From Plaques to Practice: How Schools Can Breathe Life Into Their Guiding Beliefs

Mr. Allen describes five problems that help cause schools to ignore their guiding statements, and he recommends six ways by which schools can overcome that shortcoming.

BY LEW ALLEN

THINK BACK to your school days. Do you remember that junior high teacher who, despite your charm, quick wit, and endearing ways, failed to appreciate your many talents? Can you close your eyes and conjure up a picture of what your elementary school looked like as you approached it each morning? Remember your high school's mascot and the cheers that were so inspirational — "Hit 'em again, hit 'em again, harder, harder" or "How loose is your goose, how funky is your monkey"? Did one of your teachers have a favorite saying or a tidbit of wisdom that he or she repeated so often it still rings in your ears: "If you had just listened to me the first time, you wouldn't have to be asking me that now"?

Now that your mind is back in the old days, try to recall the mission statement of any one of the schools you attended. Can you bring to mind a statement of vision or philosophy that unified the instructional practices of your teachers and inspired and guided your learning? Do you know the guiding vision, mission, or philosophy of the school in which you currently teach, administer, or facilitate? Do you know such things about the school to which you send your children?

No peeking at the plaque in the front hallway, no checking out the school's website, and no thumbing through the teacher, student, or parent handbook. And I'm not referring to some catch phrase that might be heard on a school's answering machine or read as part of the daily announcements: "Good morning, students; welcome to another day at High Hope School, where all things are possible and the skies are not cloudy all day." I'm referring to a vision that guides, informs, and inspires teaching and learning strategies, staff development initiatives, teacher evaluations, student assessment, and parent and community involvement. I've asked many groups of people about their school's guiding vision — what it says and what is being done to bring it to life — and generally the response I get includes pursed lips, bemused smiles, and vacant shrugs.

Almost everyone in the education community agrees that people associated with schools would benefit from having a common vision to guide their individual and collective actions. Michael Fullan writes, "The vital role of vision appears in every book on educational and organizational excellence."[1] Every book written about excellent schools and excellent schooling touts the importance of vision. Bruce Barnett and Kathryn Witaker

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note, "Leadership and management literature are replete with information about the importance of vision formation in organizations."[2]

In describing the work of the Accelerated Schools network, Henry Levin, its founder, wrote that schools must have a "unity of purpose [which] refers to an active collaboration among parents, teachers, students, support staff, administrators, and the local community toward setting and achieving a common set of goals for the school. These shared goals and values become the focal point of everyone's efforts."[3]

WHY ARE SCHOOLS' GUIDING STATEMENTS GATHERING DUST?

In *A Guide to Authentic Instruction and Assessment*, Fred Newmann, Walter Secada, and Gary Wehlage hold that vision is a key element for instructional renewal. They found that before people in schools could make instructional changes they had to have "a schoolwide vision for the intellectual quality of teachers' work and students' expectations across the different subjects and grade levels."[4]

It seems that everyone agrees that school communities should have some sort of covenant, vision, mission, philosophy, or values to guide their work. In this article I will use the term "guiding statements." The good news is that nearly all schools do have such statements. The bad news is that nearly all schools tend to ignore them. Guiding statements are rarely used for anything other than an occasional, symbolic group hug. Why do people in schools routinely walk by plaques, banners, and framed statements that contain their beliefs and hopes for the future without paying them any attention? Why are schools' guiding statements gathering dust in so many schools across the country?

PROBLEMS

For the past decade, university and school-based educators associated with the League of Professional Schools have worked together to learn about creating guiding statements — what the league's founder Carl Glickman has termed covenants.[5] We have learned that developing such statements is no simple task and that building the collective will to bring these guiding statements to life is equally challenging. Here are five problems that help cause schools to ignore their guiding statements.

Problem 1. Much of what is found in the guiding statements of schools is so general that it is virtually impossible for people to know what success looks like. This leads people to conclude that the statements are feel-good sentiments that have been created for public relations reasons and are not serious statements of intent. Such statements as "We want our students to reach their full potential mentally, physically, and socially" or "We seek excellence in all that we do" cry out to be ignored because they allude to ideas and results that are impossible to track. A school can never know if its students are reaching their "full potential" or if they are seeking more "excellence" this year than last. Such statements are probably meant to set a tone and to inspire people. Instead, they encourage people to ignore them.

Problem 2. Guiding statements often don't link desired results or philosophical stances with specific teaching and assessment practices. This leaves the statements void of any practical implications for what people actually do on a day-to-day basis, which means the statements can be used to stimulate and clarify peoples' beliefs, but they fall short of inspiring and guiding people's actions. Over time, this lack of action can lead people to conclude that the statements are much ado about nothing.

