

# Itasca Area Schools Collaborative

IASC Strategic Plan 2022-2025  
Presented to the IASC Board

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**Keeping the Focus on Students**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We acknowledge through research and our collective experience that effective public schools are the catalyst for a strong foundation of our communities. The health and well-being of the students and the communities our schools serve are crucial to the success of our society. Public education continues to evolve to meet the needs of the students and communities it serves.

The Itasca Area Schools Collaborative (IASC), under a Joint Powers Agreement, was formed in August 2005 to bring new focus to the partnership of area school districts seeking increased educational opportunities for students. Leveraging relationships and trust between districts, IASC strives to achieve educational transformation and improve sustainable educational outcomes through strengthened partnerships and cooperation, state-of-the-art architectures, integration of functions, and enhanced stakeholder understanding.

## ITASCA AREA SCHOOLS

**MISSION** | Collaborate most efficiently and effectively educate all learners.

**VISION** | Be the trusted provider of education, promoting economic opportunity and life-long learning for the Itasca Area.

Upon completing interviews with stakeholders, we concur that the mission and vision for the organization are both still relevant and aspirational as IASC moves forward for the purposes of this strategic plan.

The IASC board and administration initiated a new phase of planning for the future by engaging with SitelogIQ in a strategic planning process to ensure the vision and mission of IASC continues to serve the students and communities it represents.

Facilitators began the process of collecting and reviewing financial and enrollment data from the IASC districts. Historical and current enrollment indicated an overall decline in total enrollment for IASC districts, with variations of enrollment growth or loss depending on the individual district. After reviewing the data, facilitators interviewed the superintendent group, program directors, the Deer River finance team, and various other staff members who shared more insight into the history and current reality of IASC.

Upon approval of a strategic plan by the school board, the IASC administration will develop the strategies of how to meet the goals of the plan. They will then spend the next several years on implementation of the identified strategies to meet those goals, taking time to reflect annually on their progress towards the goals. They will identify areas that may need to be adapted to meet student needs based on changes due to current events and local or state initiatives.

# I. RATIONALE FOR THE STRATEGIC PLAN PROCESS

Strategic planning is an organizational management activity that provides direction and focus for organizations. It is a customized roadmap for success. By setting overall goals for the organization and creating a plan to achieve them, the organization can improve its efficiency and effectiveness. It allows the organization to take a step back from the day-to-day operations and reflect on the current reality and plan for the future.

Engaging in the strategic planning process promotes innovation, improves decision making, assists in setting the right goals, promotes clarity for the community, reduces overlapping of services, and ensures efficient use of resources. The strategic planning stakeholders refine the vision and mission and prioritizes the goals to move toward that vision. The administration then takes direction from the vision and mission and creates the strategies and approach to achieving those goals, typically over a three to five-year period.

# II. CURRENT REALITY

The IASC Joint Powers Agreement was created in 2005. The current reality for public schools and organizations that support them has changed dramatically since then. For example, due to the ongoing COVID 19 pandemic, schools have changed their instructional methods to include distance and/or hybrid models of learning. Districts need support and coordination for new modes of learning and challenges. In addition, the economic strains in our communities continue to impact the ability to retain high-quality staff and provide adequate funding for all programs.

Declining enrollment has influenced IASC. Because school districts are funded in a per-pupil manner, fewer students mean less money for schools to operate. This is partly due to the graduation of larger class sizes compared to the size of incoming kindergarten classes. Families are having fewer children. Many families are choosing schools that are closer to their place of employment or have cited lack of housing options as an on-going concern. As a result of the decreasing revenue, significant budget cuts for member districts have taken place over the past several years to match expenses with revenue. Some of the reductions included not replacing staff when they move or retire, restructuring administrative positions, combining grade levels, reducing academic program offerings, and adjusting or eliminating extra-curricular activities.

## Blandin Foundation

Our report would not be complete if we did not honor the Blandin Foundation for the generous support they have invested in IASC to help serve our students and families over the last 20 years. Rarely will you find a long-standing commitment from the private to public sector for the duration and amount of funding that the Blandin Foundation has contributed to IASC. IASC is indeed grateful for their on-going support and partnership.

Like IASC, the Blandin Foundation is reviewing its mission and vision and creating a new strategic plan for the future under new leadership. The new strategic plan is anticipated to be completed this winter, at which time representatives will connect with IASC leadership to discuss how the organizations might continue to partner in the future.

## Higher Education Partners

Itasca Community College has been a valued partner in IASC since its inception. This collaboration has allowed for a more seamless transition of programs between K-12 and higher education. IASC students have had direct access to programs in education and nursing within the home districts through this partnership, in addition to the College in the High School Program. Higher Education Partner Itasca Community College merged within Northeast Higher Education District Campuses. With the merger the northeastern Minnesota community colleges, students will have access to more programs on the current campus, which will allow further expansion of IASC career pathways program areas.



Showing students career options near their hometowns opens their minds to a wealth of new possibilities.

