productivity via goals related to college and career preparation. Second, there is broad agreement around prioritization of student safety, belonging and a positive climate and culture. These priorities may function in service of educational goods such as learning and development, or they may reflect a childhood good in their own right – ensuring students have a positive school experience. Third, districts consistently highlight family and community ties, reflecting the independent value of honoring parents' interests and fostering community support for schools. Finally, there is shared attention

to district infrastructure and resources, perhaps as a mechanism for achieving other priorities. Convergence is also evident in commitments to intervention and differentiation, which move districts beyond serving the average student to focusing on students who require additional support. These goals align most clearly with distributive values – benefitting the least advantaged – and extend across both academics and behavioral supports.

Greater variation emerges when moving beyond economic productivity into other educational goods like autonomy, democratic competence, personal relationships, and personal fulfillment. Districts diverge in the extent to which they emphasize student well-being, health, social and emotional development, character and leadership, and healthy relationships. They also vary in how prominently they prioritize closing achievement gaps (reflecting distributive values) and advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion (which relates both to distributive values and to the educational good of regarding others as equals). DEI emerged as the topic which varies most substantially by district characteristics, with substantially higher prevalence in urban, Northeastern, racially diverse, and left-leaning districts.

Implications

Practically, we draw a few key implications of these findings for future research and for informing program development. First, districts consistently emphasize strengthening family and community ties, suggesting that additional research on how to do so effectively could be welcome. A long line of research suggests that family involvement in students' education is related to academic achievement, including in experimental studies of interventions (Kim, 2022) but less is known about "the role of the school… in supporting the development of these practices" (Higgins & Katsipataki, 2015, p. 283). Likewise, the widespread prioritization of safety and belonging points to continuing support for practices that reliably promote positive

school climates (Borgen et al., 2021). Beyond these broadly shared priorities, however, the practical implications are less clear. One response might be to acknowledge variable values by encouraging program adaptation to local needs (Century & Cassata, 2016). Another might be to adapt the messaging to better align with the district's mission (Domitrovich et al., 2008). A third might be to encourage value change within a district (Sashkin & Egermeier, 1993). Which of these approaches is taken may depend on the values underlying the program itself but, in any case, where value tensions between communities and programs arise, they warrant attention.

Conclusion

District strategic planning provides a valuable window into how local communities answer a seemingly simple but difficult question: what should schools do? Importantly, district answers are not limited to improving the academic achievement of the average child. While there is indeed convergence on the prioritization of academic learning and on college and career readiness, there is also widespread convergence on improving school culture and student belonging, on increasing ties to the community, and on addressing differential student needs. Further, while other goals are divergent, districts consistently state additional aims for their students that go beyond academics. Ultimately, district priorities reflect both commonly held and locally specific visions, illustrating the complex and contested nature of education and the importance of acknowledging local context.

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Tables and Figures

Table 1

Majority District Goals, in More than 50% of Hand-Coded Strategic Plans

Goal	Count	Proportion
Core academics and achievement	89	0.82
Teacher knowledge, skills, and professional development	86	0.80
Curriculum and instruction	77	0.71
Climate, culture, and belonging	71	0.66
Community connection and buy-in	70	0.65
Family communication and involvement	67	0.62
Technology	66	0.61
Teacher hiring and retention	59	0.55
Career and college preparation	59	0.55
Facilities	57	0.53
Safety	57	0.53
Finances and budgeting for the district and schools	56	0.52
Intervention and differentiation	54	0.50

Note. Goals identified via qualitative content analysis. See appendix B for definitions and examples.

