

State Your Mission: Creating Mission Statements that Work

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What is your school's mission statement? If it doesn't exist or you can't recall it, it's time to take another look. A mission statement can be a focal point for learning. It can guide all school activities, and even assist you in choosing the right people to join your staff.

"The clearer a school community is about its mission, the more successful it can be," [Cile Chavez](#), Ed.D., told Education World. "A mission can serve as a centerpiece for faculty, staff, and students. It can serve as a framework for making decisions and for building relationships. Powerful missions give people a sense of purpose and passion. Every school should crisply articulate a mission statement and *walk the talk*."

A former Colorado superintendent and nationally known speaker and consultant, Chavez believes not only that every district should have a mission statement, but that it should be brief and easy to state and remember.

"An effective mission statement is certainly one that has meaning to the whole school community," says Chavez. "It should inspire! A mission statement should clearly communicate what has heart and meaning within the school or district."

Some of Chavez's favorite missions include "our actions will result in student greater self-esteem and performance" and "to inspire every student to think, to learn, to achieve, and to care." According to Chavez, the first step an administrator should take in creating a powerful mission statement like those is to give careful thought to what he or she believes about mission statements and how they can serve.

"It is important to create what I call *felt need*," she explained. "Help people discover how a clear, compelling mission statement can serve to improve teaching and learning. Get people to examine mission statements and explore the possibilities. Simply have conversations on the power and promise of a mission. Guide the thinking on the power of language in capturing the culture of the school; what will best capture our intentions of showing up each and every day. Model enthusiasm for the possibilities that result from an inspiring mission."

MISSIONS ARE CRITICAL

Suzanne Bond, an associate professor in educational leadership at Seattle Pacific University in Seattle, Washington, has helped to facilitate the development of mission statements at both the school and district level. A former high school teacher, principal, and superintendent, she has generated a process for creating mission statements that provides guidelines and examples.

"Participants worked in small groups to come up with their ideas for the statements meeting these guidelines," Bond explained. "The possible mission statements were then taken out to the entire staff (faculty and classified staff) for their input and ideas."

"Dedicated to knowledge, character, and creativity," "working together with a heart for kids," and "the best place on Earth to educate kids" are a few samples of mission statements that Bond feels "work." While some say these are "mottos" and insist on a longer, more extensive "mission statement," Bond argues that if it can't be remembered by everyone, the purpose is defeated.

ACCEPTING THE MISSION

After a mission is established, the challenge of implementing it remains. "The best way to make a mission statement the focal point of a school is to have everyone involved in creating it, including the community, and then put it everywhere -- on banners, letterhead, newsletters, seat cushions," explained Bond. "Don't rush the process; make sure everyone in the organization and community has had the opportunity to be involved in creating the purpose statement."

Cile Chavez recommends inviting suggestions as to how implementation of the statement can be done in an authentic, realistic manner. For example, faculty members might offer questions that the principal can use in the interviewing process to find candidates who are a good match for the school and its mission.

"Above all, talk about it!" advises Chavez. "Host conversations whenever and where ever you can that are centered on the meaning of the mission statement. Reference it when you hire people, and hold people accountable. Constantly ask how we can breathe life into the mission. What do we do that says we consistently live out the mission? In what ways -- practices, policies, and procedures -- do we violate the mission?"

A mission statement should be institutionalized and placed as part of the teacher evaluation system, Chavez adds. Parents should be aware of the mission, and administrators should seek their support and ideas for enhancing the essence of it. To evaluate the success of the mission statement, it is essential to ask for evidence that the mission is being followed.

"Engage the school community for ideas in terms of measurement," Chavez recommends. "I think at the end of each year students, faculty, and staff should engage in a meaningful dialogue about how the mission has served. Perhaps refinement will be necessary. The bottom line is that the mission should inspire people to create a better future individually and as a community."

"BE YOUR BEST AND NOTHING LESS"

A change in leadership prompted a recent review of Laguna Elementary School's mission and vision statements, which had not been re-examined since 1997. Dr. Kathleen Root spent most of her first year as principal of the school listening to the concerns of faculty and parents in Scottsdale, Arizona. She learned what those individuals were passionate about, how they worked with each other, and what the stakeholders valued.

"During the last faculty meeting held the day after students left in May 2004, I met with my staff for four hours," she recalled. "We talked about the strengths and needs of our school, and we began to develop a list. I spent my summer reviewing district policies, school procedures, student and parent handbooks, and any data we had available on the school. At the first faculty meeting upon our return (prior to the start of the school year), I met with the staff again. Armed with data and the faculty's initial list, we narrowed down the list to core areas that we wanted to address over the next few years."

