

# Hitch Your Wagon to a Mission Statement

by Allison Zmuda

## **T**he Power of Mission

A mission statement drives the work of the school when it creates strong internal accountability among staff members for student learning. This means that staff believe they are responsible for student performance while maintaining a sustained focus on a handful of improvement efforts. This is a commitment to collaborating with one another to analyze student work as well as each other's instructional practices, and to acquiring new knowledge and skills (even if it means unlearning old ones).

The call for schools to redefine, recommit, or reclaim their mission is being trumpeted by researchers, business leaders, and educators across the nation. One of these calls to reconsider the purpose of schools comes from David Conley, Director for the Center of Education Policy Research at the University of Oregon and Executive Director of the Educational Policy Improvement Center. He warns of the significant gap between high school work and college readiness

by stating, "Research suggests that one of the major reasons that students falter in college is the gap between their high school experiences and college expectations. Many first year students find that their college courses are fundamentally different from their high school courses. College instructors expect students to draw inferences, interpret results, analyze conflicting source documents, support arguments with evidence, solve complex problems that have no obvious answer, draw conclusions, offer explanations, conduct research, and generally think deeply about what they are being taught" (National Research Council 2002). In the later 2006 report *Are They Really Ready to Work?*, the top areas identified by employers as crucial to workplace success are as follows:

1. Critical thinking/problem solving
2. Information technology application
3. Teamwork/collaboration
4. Creativity/innovation
5. Diversity (Conley 2007).

Vivien Stewart, Vice President of Education of the Asia Society, calls on schools to prepare students for the world community. She says, "Our challenge is to hone students' critical thinking skills and to familiarize students with key concepts that they can apply to new situations. In this way, they can make sense of the explosion of information from different sources around the world and put factual information into context" (2007).

Despite all this clamor for a more rigorous, performance-based, global-minded mission to drive the work of schools, many structures and staff have remained unchanged. According to Professor Richard Elmore, none of this should come as a surprise. He states, "The core of schooling remains relatively stable in the face of massive changes in the structure around it. Schools legitimize themselves with their various conflicting publics by constantly changing external structures and processes, but shield their workers from any fundamental impact of these changes by leaving their core intact. This accounts for the resilience of practice within the context of constant

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institutional change" (2004).

A mission statement can be an important response to these concerns about the purpose of the school organization; its purpose is to cause student learning as defined by a set of goals. In their new book *Schooling by Design*, authors Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe delineate the range of goals for learning by stating, "Students are meant to leave school as not merely learned, but inquisitive; not merely knowledgeable, but capable of using their education for good ends; not merely with technical skills but with the appropriate habits of mind that determine whether the skill is used wisely, unwisely, or not used at all when needed. Again, content mastery is not the primary point of teaching even when mission refers to academic goals" (2007).

## **T**he Impact of Mission on Library Media Centers

The push for schools to become more accountable for the learning results they produce has created significant pressure on staff to analyze the relationship between the teaching design and the students' performance. The push for schools to be more mindful of preparing students for the challenges of college and the workplace has highlighted the need for information literacy and technology to be a meaningful component of curriculum designs and instructional practice. Likewise, the push for schools to engage all learners in authentic, complex tasks that mirror the real world has elevated the research process from a procedure

that is carried out only in a library to an inquiry-based framework that supports learning in all subjects. Library media specialists should see their work as "the school's work," not just because their classroom space and resources are shared by all, but because the significance of the learning conducted in the library media center is at the heart of the school's purpose. That assumes, however, that the work being conducted in the library media center lives up to the promise of the mission—does it require students to be critical and creative thinkers? Adept problem solvers? Fluent and respectful communicators? Or does the work, instead, simply highlight the autonomous practices that live in the building?

respect, collaboration does not occur. Thus, results are minimized (if not obliterated), and the opportunity of the library media specialist to engage students in work relevant to established information literacy goals is lost. Library media specialists must, therefore, bend over backwards to accommodate classroom teacher requests in hopes that these "good will gestures" will open the door to more meaningful forms of collaboration.

