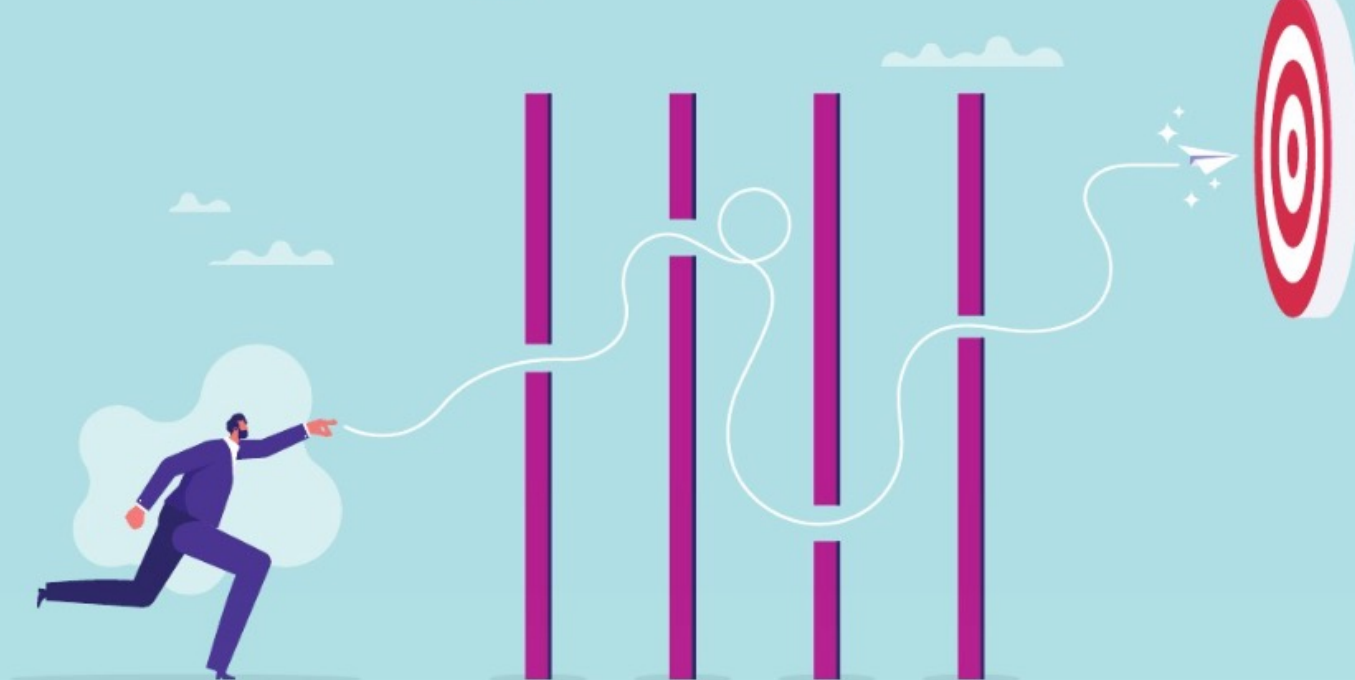




A Strategic Plan Built for Disruption

A disciplined 12-year path that relies
on a repeatable leadership cycle revisited annually

BY STEVEN E. ESTEPP

In 2013, I stood in the back of my daughter's kindergarten classroom, watching a group of 5-year-olds settle into their first day of school. Some were nervous. Others were already testing boundaries. None of them had any idea that the world they would graduate into 13 years later would look nothing like the one they were sitting in at that moment.

I had just become superintendent of Mariemont City Schools in a suburb of Cincinnati, Ohio. Somewhere in that room watching those kids, a question took hold of me that I couldn't shake: What story would these kindergartners tell when they crossed the graduation stage in 2026?

Not test scores or class rankings, but what experience would we build for them, and would it make a difference to their story?

That question became the foundation of everything we did next.

Our Starting Point

As we set out on this mission, more than 50 teachers and administrators spent 18 months researching what a world-class education could look like for Mariemont students. At the end of the process, we had dismissed the traditional three- to five-year plan in place of a 12-year vision anchored to that cohort of kindergartners. We called it Destination 2026.

