



Living the Mission

*Is your mission statement an afterthought?
Take a page from these successful schools whose
mission statements drive all decisions*

Michael Corso, Linda Lucey, and Kristine Fox

Do your teachers, students, and community members know the goals your district and schools are striving to achieve? Does everyone in your learning community know your mission statement?

As researchers and professional development providers, we find all too often that school mission statements are merely written documents posted in the main office and published in myriad handbooks. They are not what they should be: a set of beliefs that drive a district's goals, hiring practices, instructional leadership, and program initiatives.

Often, mission statements are irrelevant, or worse, obsolete. Yet, in our work in hundreds of schools we have seen

how creating and maintaining a mission-driven culture propels schools to new levels of excellence.

Through a joint research initiative, two nonprofit organizations, the Aspirations Research Center at the Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations and the Successful Practice Network, conducted a quantitative and then qualitative study examining highly ranked public high schools across the country. This project was supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in partnership with the Council of Chief State School Officers and the International Center for Leadership in Education.

The schools that rose to the top in our study have mission statements that are widely known within the district and applied to decisions involving every aspect of teaching

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and learning.

What the high-achieving public high schools in our study share is evidence of the importance of having a mission that is genuinely and widely shared, lived, and aligned with the school's policies and practices.

No excuses: College bound

Withrow University High School is a public school of choice in Cincinnati, serving an inner-city population with an enrollment that is 98 percent students of color. The school's mission focuses on preparing students for college. At Withrow, "Every student is college bound." This determined approach drives all decisions in the school.

A student survey noted 61 percent of students agreed that "I know the goals my school is working on this year." This response is 24 percent higher than the national average of students in grades six through 12.

When everyone understands the school's mission, all resources of the school system are focused on achieving the mission. Students know what they must do to attend college, teachers teach to a level required at the college level, administrators accept no excuses, and the school board budgets in a way that supports the mission of getting all students to attend college. In 2008, the school had an 85 percent college acceptance rate, with at least 70 percent of students attending.

Citizens of the world

North Carolina's Raleigh Charter School has achieved numerous awards and recognitions. Its mission statement reads: "We graduate citizens of the world by creating an interconnected learning environment that combines a demanding college-preparatory education with a curriculum that teaches and models citizenship skills."

Focusing on citizenship is a different mission statement from getting students into college, yet the end result is an equally successful school. The difference is reflected in the course offerings, class expectations, and a shared set of values to guide decisions. Students at Raleigh Charter live out their mission in the way they treat one another. Citizenship begins at home. In response to the statement, "Students are supportive of each other," 79 percent of Raleigh Charter students agreed.

Another indicator of the school living out its mission is reflected in student responses to the statement, "I believe I can make a difference in the world." Seventy-six percent of students agreed with this statement.

Raleigh Charter's mission statement is active and visible. We found the aspects of school life at Raleigh to be so much a part of the fabric of daily existence that it was challenging for staff and students to articulate how and why Raleigh is the way it is.

Know your students

Saunders Trades and Technical High School is part of the Yonkers City School District, which sits on the urban edge of New York City. Currently, the school serves 1,250 students from diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds.

In 1997-98, Saunders was recognized as a Blue Ribbon National School of Excellence by the U.S. Department of Education and in 2005-06 as a High Performing/Gap Closing School by New York state. Saunders' mission of "valuing relationships and a small learning environment" is evident throughout the school.

Students at Saunders recognize they are part of a special family. They indicate that there are very few instances of bullying and students in general just "get along." During interviews, students were quick to comment on the success of a classmate. It was clear that students and staff care about each other.

The staff and administration at Saunders have internalized their belief about the necessity of building strong relationships with students as the key element to improved student performance. For example, the design of the course of study supports the school's mission. Saunders students each have a major, similar to a college major. Students work with the same group of teachers in their major for three years, leading teachers to genuinely understand the goals of their students.

Perhaps the most telling piece of data from this urban school is a 94 percent attendance rate. Students want to be at school.

Advanced Placement focus

Newport High School in Bellevue, Wash., is known for its emphasis on Advanced Placement (AP) classes. It was selected as a Blue Ribbon National School of Excellence in 2003 by the U.S. Department of Education.