Root then held up the new mission statement and posed the question, "Does this reflect what we are about and where we want to go?" Staff members were encouraged to address the question in their grade-level meetings, send their input to committee representatives, and be prepared to discuss the statement at every faculty meeting for the school year. Root met with PTO members and began the same process.

"I was connected with a community member from SRP, our local utility company, who agreed to host and facilitate a series of meetings with a team of parents, staff, and community members," Root stated. "We met four times during the school year for day-long brainstorming. Each time we would present our work to the PTO and staff for feedback. We worked this process all year long. A clear mission, vision, philosophy statement was developed and approved by faculty, PTO, and the site-based leadership team."

Twenty-five people formed a core group of participants who were tasked with creating the new mission statement for the school, with over 200 people providing feedback from various groups. The group included eight staff members (certified and classified), twelve parents, three community members, one administrator, and occasionally two district members.

"People were chosen for their expertise, differing perspectives, differing roles in the community, and desire to participate," said Root. "I was looking for a wide range of participants who were uniquely different from each other."

The process resulted in a motto for Laguna Elementary School -- "Be your best and nothing less!" -- and a new mission statement that reads, "To provide each student with the highest quality education and create a passion for learning, empowering each student to contribute positively to our global community." To guide future efforts, a vision statement was designed as well.

To be the best elementary school in Arizona by

1. invigorating each classroom environment by reducing the student to adult ratio to 15:1.
2. continually investing in the hiring and retaining of highly educated and trained staff who teach effectively and passionately.
3. challenging students to stretch beyond one year's growth.
4. being an integral part of the community.
5. having each family feel directly connected and appreciated.
6. providing exceptional learning opportunities that are enhanced by state-of-the-art technology, community resources, and support.

MISSION POSSIBLE

"What we like best about our mission and vision is it identifies clearly what we are about and what we want to be," Root reported. "The mission statement explains why we are an entity and why we are in business. The vision statement will be used to guide us in our decision-making when creating and working toward improvement goals."

Both statements will help the school maintain its focus and unite the school community in a common purpose, Root said, adding, "This was an incredible experience. I feel like everyone is focused and working toward common goals -- we are working together!"

At Columbiana (Alabama) Middle School, *cats* are more than furry creatures with a fondness for mice. "CATS" is an acronym used to remember the school's mission statement -- "Citizenship and Academics Target Success." That core mission is supported by four belief statements:

Student learning is the chief priority for the school.

All students can learn.

Continuous improvement promotes life-long learners and productive citizens.

The community shares the responsibility for furthering the school's mission in a safe, comfortable environment.

"This statement drives the way that we teach and learn, the way we implement our professional development, and our day-to-day operations in our school," explained David Dixon, the school's principal. "Our students are becoming positive, well-rounded individuals who we feel will have a positive impact on our society."

Reviewing the mission statement is an annual collaborative effort of faculty, staff, administration, students, parents, and business and community leaders in the area. Dixon told Education World, "As the dynamics of our community change, we feel that we must always examine our mission, beliefs, and goals and make adaptations when necessary."

Making a Mission

Having completed a year-long process to develop an effective mission statement for Laguna Elementary, Katie Root offers other administrators who are embarking on the journey this advice

Always include all of your stakeholders and provide opportunities for continuous feedback during the process.

Find an outside place to hold meetings and, if possible, have a neutral facilitator work with the core group. (That allows an administrator to be a part of the group instead of the leader of the group and encourages quieter people to participate openly.)

Don't give up. It is a long -- and sometimes uncomfortable - process, but it is well worth the effort.

Effective Missions

To establish a meaningful mission statement, follow Suzanne Bond's guidelines:

The mission statement is one thing that should be known by *every person* in the organization. You should be able to go up to any individual in the organization and he or she should be able to recite the

mission to you.

It is a clear and concise expression of the school or district's purpose and function. It serves to focus all of the organization's attention and to concentrate its energies on one common purpose.

The mission statement is the keystone on which the entire strategic plan depends.

It should always be brief, so that it can be remembered.

It acknowledges reality and also aspires to the ideal. This is very important -- high expectations must be evident.

It is not just a description of the status quo, but rather a bold declaration of what the organization will be.

The mission statement must represent a commitment to the special distinctiveness, the uniqueness, the originality that sets the organization apart from others like it.