Anchoring to this cohort fundamentally changed the nature of our conversations and our work. Every proposal was measured against a simple question: Does this move us closer to the experience these students deserve? That question had a way of cutting through a lot of noise.

At first glance, our timeline felt ambitious. Over the past decade, we have seen social media reshape adolescence, 1:1 technology devices trans-

form instruction, artificial intelligence accelerate change and a global pandemic disrupt schooling.

A long-term plan in a rapidly changing world can become obsolete if it is rigid. Ours was designed to be steady in direction but flexible in execution.

Destination 2026 clarified the end goal. We committed to expanding advanced coursework access, deepening experiential learning and ensuring graduates are prepared for a rapidly changing world. What we did not do was overprescribe the approach to getting there. Instead, we built a repeatable leadership cycle — train and reinvent, strategize and plan, build and execute — and we revisited it every year.

When student mental health needs increased, we strengthened support systems. When artificial

intelligence emerged as a classroom reality, we studied its implications before reacting.

Over time, we realized that what sustained the plan was not the document itself, but three disciplines that kept it alive.

► **Discipline No. 1: Anchor the vision in real students.**

A 12-year vision only works when it feels personal. Anchoring our strategy to a specific cohort of students kept the work human and focused.

It reminded us that we were not planning for an abstract future. We were shaping an experience for real children as they moved through our classrooms year by year. That clarity helped us ignore short-term noise and stay aligned with the longer journey.

We made a deliberate decision to reorient around engagement and passion rather than a

Student Experiences Built into the Blueprint

A strategic plan is only as good as what students actually experience. In Mariemont City Schools, that experience was given a name: Warriors BEyond.

Warriors BEyond is a comprehensive K–12 initiative built to provide students with experiential learning opportunities beyond the traditional classroom. It is Destination 2026 made visible, the clearest expression of the school district's commitment to reorienting education around engagement, passion and student choice.

The arc begins in kindergarten. Elementary students participate in Mission BEyond experiences during the day, enrichment

opportunities after school and Camp BEyond summer programs led by district staff and community partners. The goal: Expose students early to creativity, exploration and discovery.

By 5th and 6th grade, that exposure grows into what we call Explorations: student-selected, hands-on courses designed to cultivate curiosity, uncover new interests and encourage risk-taking without the pressure of grades. The emphasis is not simply on content acquisition, but on helping students discover what excites and motivates them as learners.

In junior high, that exploration deepens

through Expeditions. Through four full-day experiences developed with teachers, businesses and community partners, students explore careers and interests connected to five core pathways: the Creators, the Futurists, the Global Learners, the Wellness Warriors and the Young Professionals.

Immersive Learning

By high school, those experiences become increasingly connected to life beyond graduation.

Intersession, the Warriors BEyond capstone experience, gives every high school student a multi-day immersive opportunity each spring.

Students choose from teacher-led experiences connected to fields such as healthcare, architecture, entrepreneurship and environmental science; college visits designed to make postsecondary pathways tangible; or what we call Experience-ships, which are job-shadowing placements embedded in professional environments, such as Fifth Third Bank, Mercy Health, Cincinnati Magazine and law firms.

The thread running through all of this is the same question that guided Destination 2026: Does this action move us closer to the experience these students deserve?

From a kindergartner choosing an after-school art class to a junior in high school shadowing a physician for a few days, Warriors BEyond is not a supplement to the strategic plan. It is the plan in motion.

—STEVEN ESTEPP



Students work at pottery wheels as part of Mariemont City Schools' student-selected, hands-on courses that cultivate curiosity.



Members of Mariemont City Schools' graduating class of 2026, including superintendent Steven Estep's daughter, as both 12th graders (top) and kindergarteners (bottom), covering his tenure to date.

system where content was delivered, absorbed, tested and repeated. That meant creating experiential learning opportunities, expanding student choice and asking teachers to think of themselves as designers of learning, not just deliverers of content. And it all came back to that one question: Does this move us closer to the experience these students deserve?

