



Turning Purpose into Performance

By Bill Simmer

Your community deserves specific, meaningful, comprehensible statements. Otherwise you can end up with as many interpretations of the mission as people in your building.

Value is more than just a narrative. You work in a community that can readily assess whether your mission and core values are actually transforming children's lives. And you can bet your students can accurately assess whether your mission is relevant and your school provides the experience it claims to.

For all too many schools, the mission and core values are peripheral to the actual experience. Indeed, what does performance even mean in the context of your mission? More schools than we would like to admit practically ignore their mission for day-to-day work.

There is a way to bring your mission off its lofty perch and into a more direct, operational relationship with every decision you make. The first step is to understand that the mission simply can't do it alone. To cement the mission in your school, you need three foundational community documents: your school's *mission*, *portrait of the graduate*, and *characteristics of professional excellence*.

Mission

I don't know about you, but if I read another mission statement boasting "Christian worldview, academically excellent/rigorous, global citizen, lifelong learner, environmentally conscious, biblically based"—you get the point—I may lose my mind.

The more you attempt to make your mission comprehensive, the less powerful it becomes. The mission is your school's essential reason for being. Put another way, how would the children in your area be underserved if your school ceased to exist?

This obsession with comprehensiveness (along with the other mission killer, "educatorese") can

render your mission hollow and irrelevant to your community. Meaning trumps words. What good is a mission statement that holds no real power for your people? You need something your community can own—something that makes your team wake up on Monday morning and run to work.

A special needs school in North Carolina chose a short but powerful mission statement: "Quenching the thirst of students who learn differently." *Quench your thirst* is everywhere on campus, but more importantly it is in the hearts of its constituents. Which phrase is more likely to have your educational team running to work: "quenching the thirst of students" or "academic rigor"? Consider all the ways your community will find both phrases infused with meaning.

The Portrait of the Graduate

I'm less and less convinced that core values are helpful to schools. Rather than focus on a collection of attitudes, we should focus on specific student outcomes. The portrait of the graduate asks, "What are the specific outcomes we, as a community, are committed to seeing in the lives of our students?"

The key words here are *specific*, *outcomes*, and *student*. Many of the Christian schools I work with use some form of the phrase "Christian worldview" as one of their stated purposes or core values. With all due respect, I can drive a semi-truck through "Christian worldview." Asking 24 Christian educators what it means to have a Christian worldview will likely produce 24 different answers. Sure, there will be overlapping themes, but the inescapable reality

is that there will be significant variance. It is just too broad. How can we measure a worldview? How can we know if we are successfully cultivating a worldview in our students? It is much easier to get excited about a “portrait of the graduate” statement like this one:

“Our graduates will give of their time, talent, and resources to those in need, both locally and globally.”

That puts a much finer point on “worldview.” It’s comprehensible: educators are able to break the statements down into pieces everyone can understand and act on. It’s also measurable: the school can survey past and current students to find out if the mission is being accomplished. This can inform their practice in concrete ways.

The same problems exist with “lifelong learner” and “academic excellence.” These statements are overly broad and ambiguous. They are mere words to your constituents. Your community deserves specific, meaningful, comprehensible statements. Otherwise you can end up with as many interpretations of the mission as people in your building.

This is also a much more student-focused way of thinking. We must strive to keep the students at the front of the conversation. Schools, by their very nature, move toward adult centrality; adults have all the power. We must have the mental discipline to return to this burning question: “How are we serving our students?”

Characteristics of Professional Excellence

That leads us to the third piece of the *Purpose and Outcomes* suite. When you know your school’s essential reason for being and the specific outcomes you are trying to cultivate in your students, you can then extrapolate the specific attitudes and behaviors you need from your faculty to achieve those outcomes. Like the portrait of the graduate, there will likely be some overlap with other schools in your market. It is hard to imagine, for example, leading a school in which “effective parent relations and communications” would not be expected among faculty. However, some characteristics of professional excellence statements will be specific to your unique culture—expectations and aspirations that may differ significantly from those of the school down the street. These are your contributions to the tapestry of Christian child development.

Conclusion

When a school community knows and owns its core reason for being, its market differentiator, the specific outcomes it is trying to cultivate in students, and the core attitudes and behaviors that must be prevalent among its faculty to accomplish those differentiators and outcomes, it has the foundation for all performance processes. You know what your core marketing and validation messages need to be, as well as the case for investment in your school. You have principles to guide you in programmatic decisions, which in turn impact how you invest your resources. You know whom you need to hire; what information, aptitudes, and experiences must be discerned from the recruitment and interview process; the ways you will onboard and orient new faculty and staff; and the core factors you will need in your evaluation and performance metrics.

Value is more than just a narrative; it is the lifeblood of your organization and the people working within it. When mission, marketing, meaning, money, and metrics are all in sync, your school will truly transform its students’ lives.

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