Many schools want their students to feel challenged and motivated to take a rigorous curriculum. What makes Newport High School different? Possibly it is the explicit mission expressed in measurable terms: "All students will take at least one advanced-level course before graduating from high school in preparation for the rigors of college." The students we interviewed repeatedly told us that they were expected to take up to five AP courses before they graduate.

These results are a product of Newport's commitment to its mission. The school schedule includes 30 minutes of small group tutoring at the end of every day. In addition, the school offers peer tutoring and counselors who guide students in their course selection toward the most rigorous curriculum each student can handle.

Teachers are supported to enhance their teaching skills through the Advanced Placement Institute hosted by the

district. Sixty-one percent of Newport High School staff have attended the summer institute, and many of these teachers have attended it multiple times over the past nine years. Newport's school community embraces this culture and strives to create an environment that is challenging, rigorous, and committed to graduating students ready for college-level work.

Mission-driven schools

Whatever the common cause—whether keeping students in school and valuing relationships as in Saunders, or having students get into a first-choice college as in Newport—purpose itself is an active force in the daily experience of school. Far from the dead documents framed in many principals' offices, the schools we studied have mission statements they *live*.

Withrow's mission statement ends with two words: "No excuses." In many schools, this would make for a nice hallway banner or splashy brochure caption. At Withrow, "No excuses" is on the minds and lips of every student and staff member as they move through their day. It *drives* them. Students at Raleigh Charter School frequently referenced the school's mission statement "to graduate contributing citizens of the world" as accountable for academic success, high levels of participation in co-curricular activities, and as the rationale for their service learning program. Being mission driven is the common thread.

In these schools, an outcome of having a shared and lived sense of purpose is a high degree of systems alignment. Having all participants understand the school's mission statement is one thing. Ensuring that resources, schedules, professional development, student services, curriculum, co-curricular activities, and other school systems are in full support of the school's mission is another.

A significant finding in these high-performing schools is

that all of the oars are in the water and rowing in the same direction. We uncovered little to no evidence of departments or areas working at cross-purposes. Guidance departments and administrators support classroom teachers, who in turn support students toward a common goal. For example, all of Raleigh Charter School's field trips are oriented toward the mission of teaching students to make a contribution to their community and the world. Their curriculum and schedule were direct expressions of the mission-critical importance of having an interconnected learning environment.

Do these findings suggest that the key is a common, unchallenged direction? No. In each school, we did find disagreement about how to achieve the agreed-upon goal. However, each school did hold a common mission. We also found that where the system is lacking in reference to the stated purposes of the school, interventions are promptly put in place to create greater alignment.

In Newport, data suggested that a small minority of students was struggling with the school's mission of high academic achievement due to a lack of personal relationships with teachers. The school is in the process of addressing this concern through professional learning communities and looking for ways to improve relationships with students to better help them excel academically—Newport's stated purpose.

All schools studied have a dynamic sense of their purpose. Having set their sights on a common target, these schools are not content with resting on their laurels. They embody the notion of continuous improvement by frequently re-examining and raising the goals they set for themselves. Examples of this:

- Despite the focus on citizenship and service, several staff members at Raleigh Charter School told us, "We are still learning what citizenship means."

- Saunders' consistent ability to form relationships with students who typically do not do well in school has become the foundation for considering new ways of challenging students academically.

- Now that Withrow has had success in helping students pass the Ohio Graduation Test, it is looking into the ACT and AP programs as the next level of performance assessment.

- Newport's vision of rigor currently has an effective and strong college prep focus, but it continues to pursue innovative programs to exceed college-readiness standards. ■

Living out your school's mission

The results of our study led us to conclude that individual mission statements do matter. Through the study of these schools, we learned three simple steps schools can take to get started living their own mission statements.

Step One: Find out whether all stakeholders know your school and/or district's mission statement.

Step Two: Document evidence of the mission statement being lived through the district's actions and goals.

Step Three: Take action to align school and district initiatives with the mission statement or commit to rewriting a purposeful, meaningful mission statement.

Michael Corso (corso@qisa.org) is the chief academic officer and a senior field specialist of the nonprofit Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations (QISA) in Portland, Maine. Linda Lucey (linda@leaded.com) is the chief academic officer of the Successful Practices Network in Rexford, N.Y., where she oversees the education initiatives. Kristine Fox (fox@qisa.org) is the director of product development and senior field associate at QISA.

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