► **Discipline No. 2: Build short cycles inside a big vision.**

To keep the vision from drifting, we created what we called a "punch list." Borrowed from construction, a punch list identifies what is not yet good enough. When we first built ours, the list was humbling. There weren't enough high school course options. Advanced Placement enrollment was limited and uneven. Instruction was too often one-size-fits-all.

Also, students weren't traveling or engaging in experiential learning. Our professional development had grown stale. And we weren't consistently meeting college-readiness benchmarks.

Every year, we revisit the list, sometimes to add new items and other times to identify which items we've mastered.

Some things moved quickly. Within a few years, AP enrollment had expanded significantly, and we had created new pathways that hadn't existed before. Other things took longer. Shifting our instructional culture was slow and tedious work. Naming the gaps year after year prevented



the illusion that good intentions were the same as progress.

Our annual action plan built around the punch list became one of our most important leadership tools to measure success and be honest about our progress.

► **Discipline No. 3: Measure what truly matters.**

We expanded our definition of success. Academic performance always was central. We tracked achievement and growth carefully, but we also measured access. Who was enrolled in advanced coursework? Were historically underserved students gaining opportunities? Were experiential programs expanding?

We measured our culture through annual staff and stakeholder surveys. Engagement, trust and belonging became leading indicators of system health. Finally, we measured capacity. Were we investing in leadership development? Were we studying trends and preparing for change rather than reacting to it?

As a result, we built structures specifically designed to hear from the people closest to the work. We launched “Meeting of the Minds” teams — groups of teachers and staff who could surface real issues before they became entrenched problems. At the school district level, I started a Staff Council where I sit down personally with staff members every month to address their questions and concerns and hear their perspectives on what’s working and what isn’t driving the discussion.

We also created a year-long intensive Fellowship Program for leadership development that’s open to all staff. If we wanted the organization to keep growing, we had to invest in the people inside it, not just manage them.

When it came to our work on outcomes, we carefully disaggregated data. The hardest thing about measuring what matters is that it forces you to look at things you might prefer not to see. Our data sometimes confirmed what we hoped. Sometimes it didn’t. But it kept us honest about the distance between our aspirations and our actual impact.

A plan built for disruption requires more than outcome data. It requires insight into opportunity, culture and readiness.

Built to Adapt

Looking back, the greatest lesson of our 12-year journey is this: The advantage was not predicting the future. It was building a system capable of adapting to change.

Each year, we studied emerging trends across technology shifts, workforce demands and instructional research, asking not only how we were performing, but what was coming next. Because our direction was clear, adjustments felt intentional rather than reactive.

Adaptation alone, however, was not enough. Sustaining a long-term vision also required community understanding and trust. People cannot value progress they cannot see. Most residents do not experience schools firsthand, and even parents only see part of the student experience through their own children.

To build understanding over time, we created consistent ways to share the story of Destination 2026 through direct mail, videos and community updates that highlighted both progress and purpose. Mental health supports, experiential learning opportunities and evolving student pathways became more visible to families and residents alike.

Over time, communication became more than public relations. It became part of how we sustained alignment, reinforced direction and helped



Steven Estepp became superintendent of Mariemont City Schools in Ohio just as his daughter was beginning kindergarten in the district.

the community see the transformation happening inside our schools.

Outcomes Apparent

As the class of 2026 graduates, we see measurable results. Access to advanced coursework expanded significantly, with AP enrollment increasing by 71 percent over the course of the initiative. Participation also broadened to include students who had not previously accessed those opportunities. At the same time, outcomes improved, with the percentage of students earning at least one score of 3 or higher on AP exams nearly doubling from 45 percent to 83 percent.

Beyond advanced coursework, all students now participate in experiential learning opportunities, reflecting a broader shift in how we define readiness and engagement.

But the deeper impact is consistency. Students experienced a coherent vision across grade levels, staff worked toward shared priorities, and families understood the district’s direction.

A strategic plan built for disruption doesn’t try to control the future. It builds the capacity to navigate it. In a decade defined by disruption, that made the difference. Because how we plan and measure ultimately shapes how we lead, and how we lead determines how we impact. ■

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