Problem 3. Guiding statements are generally too long and too complicated. In an effort to cover all bases, people often include every good thing they want for their students. In doing so, they overwhelm themselves with words, water down what is of bottom-line importance to them, and encourage members of the school community to ignore the entire document. By contrast, when guiding statements are short and to the point, they can be easily brought to mind, even by aging baby boomers. I don't mean to imply that the process of writing and using guiding statements is a straightforward, management-by-objective enterprise. It must be an ongoing, thought-provoking, and reflective process if it is to have an impact. But that doesn't mean that the guiding statements themselves must cover every trait, skill, emotion, and set of academic facts that the

school wants to impart to its students.

There is a closely related problem: the practice of plastering a school with sayings, mottos, and quotes. This can add to the confusion about what a school is really committed to doing. The official guiding statements of a school can get lost in a sea of sayings.

Problem 4. Often many of the people in a school had no part in writing its belief statements. These people lack any personal connection to the statements and are not likely to give them serious thought. This happens when only a few people are involved in writing a school's guiding statements, when new people aren't given opportunities to think about their new school's guiding statements, or when district offices provide schools with ready-made guiding statements. Under such circumstances, people aren't likely to develop any personal understanding of, connection to, or ownership of the statements and so aren't inclined to take them to heart and use them. People will not work hard to implement guiding statements that are simply handed to them — Moses being a notable exception.

Problem 5. Life in schools discourages people from having reflective, ongoing dialogues. Phones ring and bring problems that need to be addressed immediately, people lead busy lives and have needs that must be met sooner rather than later, and curriculum guides must be followed. Everyone is consumed by the issues of the day, and there is little time or energy for thinking about visions and missions. What's that old saying about draining a swamp when one is surrounded — to put it politely — by alligators?

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1. Schools might start by examining their current guiding statements sentence by sentence and word by word. Then they can cull or clarify sentiments that may sound good but are just not something for which they can hold themselves accountable. For example, phrases such as "we will create a dynamic educational environment," "we will provide a quality educational program," or "we will develop and support all human resources" are just too broad to evaluate. Including them muddies the water and can lead people to dismiss the entire statement as pie in the sky, unless they are clearly linked to other parts of the document that show how the school will hold itself accountable for them.

Recommendation 2. Schools' guiding statements are more likely to lead to action when they address in very specific ways the type of teaching and learning experiences that people believe will help their students realize the stated purposes and desired results found in the statements. Consider the following examples.

- Students learn best when they apply their learning in real-world situations.
- Students learn best when they ask critical, probing questions of the subject matter.
- Students learn best when they are actively engaged in their own learning.

You may agree or not with any of these statements. The point is that they describe specific characteristics of instructional practices and so can inform, inspire, and guide staff development programs, critical friends groups, mentoring initiatives, and peer coaching.

Here are some examples of statements that are *not* specific to actual teaching techniques or instructional approaches.

- We will provide courses that will challenge and enlighten all students.
- Our courses will include instruction and experiences that will enhance reading, writing, speaking, listening, and presentation skills.
- Our school will encourage innovation and change to allow new instructional programs to be practiced and meet the needs of our students.

These statements focus on instruction and suggest desired outcomes, but they aren't specifically focused on the characteristics of a particular type of instruction or on any specific learning activities and are therefore difficult to use as a guide for action. They are easy to embrace — and then dismiss.

Recommendation 3. Once schools have guiding statements in place, they must engage in an ongoing dialogue that deepens people's understanding of their content. Without structures that help people explore what is meant by guiding statements, many will conclude that their own actions already embody the beliefs in the statements and won't give them any further thought. People must be provided with experiences that help them think more deeply about what is meant by their school's guiding statements beyond what they are already thinking and doing. Guiding statements should be seen as catalysts for deep reflection about beliefs and practices — not as vague reminders to do the right thing.

Recommendation 4. A school's work with student assessment, staff development, teacher evaluation, hiring, mentoring programs, communicating with parents, and so forth is most powerful when efforts in all

these areas are aligned with its guiding statements. What message does it send to teachers when they are evaluated according to something other than a school's guiding statements? Or when staff development activities are inconsistent with the school's guiding statements? How are parents supposed to be meaningful partners in their children's education when they aren't given opportunities to help bring a school's guiding statements to life? How can students take their school's guiding statements seriously when their teachers' assessment instruments aren't aligned with the guiding statements?

Recommendation 5. Effective principals are strong advocates of the guiding beliefs of their schools.[6] They make sure that the guiding statements are used to inform actions, including their own. Whenever possible, they use the language of the statements in dealing with teachers, parents, students, and community members. They leave no doubt in anyone's mind that the guiding beliefs affect school policies, procedures, and classroom practices and thus should not be confused with other sayings and quotes posted throughout the school.

Principals also play a key role in helping people find the time to write guiding statements and to bring them to life. It is imperative that principals give this work a high priority and help direct the appropriate resources to it.