Table 2

Minority District Goals, in Less Than 50% of Hand-Coded Strategic Plans

Goal	Count	Proportion
Governance and communication within district	50	0.46
Teacher salary and working conditions	48	0.44
Diversity, equity, and inclusion	44	0.41
Extracurriculars and electives	42	0.39
Student wellness	40	0.37
Social and emotional learning	39	0.36
Graduation	38	0.35
Student behavior and discipline	37	0.34
Reducing achievement gaps	33	0.31
Student mental health	32	0.30
21st Century marketable skills	31	0.29
Attendance	29	0.27
Student leadership and advocacy	24	0.22
Character and ethical development	24	0.22
Preschool and early education	22	0.20
Student physical health	19	0.18
AP courses and testing	15	0.14
Substance abuse and drugs	12	0.11
Bullying	8	0.07
Paraprofessionals/Assistant teachers	6	0.06
Sex education	2	0.02
Prevention of dating violence	1	0.01
Preserving local language and culture	1	0.01

Note. Goals identified via qualitative content analysis. See appendix B for definitions and examples.

Table 3

Key Topics Identified by LDA Topic Model, in Order of Decreasing Prevalence

Topic Name	Mean	25th	75th	Word 1	Word 2	Word 3	Word 4	Word 5
Culture and Climate	0.21	0.07	0.31	learning	environment	community	mission	safe
Communication and Partnerships	0.14	0.05	0.22	community	families	communication	support	opportunities
Academic Achievement	0.12	0.03	0.15	grade	math	year	increase	goal
Academic Achievement				data	performance	improvement	plan	goals
Teacher Professional Development	0.08	0.02	0.12	teachers	support	learning	professional development	provide
Courses, including CTE	0.08	0.02	0.11	high	college	career	learning	opportunities
Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion	0.08	0.01	0.11	schools	equity	public	every	community
Recruitment and Retention	0.06	0.01	0.10	staff	teacher	increase	employees	teachers
Curriculum Alignment	0.06	0.00	0.07	curriculum	data	instruction	standards	assessments
Parents and Community	0.05	0.01	0.07	parents	parent	activities	program	year
Attendance, Behavior, and Mental Health	0.05	0.00	0.07	attendance	schools	services	programs	behavior
Non-Academic Skills and Characteristics	0.05	0.01	0.06	learning	technology	skills	century	21st

Note. Mean is the mean normalized prevalence across all documents. 25th and 75th are the 25th and 75th percentile of normalized prevalence. Academic Achievement consists of two aggregated topics.

Table 4

Topic Prevalence by Urbanicity, with State Fixed Effects and Controls

Topic	Urban Mean	Suburb Coef.	Town Coef.	Rural Coef.	Unadj. P-value	Adj. P-value
Curriculum Alignment	0.03	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.00**	0.01*
		(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)		
Courses, including CTE	0.09	-0.00	-0.01	0.01	0.65	0.71
		(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)		
Academic Achievement	0.11	0.00	-0.00	0.01	0.94	0.94
		(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.02)		
Non-Academic Skills and Characteristics	0.05	-0.00	0.00	-0.02	0.14	0.31
		(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)		
DEI	0.13	-0.05	-0.07	-0.07	0.00***	0.00***
		(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)		
Attendance, Behavior, and Mental Health	0.04	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.11	0.31
		(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)		
Culture and Climate	0.23	-0.02	-0.02	-0.03	0.51	0.71
		(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)		
Parents and Community	0.04	0.01	0.03	0.03	0.01**	0.02*
		(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)		
Communication and Partnerships	0.14	0.03	0.01	0.00	0.28	0.51
		(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.02)		
Teacher Professional Development	0.08	0.02	0.01	0.02	0.32	0.51
		(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)		
Recruitment and Retention	0.06	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.65	0.71
		(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)		

Note. $p < .05$ = *, $p < .01$ = **, $p < .001$ = ***.

