that’s our mission?

Improvement comes only if reality matches the noble sentiment

If the results of an informal survey I have been conducting are accurate, almost every educator in North America has participated in an attempt to clarify his or her school’s fundamental purpose or “mission.” Most school improvement models call upon staff to clarify their school’s mission early in the improvement process.

Many state legislatures or departments of education have decreed that every school must develop a mission statement. Even in states where educators are still allowed to be missionless, most school districts and/or individual schools have developed solemn pronouncements to clarify the very essence of their educational enterprise.

The core elements of these statements are typically very similar. The schools they describe can be high schools or elementary; urban, suburban, or rural; American or Canadian. Regardless of the level, locale, or nationality of the schools, their mission statements attest to the following commitments:

We will teach each and every child to realize his or her full potential and become a responsible and productive citizen and life-long learner who uses technology effectively and appreciates the multicultural society in which we live as we prepare for the global challenges of the 20th century.

Thus, not only have educators addressed the issue of public schooling’s mission, they have demonstrated remarkable consistency in articulating that mission or purpose. Yet, according to a recent study, one of the most common reasons school improvement initiatives fail to result in higher student achievement is the staff’s inability to establish and agree upon clear educational purpose and central goals for student learning (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). What’s wrong with this picture? How is it that an area given such attention and resulting in such consistent responses remains a major stumbling block in the effort to improve schools?

The answer, of course, lies in the disconnect between the noble sentiments of the mission statements and the reality of the day-to-day functioning of schools.

This incongruity between the typical mission statement and the actual practices, policies, programs, and assumptions at work in most schools should serve as a catalyst for change. Too often, schools are content to live with the incongruity.

What if schools were suddenly subject to

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“truth in advertising” legislation? Imagine if every school was required to post a mission statement that accurately reflected the actual conditions in the school.

If honesty and accuracy replaced esoteric language and noble sentiment, some schools’ true mission statements might read as follows:

**Our mission** is to sort and select students into widely varying programs on the basis of their innate, fixed aptitude. We strive to present good lessons and to create classroom environments that encourage students to learn. We then rank them according to their willingness and/or ability to learn. Finally, we take credit for the achievements of high-performing students and assign others the blame for low performance.

**Our mission** is to promote positive feelings about the school on the part of students and staff. We are committed to developing students with high self-esteem who feel good about themselves. We foster high faculty morale by attempting to eliminate any source of concern that interferes with the happiness of the adults in the organization. We avoid conflict at all costs, in keeping with our premise that a happy school is a good school.

**Our mission** is to help parents and the general public understand all the reasons that our students should not be expected to reach the standards of achievement that the state has established.

**Our mission** is to provide a safe, orderly, and clean school environment.

We focus on the behavior of students — their relations with adults and each other, and their willingness to abide by school rules. We fulfill our mission when the students’ deportment reflects a school’s orderly atmosphere.

**Our mission** is to teach the 75% of the students who are interested in learning and to apply appropriate consequences to students unwilling to put forth sufficient effort to learn.

It is time we acknowledge that organizations demonstrate their assumptions about their fundamental purpose not through the words of finely crafted mission statements, but in the actions that dominate their day-to-day activities. Our real missions are communicated not by what we say, but by what we do. It is time we demonstrate the “high tolerance for truth” (Senge, et al., 1994) that characterizes learning organizations.

If an honest assessment of the current reality in our schools demonstrates incongruity between our alleged mission statement and our actual practices, we are faced with two options: amend the mission statement to reflect our practices, or amend our practices so they better align with our mission statements.

It is time we stop writing and begin living the mission of public education.

**REFERENCES**