### III. IDENTIFIED NEEDS

As we examined the current reality through conversations with board members, superintendents, and staff members, and supporting organizations, a consistent list of need and themes emerged. These needs were categorized as follows:

#### Educational Programs

- Special Education programming for 18–21-year-old students is lacking.
- Special Education programming is beneficial for all IASC districts; however, funding and staffing are continued concerns.
- The current structure for special programs (i.e., Level 4 programming and ALC) is not available and/or serving all student populations.)
- Career Pathways has been very beneficial for some districts, but expansion has stagnated.
- The current Early Childhood Program is beneficial; however, staffing is a concern, and the major funding source is sunsetting. Change is inevitable.
- Gift and Talented and Extended Time programs operated by individual districts aren't as robust as they could be.

#### Finance and Operations

- Administration and operations are overloaded. Leadership changes have impacted energy and focus.
- Ideas have become stagnated and difficult to implement across IASC.
- Funding both within each individual district and throughout IASC is creating constraints on programming and staffing opportunities.
- Program funding and cost allocation may be prohibitive to developing more of an ala carte service offering.
- The Joint Powers Agreement has not been updated.
- Working agreements for staff need updating to be competitive and sustainable.
- Continued budget constraints to maintain a safe technology network.



## Facilities

- Staffing for the different programs and operations are spread throughout the IASC districts. This creates limited opportunities for staff interactions, professional development, and overall communications.
- Leased spaces used for programming and vacant spaces across IASC member districts appear piecemeal and expensive.

## Communication

- Communication is fragmented as it relates to the IASC Board of Directors. Information is not consistent, nor does it extend to the alternate board members.
- Communities aren't aware of the opportunities IASC provides for their students
- There is a disconnect of members knowing specific roles within the IASC board.
- When individual districts are not following the agreed-upon processes and procedures that occur with IASC members in their entirety, it creates a sense of mistrust across member districts and confusion amongst shared staff.

## Community Engagement

- There is a need to connect with local businesses to support the Pathways Program regarding student intern placements.
- Local districts participating in IASC don't appear to have an all-for-one approach.



Building strong relationships with the community opens doors for students and reduces brain drain in IASC communities.

## IV. STRATEGIC PLAN RECOMMENDATIONS

By combining the identified needs with the priorities established through the stakeholder interviews, our recommendations emerged. These recommendations are presented for your consideration and approval.

Whenever we partner with a school district or organization, we urge them to consider three variables as they determine the next steps with the goals identified. Each goal should be *desirable, feasible, and sustainable*. When a goal or strategy meets all three of these descriptors, there is a much higher chance of long-term success.

### Educational Programs

- Create a plan in partnership with North Star and the Blandin Foundation to identify needs, opportunities, and commitments for the future.
- Enhance Pathways Programs and certification options and increase outreach to businesses.
- Improve programming for 18-21 transition program and ALC options.
- Restructure Invest Early programming to meet the required educational needs of students without Blandin Foundation funding.
- Position IASC to facilitate member districts to expand and administer new program offerings.

### Finance and Operations

- Hire 1.0 FTE Executive Director position to lead IASC for growth into the future.
- Update Joint Powers Agreement as needed to support mission and vision.
- Transition to independent operations office to support cohesive programs.
- Review program funding and allocation of costs for alternate solutions.
- Continue to maintain and enhance technology infrastructure budget.

### Facilities

- Explore space needs and opportunities to house IASC staff and special education staff in one location based on Invest Early final decisions.
- Cost and needs analysis of leased spaces and opportunities to use vacant spaces across IASC.



## Communication

- Increase board of directors' meetings to monthly meetings, to improve opportunities for communication, partnership, and engagement.
- Provide monthly updates to member districts.
- Develop and implement a marketing plan for IASC to improve brand awareness.

## Community Engagement

- Communicate the new strategic plan and create a presence in all IASC districts.
- Facilitate collaboration between IASC programs and member districts.
- Continue engagement with the business community and economic development organizations to maintain Pathway Programs and focus on regional employment needs.
- Continue to collaborate with community foundations and partner organizations to develop program opportunities and funding streams.



It was clear to the SitelogIQ team that the consistent thread of thought throughout the organization was to encourage growth and innovation. IASC is an organization that brings value to the districts and is committed to increasing the efficiency of administration and effectiveness of the programs for students into the future.

Again, all changes and improvements to the school system must be viewed through a lens of desirability, feasibility, and sustainability. If a program cannot be sustained over a length of time it is difficult to measure the impact on student achievement and opportunities, and time and resources may be wasted. One must recognize that the school district is responsible for the education of children. This must remain the central focal point for all commitments of time, energy, and resources.

Schools are an important part of the community. The continued success of IASC will depend on the ability of leaders, staff, and community members to work together to develop innovative solutions to the various challenges they are faced with. The ability to do so was evident as we learned about the history of IASC and the many challenges and opportunities over the years. SitelogIQ remains committed to supporting the IASC Board and administration with these endeavors as you reimagine and design how to best meet the needs of all IASC students into the future.