Table 5

Topic Prevalence by Region, with Controls (No State Fixed Effects)

Topic	Northeast Mean	Midwest Coef.	West Coef.	South Coef.	Unadj. P-value	Adj. P-value
Curriculum Alignment	0.04	-0.00	-0.01	-0.00	0.65	0.68
		(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)		
Courses, including CTE	0.07	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.57	0.68
		(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)		
Academic Achievement	0.07	0.01	0.04	0.03	0.07	0.13
		(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)		
Non-Academic Skills and Characteristics	0.05	-0.01	-0.00	-0.01	0.68	0.68
		(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)		
DEI	0.13	-0.05	-0.04	-0.06	0.00***	0.00**
		(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.01)		
Attendance, Behavior, and Mental Health	0.04	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.22	0.35
		(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)		
Safety and Learning Environment	0.18	0.06	0.05	0.03	0.07	0.13
		(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.02)		
Parents and Community	0.04	0.01	0.02	0.02	0.31	0.42
		(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)		
Communication and Partnerships	0.18	-0.01	-0.03	-0.04	0.06	0.13
		(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)		
Teacher Professional Development	0.14	-0.06	-0.06	-0.05	0.00***	0.00***
		(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)		
Recruitment and Retention	0.04	0.03	0.01	0.05	0.00***	0.00***
		(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)		

Note. $p < .05$ = *, $p < .01$ = **, $p < .001$ = ***.

Table 6

Topic Prevalence by Percent of Black and Hispanic Students, with State Fixed Effects and Controls

Topic	Q1 Mean	Q2 Coef.	Q3 Coef.	Q4 Coef.	Unadj. P-value	Adj. P-value
Curriculum Alignment	0.12	-0.04	-0.03	-0.04	0.00**	0.01*
		(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)		
Courses, including CTE	0.09	-0.02	-0.02	-0.00	0.12	0.39
		(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)		
Academic Achievement	0.12	0.01	0.02	0.02	0.74	0.84
		(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)		
Non-Academic Skills and Characteristics	0.06	-0.01	-0.02	-0.02	0.14	0.39
		(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)		
DEI	0.03	0.03	0.04	0.09	0.00***	0.00***
		(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)		
Attendance, Behavior, and Mental Health	0.06	0.01	-0.00	-0.00	0.41	0.65
		(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)		
Safety and Learning Environment	0.19	0.03	0.02	-0.01	0.20	0.45
		(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)		
Parents and Community	0.05	0.00	-0.01	-0.02	0.30	0.54
		(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)		
Communication and Partnerships	0.14	-0.01	0.00	-0.01	0.76	0.84
		(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)		
Teacher Professional Development	0.08	0.00	0.00	-0.01	0.92	0.92
		(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)		
Recruitment and Retention	0.05	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.53	0.73
		(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)		

Note. $p < .05$ = *, $p < .01$ = **, $p < .001$ = ***.