On the larger scale of school reform, library media specialists openly wish that "things were different" but are largely resigned to the fact that they aren't. Therefore, the cost of pushing for "something more" can feel not only uncomfortable but unbearable and ultimately

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Library media specialists typically are expected to collaborate with everyone. Because the teacher holds the proverbial key to the classroom door, he or she also has the access to the students. If there is no access to students, there is no opportunity to cause student learning. Real collaboration is, however, based on a mutual understanding from all parties. Each party brings to the table a unique and important contribution that makes the collective work richer than any individual effort. Without this mutual

unproductive. Today's "systemic constraints," however, do not mitigate the desire or the responsibility to achieve the mission of the school. In his monograph to the international best seller *Good to Great*, Jim Collins advises, "It might take decades to change the entire systemic context, and you might be retired or dead by the time those changes come. In the meantime, what are you going to do now?... You must retain faith that you can prevail to greatness in the end, while retaining the disci-



pline to confront the brutal facts of your current reality. What can you do today to create a pocket of greatness, despite the brutal facts of your environment?" (2005). Such reform efforts require much more than additional initiatives, policies, and structures; they require fundamental changes in how we work together to cause student learning. The solution requires more than time, money, and additional staffing; it requires clarifying how staff dedicate instructional minutes to focus students on significant tasks that will prepare them for an ever-increasingly complex, connected, and global world where communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity are prerequisites for success.

## **The Importance of Candor**

Candor requires staff to speak openly about gaps between the status quo and the mission of the school. Renowned businessman Jack Welch asserts that lack of candor damages the relationships between people because of the inability to honestly communicate about difficult issues. He further states, "Instead they withhold comments or criticisms. They keep their mouths shut in order to make people feel better or to avoid conflict, and they sugarcoat bad news in order to maintain appearances. They keep things to themselves, hoarding information. That's all lack of candor and it's absolutely damaging" (Welch 2005). Welch's assertion may appear counterintuitive. Many library media specialists would contend that it is more damaging to speak their minds to their colleagues about the need for more authentic collaboration, more

cognitively demanding work for students, more focused tasks (in design, in directions, and in grading criteria), and more feedback about how students performed as measured by an established set of indicators. Holding on for the right moment, the safe moment, the teachable moment flies in the face of professional responsibilities to the short-term obligation to the students in the school right now and also to the long-term obligation to grow the system.

Clearly there are ways of engaging teachers in conversations that are tactful but still direct. But this desire to grow people must be accompanied by the necessary courage and compassion when discussing difficult issues. This is the role of a coach—someone who articulates (and models) a vision of what quality looks like and then provides the support needed to grow each person to that point. Coaches must not only care about the people they work with but also must be able to separate out the performance from the performer. In other words, library media specialists in this coaching role must navigate precarious conversations through nurturing relationships with individual staff without compromising the clarity of the message or hedging on the difficulty and depth of the change. Higgins states, "Coaches know that significant change demands energy from them and the learners over a long time. They know that any deeply ingrained faulty skill will get worse before it gets better. Performers must be willing to take a step back to be able to take greater steps forward later. It is never easy and coaches prepare learners for this challenge in the beginning" (2003).

## **Leading the Way**

The authority and leadership for this type of collegial coaching does not come from the job title or hierarchy of employees but rather from the system's internal accountability to accomplish the mission of the organization. The good news is that library media centers are increasingly being looked to as an untapped source of potential learning, a place where students can engage in work that is purposeful, powerful, and personalized. The challenge is how to make sure that the increased attention brings results in real change in instructional practice instead of superficial "parallel play." This requires nothing less than a fundamental change in "beliefs, norms and values about what it is possible to achieve, as well as in the actual practices that are designed to bring achievement" (Elmore 2007). But the payoff for the hard work can inspire the school community because the mission statement finally has become much more than words on a wall; this statement has become the mantra for how we do business.

## **Resources**

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