Recommendation 6. Schools must implement an information-gathering system that will shed light on how people are doing in understanding and using their school's guiding statements. Mike Schmoker has described our failure to do so:

> We have launched initiatives (e.g., site-based management), provided loads of staff development in certain methods (e.g., "Essential Elements of Instruction"), and spent untold hours drawing up visions and mission statements. All had enormous promise. But these symbolic, high-profile "initiatives du jour" occurred in the near absence of any written or explicit intention to monitor, adjust, and thus palpably increase student learning or achievement.[7]

A cycle of learning needs to be put in place that ensures that people in groups and as individuals 1) translate their school's guiding statements into action, 2) link their actions to the effect they have on student learning, 3) reflect on what they have learned, 4) share what they are learning with the entire school community, and 5) plan their next steps.

CONCLUSION

Students benefit when their schools are purposeful places that not only clearly define what they want all students to know and be able to do but also clearly describe how they are going to bring about these desired results and how they will know if they have succeeded.[8] I'm not suggesting that schools should be places in which everyone follows the same practices in a lockstep way. A school can have a specific guiding statement that is used to inform everyone's work and still be a place in which people try new things and develop their own particular style. All that's necessary is that their actions reflect the spirit of the democratically agreed-upon vision of the school and that the outcomes are analyzed and used for determining next steps. Guiding statements should be provocative and challenging, not prescriptive and limiting. They should spark debate and inform action, not encourage compliance and unquestioned routines.

I'll conclude with an example of a set of guiding statements that I believe embodies the points I have tried to make. The people of the ABC School share a belief in the power of democratic ideals and processes to create the kind of learners and citizens they want their students to be. Their guiding statements reflect those beliefs.

> ABC School
>
> We expect our students to use their academic and social skills to seek and generate information that enables them to be contributing members of and problem solvers in our democratic society.
>
> We believe students learn to be such citizens when they 1) are active in their own learning both as individuals and in groups, 2) seek meaning and understanding beyond simple facts, 3) connect their learning across content areas, and 4) apply what they know and are able to do in our community.
>
> To inform and continuously improve our efforts, we will create ways for students to publicly demonstrate their level of mastery of our expectations.

The first paragraph of these guiding statements lays out what the school expects of its students. The people of ABC have not included all the wishes, hopes, and dreams they have for their students in these guiding statements. They have kept them short and to the point. But there is still a lot of meat in that opening sentence that could and should lead to ongoing discussions about values, commitments, and purposes. There are several key ideas that will need to be defined

with increasing specificity and clarity (contributing members, problem solvers, democratic society) so that indicators or benchmarks can be identified and refined to enable people in the school community to work on bringing their statements to life and to help them understand the progress they are making.

The second paragraph lays out specific skills and competencies that those in the ABC school community believe their students will need in order to gain the results laid out in the first paragraph. These descriptions are specific enough to guide and inform professional development for the school staff, to help students understand what is expected of them, and to help parents understand how they can be partners with their children and the school. For example, teachers and administrators could design professional development that would help teachers encourage students to be active in their own learning. Teachers could observe one another's teaching and provide peer coaching as they learn about and deepen their understanding of instructional practices that help students seek meaning and understanding beyond simple facts. The school could reach agreement about teacher evaluation procedures and instruments that reflect the collective commitment to the beliefs expressed.

Finally, in the third paragraph, the ABCers make it clear that they intend to get better and better in their efforts to turn out students who are contributing members to and problem solvers in our democratic society. They have committed themselves to creating ways to improve and to hold themselves accountable for the results that they get.

These guiding statements are not magical. And they won't automatically bring about great things for the people of ABC School. However, if they take them seriously and put in the time and energy necessary to bring them to life, the statements can guide their work. Imagine attending a school reunion at which the graduates of ABC compare how the school's vision affected their education and is still affecting their lives and recall how they were a part of a school community that pulled together to purposefully and thoughtfully put its signature on them all.

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1. Michael G. Fullan, *Successful School Improvement* (Bristol, Pa.: Open University Press, 1992), p. 81.

2. Bruce G. Barnett and Kathryn S. Witaker, *Restructuring for Student Learning* (Lancaster, Pa.: Technomic, 1996), p. 81.

3. Henry Levin, "Learning from Accelerated Schools," in James H. Block, Susan T. Everson, and Thomas R. Guskey, eds., *Comprehensive School Reform: A Program Perspective* (Dubuque, Ia.: Kendall/Hunt, 1999), p. 20.

4. Fred M. Newmann, Walter G. Secada, and Gary G. Wehlage, *A Guide to Authentic Instruction and Assessment: Vision, Standards, and Scoring* (Madison: Wisconsin Center for Education Research, 1995), p. 5.

5. Carl D. Glickman, *Renewing America's Schools: A Guide for School-Based Action* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993).

6. Thomas J. Sergiovanni, *Moral Leadership: Getting to the Heart of School Improvement* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1992).

7. Mike Schmoker, *Results: The Key to Continuous School Improvement* (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1996), p. 2.

8. Seymour B. Sarason, *How Schools Might Be Governed and Why* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997).