Table 7

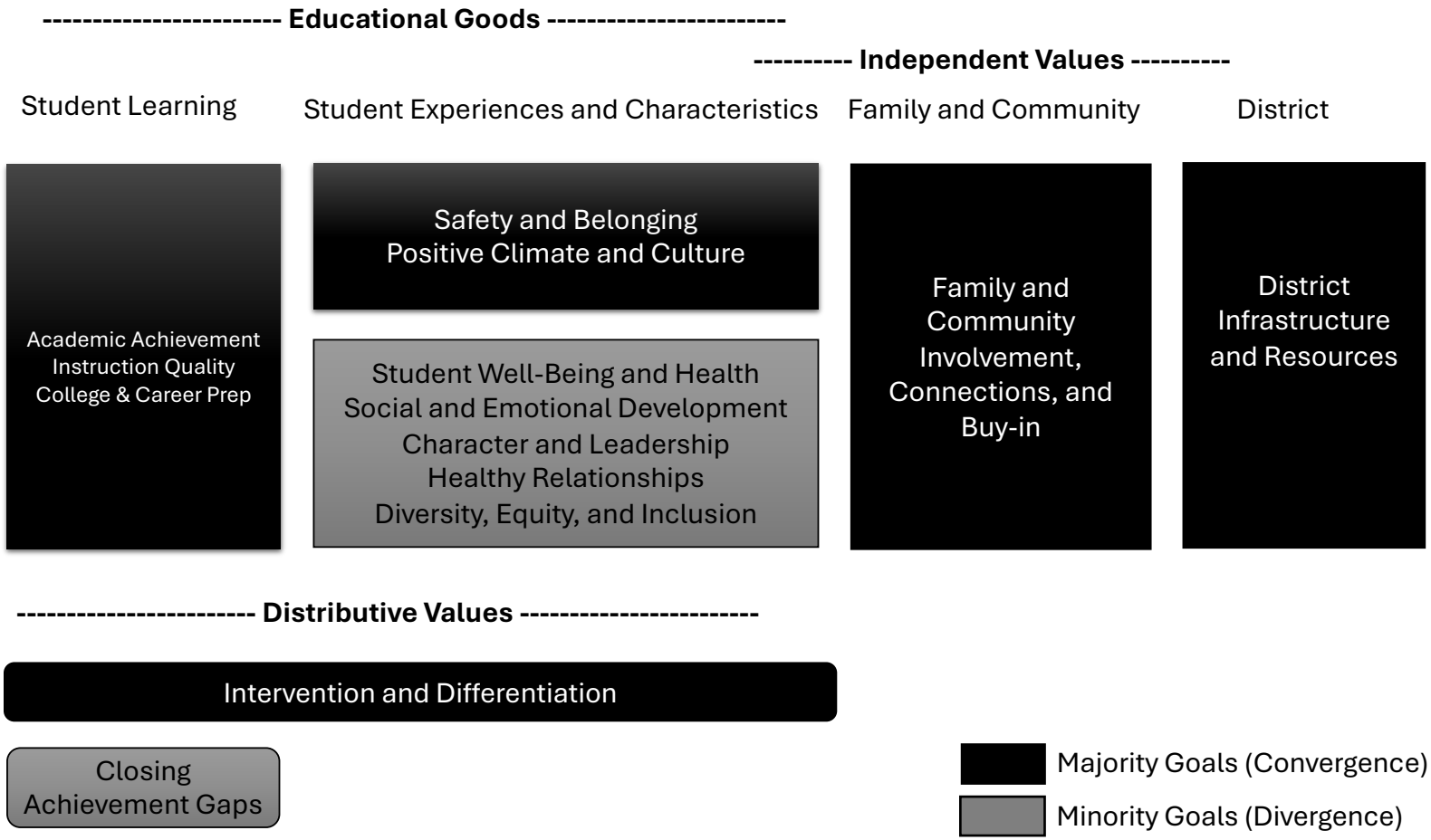
Topic Prevalence by 2020 Republican Vote Share, with State Fixed Effects and Controls

Topic	Q1 Mean	Q2 Coef.	Q3 Coef.	Q4 Coef.	Unadj. P-value	Adj. P-value
Curriculum Alignment	0.04	0.03	0.00	0.04	0.00**	0.01*
		(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)		
Courses, including CTE	0.08	-0.00	0.00	0.00	0.93	0.93
		(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)		
Academic Achievement	0.09	0.01	0.03	0.01	0.17	0.32
		(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.02)		
Non-Academic Skills and Characteristics	0.04	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.14	0.31
		(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)		
DEI	0.14	-0.06	-0.07	-0.09	0.00***	0.00***
		(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)		
Attendance, Behavior, and Mental Health	0.04	0.01	0.01	0.03	0.01**	0.03*
		(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)		
Safety and Learning Environment	0.22	0.01	-0.01	-0.01	0.93	0.93
		(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)		
Parents and Community	0.03	0.03	0.02	0.03	0.01*	0.03*
		(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)		
Communication and Partnerships	0.14	-0.00	0.00	-0.01	0.82	0.93
		(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.02)		
Teacher Professional Development	0.10	-0.02	-0.01	-0.01	0.25	0.39
		(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)		
Recruitment and Retention	0.06	-0.01	0.00	0.00	0.57	0.78
		(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)		

Note. $p < .05$ = *, $p < .01$ = **, $p < .001$ = ***.

Figure 1

Summary of Convergence and Divergence in District Priorities



Appendix A
Descriptive Characteristics of Sample

Table 1A

Characteristics of Stratified Sample, Topic Modeling Sample, and Hand Coding Sample

	Stratified Sample	Districts with Plan	Coded Plans
Northeast	0.18	0.19	0.19
	[0.38]	[0.39]	[0.39]
Midwest	0.23	0.24	0.22
	[0.42]	[0.43]	[0.42]
South	0.34	0.35	0.33
	[0.47]	[0.48]	[0.47]
West	0.23	0.19	0.21
	[0.42]	[0.39]	[0.41]
City	0.22	0.28	0.24
	[0.42]	[0.45]	[0.43]
Suburb	0.24	0.26	0.23
	[0.43]	[0.44]	[0.42]
Town	0.24	0.21	0.24
	[0.43]	[0.41]	[0.43]
Rural	0.27	0.22	0.24
	[0.44]	[0.41]	[0.43]
Enrollment (1,000)	8.59	10.85	12.98
	[22.44]	[27.63]	[37.68]
Prop Black/Hispanic	0.3	0.32	0.29
	[0.28]	[0.28]	[0.27]
Prop Other Race*	0.04	0.04	0.04
	[0.09]	[0.07]	[0.09]
Prop White	0.65	0.64	0.66
	[0.29]	[0.29]	[0.29]
Prop FRL	0.54	0.54	0.53
	[0.23]	[0.23]	[0.23]
Prop adults in district with BA+	0.26	0.27	0.26
	[0.13]	[0.14]	[0.12]
Trump 2016 vote prop	0.56	0.55	0.56
	[0.18]	[0.19]	[0.19]
Competitive 2016 district	0.15	0.15	0.19
	[0.36]	[0.35]	[0.39]
N	1031	617	108

*Including Asian, American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, and Two or More Race

Appendix B
Code Definitions

Table B1
Code Definitions and Example Excerpts

Goal	Definition	Example Excerpts
Core academics and achievement	Goals related to the improvement student achievement in core, tested academic subjects. Tested subjects include usually reading (ELA), math, science, social studies. AP courses and addressing achievement gaps are coded separately.	"In the area of Reading, 80% of students will be reading on appropriate grade and Lexile levels"; "Each student will progress toward mastery of…academic standards"
Teacher knowledge, skills, and professional development	Goals related to the knowledge and skills of the district's current teaching workforce.	"Support and provide high-quality professional development opportunities"; "Expand professional development to support high-quality culturally responsive instruction for all students"
Curriculum and instruction	Goals related to the content of what teachers teach and how they teach it.	"Ensure curriculum, instruction, and assessment are designed and delivered with a focus on content rigor, curriculum, and standards"; "progress on the alignment of the curriculum across our buildings"
Climate, culture, and belonging	Goals related to district-wide norms for ensuring a positive climate and sense of belonging.	"dedicated to creating a school environment that is nurturing, safe, and conducive to learning"; "ensure everyone is respected and feels that they are part of an inclusive organization";
Community and family connection and buy-in	Goals related to drawing in community support for district, advertising to the community, branding, etc. Also includes receiving, using or cultivating partnerships with community resources, businesses, and people.	"Revamp the independent local school advisory council", "Increase substantially student connections to their communities, aggressively reaching out to the public and businesses to make connections for learning and service"

Table B1 Continued

Goal	Definition	Example Excerpts
Family communication and involvement	Goals related to improving community and family involvement	“Schools will implement the core elements of family engagement”; “Parent engagement that is early, transparent, and collaborative”
Technology	Goals related to access or use of technology	"We will continue to implement technology best practices into teaching, learning and system operations to improve effectiveness and efficiency throughout our district."; "Every student should have access to current technology."
Teacher hiring and retention	Goals related to hiring and retaining teachers and staff.	"District 51 will grow a diverse and healthy pipeline of qualified educators and leaders that will support the strategic goals of the district."; "Increase the teacher retention rate"
Career Preparation, Courses, and Planning	Goals related to preparing students for post-secondary success through increasing options for careers, through career and technical courses work, and/or through career planning.	"Evaluate and enhance middle and high school career and technical education offerings"; "Develop and enhance partnerships to prepare students for career, college, and life after high school.”
Facilities	Goals related to constructing, improving, and maintaining facilities including buildings and transportation. May also include technology if talking about updating or maintaining technology.	“Providing the facilities, supplies, and maintenance needed to offer high-quality working space”; “Continuous improvement in facilities, resources, and support systems”
Safety	Goals related to ensuring physical safety for students and staff. May include emergency drills and crisis plans.	“Maintain a safe and drug free, sanitary environment to promote campus safety”; “Strengthen and amplify specialized assistance, crisis, and emergency support, including procedures and services necessary for crisis and emergency situations”
Finances and Budgeting for the District and Schools	Goals related to improving tracking, increasing, and using finances.	“Gathering support for adequate financial investments”, “Reviewing budgets to assess fiscal responsibility to fund projects”

Table B1 Continued

Goal	Definition	Example Excerpts
Intervention and Differentiation	Goals related to addressing the varying academic and behavioral needs of students, most commonly through multi-tiered systems of support.	"Create Student Achievement Plan for students who need Tier 2 support"; "Strengthen MTSS"
Governance and Communication within District	Goals related to how the district governs and how they communicate with district employees.	"Clearly define and document roles of admin and support staff'; "Continuous improvement in governance and leadership"
Teacher Salary and Working Conditions	Goals related to salary, workload, a positive teaching/work environment and conditions for teachers	"Adopt new salary schedules to maintain the required schedules and be competitive for our areas"; "Increase benefits/salary for employees"
Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion	Goals related to improving equity and giving attention to historically marginalized student/community identities beyond addressing achievement gaps (which are coded under Academic Achievement and Proficiency).	"Qualified teachers who reflect the diversity of our students"; "Utilize a DEI lens to identify and evaluate student and staff school and work experiences"
Extracurriculars and Electives	Goals related to extra activities, sports, clubs, enrichment classes and courses generally including the arts and non-traditional academic subjects. Either after school or during school day.	"Increase percentage of students with… participation in clubs, sports, and other extracurricular activities", "Every school is organized and resourced to…offer arts instruction"
Student Wellness	Goals related to the general improvement of student well-being, most often using that term or wellness.	"Stress the health and wellness of students"; "Implement… student success surveys to monitor student well-being"
Social and Emotional Learning	Goals related to student social and emotion skills, most commonly under the framework of SEL. This includes specific curricula and instruction around SEL and SEL assessment but can also include broader goals related to the social emotional needs of students.	"invest in social-emotional learning (SEL) for all students by implementing a social-emotional learning curriculum"; "Redesign MTSS to ensure the components related to SEL"
Graduation	Goals related to student graduation rates.	"The high school graduate rate will increase from 74% to 80%"; "To have all high school students graduate on-time"

Table B1 Continued

Goal	Definition	Example Excerpts
Student Behavior and Discipline	Goals related to student behavior outcomes and specific school choices on how to respond to student behavior (e.g. Restorative practices), or schoolwide systems for student behavior (e.g. PBIS positive behavior interventions and supports). May mention suspension (ISS, OSS), expulsion.	"The out of school suspension rate will be reduced by 5%"; "Implement a proactive approach to school discipline and safety that promotes a positive school climate and supports equity"
Reducing Achievement Gaps	Goal of reducing academic achievement gaps between student subgroups. Any use of the phrase "achievement gap" should be coded here.	"Decrease in achievement gaps among student groups"; "Examine various student outcomes disaggregated and analyzed to performance for all identifiable groups of learners, and achievement and performance gaps"
Student Mental Health	Goals related to addresses student mental health needs from a "treatment" perspective, through assessment and intervention, rather than through prevention (i.e., not through improving general wellness).	"Each student will meet with their school counselor during the…year at which time a mental health check-in will be completed"; "Expand mental health clinics in schools"
21st Century Skills	Goals related to preparing students for a 21st Century career, usually uses the phrase "21 Century".	"Regularly receive feedback on the 21st Century global competencies that are critical to success beyond academics", "The benefits of genius hour include: no loss of class instruction, creating lifelong learners, develop relationships with students, teaching 21st century skills."
Attendance	Goals related to improving student attendance and reducing absenteeism.	"increase in daily average attendance"; "the district will achieve a student attendance rate of 96% or higher"
Student Leadership and Advocacy	Goals related to student empowerment, independence, advocacy, voice, active participation, and leadership. Students leading their own learning.	"Engage youth voice in decision-making and leadership"; "Empowers students to take responsibility for their learning by giving them voice"

Table B1 Continued

Goal	Definition	Example Excerpts
Character and Ethical Development	Goals related to developing students' character or ethics, commonly using the phrase "character" or "character development" but can also include mentions of morals, student/community values, citizenship, and character traits (e.g. integrity, honesty, responsibility). This does not include social or emotional skills.	"All students will develop strength of character to prepare them to lead a life of purpose"; "Continue to implement social/emotional learning (SEL) and character education programs across all campuses" (also coded as SEL)
Preschool and Early Education	Goals related to education for students below the age of kindergarten, includes Head Start, PreK, Preschool.	"Offer targeted instruction to students identified for the preschool program for students with disabilities"; "Increased percentage of students who have access to early kindergarten"
Student Physical Health	Goals related to improving students physical (rather than mental) health. May include mentions of exercise, healthy lifestyle, diet/access to healthy meals.	"Implement the Healthy and Ready to Learn plan to ensure immunizations, physicals, and other health and child development screenings are up to date"; "Provide wrap-around services to students, including healthcare, nutrition"
AP Courses and Testing	Goals including mention of classes that are called AP/Advanced Placement or IB/International Baccalaureate courses/classes or testing of students with the intent of placement in AP or IB classes.	"AP exam pass rates"; "Use the College Board's AP Potential program to identify and enroll Black, Hispanic, and low-income students, as well as those with IEPs, in AP level classes."
Substance Abuse and Drugs	Goals related to educating and addressing substance abuse and drugs.	"Evaluate the current effectiveness of building level supports to address substance abuse"; "Advocate for a full-time Drug Abuse Resistance Education officer to work in our elementary schools"
Bullying	Goals including any mention of the word bullying, can include cyber-bullying, bullying prevention, etc.	"Assist schools with the promotion and implementation of bullying prevention measures"; "To support schools with decreasing incidents of bullying district-wide"

Table B1 Continued

Goal	Definition	Example Excerpts
Paraprofessionals and Assistant Teachers	Goals related to paraprofessionals, including their hiring and quality.	"Instructional aides and facilitators will be continued to be provided at all levels"; "Provide paraeducator support"
Sex Education	Goals related specifically to education around sex and romantic relationships, usually will include exact term "sex education".	"Provide human sexuality instruction/abstinence in grade 5-12 and health classes"; "Provide comprehensive sex education including human trafficking"
Prevention of Dating Violence	Goals related to specific mentions of dating violence or domestic violence.	"Provide dating violence prevention to secondary students"; "Provide training and/or awareness for teachers, parents, students and administrators in all grade levels dealing with and reporting dating violence"
Preserving Local Language and Culture	Goals related to preserving cultural or linguistic aspects of the surrounding community.	"Collaborate with community partners to foster the revitalization of Tlingit language"

Appendix C
Student Groups Explicitly Identified in Strategic Plans

Table C1

Student Subgroups Mentioned in Hand-Coded Plans

Subgroup	Number	Proportion
English Language Learners	22	0.20
Students with IEPs and Disabilities, Broadly	22	0.20
“At-Risk”	14	0.13
Socio-Economic Status, FRPL	13	0.12
Gifted and Talented	11	0.10
Race/Ethnicity (either Broadly, or Specific Race/Ethnicity)	8	0.07
Students Experiencing Homelessness	5	0.05
Dyslexia	4	0.04
Alternative and Homebound	2	0.02
Student Identities, Broadly Described	2	0.02
Mobile/Migrant	2	0.02
Foster	1	0.01
Males	1	0.01