School Mission Statements: A Look at Influencing Behavior

Ernest Luke McClees Jr.
Eastern Kentucky University
521 Lancaster Ave. Donavan Building
Richmond, Kentucky, 40475, U.S.A.

The purpose of this paper is to raise the question of what combination of people and mission statement create a productive school environment. Contemporary learning institutions have embraced the creation and public display of organizational wide mission statements. However, there are schools that exceed their outlined mission statement and other schools fall short of fulfilling their mission statements. This indicates that there must be more involved past writing and sharing a vision for educational stakeholders to operate within. Schools' differences and similarities are taken into consideration particularly in the area of school leadership makeup. The literature reviewed suggests that for a mission statement to have a positive impact there must be a personal intention and work alignment to help create success.

Mission Statements, Leadership, Climate, Organizational Change, Administrators, Teacher Leaders

"A small body of determined spirits fired by an unquestionable faith in their mission can alter the course of history." - Mahatma Gandhi

1.1 Introduction and Problem Statement

Mission statements have a long history in focusing ideas, groups and organizations (Gow, 2009). The use of mission statements help to clarify purpose and goals for both the members of an organization and those in which the organization serves. Schools' faculty have notice this successful practice and have joined the ranks of other organizations by creating similar type statements (Stemler, Bebell, & Sonnabend, 2011). School mission statements are a quantifiable rallying concept for faculty and staff while informing students and parents about the purpose of the school. With educational institutions creating, using and posting mission statements an interesting question centers around their effectiveness. Is it possible that mission statements create teacher motivation within an organization or does teacher motivation help a mission statement come to life? Understanding if mission statements could harness a type of collective motivation would have a significant impact on any school.

Pure motivation tends to be on a on an individual level, but it also can be formed by ones' environment (Feldman, Chao, Farh, & Bardi, 2015). During any given day there are a myriad of responsibilities teachers are a part of beyond classroom instruction (Melnick & Meister, 2008). Often, when searching for a schools mission statement one can find that the tasks outside of classroom instruction are addressed or given a generic catch all description. Many faculty and administration change schools, districts or leave the profession due the demands of being and educator (Craig, 2014; Pucella, 2011; Williams & Dikes, 2015). Many educators lose sight of their purpose due to lack of balance, support, and proper school atmosphere (Høigaard, Giske, & Sundsli, 2012; Teker, Guler, Uyanik, & Demir, 2014). The invisible line that some educators cross to quit and others cross to keep going could be dictated by school climate. However, the line seems not to be apparent to many educators as they mislabel their success or not understand their short-coming. A schools' mission statement might help eliminate negative aspects of a teaching job by unifying intentions and focus educational stakeholder outcomes. When applying this to a mission statement it brings about Aristotle's question, "what came first the chicken or the egg?" Are people selecting words to help them accomplish what they think a school should do, or are people carrying out what needs to be done while using a mission statement as a guide?

Understanding the relationship between a schools' mission statement and teacher behavior can be important for faculty and administration alike. If light can be shed on this relationship, the relationship could prove useful in optimizing each schools' potential for teacher and student success both on a macro and micro scale. After all, the mission statement is the one written purpose for an entire school.

1.2 Mission Statements

One can imagine that it could be easy to get lost in the endless stream of task that accompany contemporary life. It is extremely important to one's productivity and purposes to have a clear definition of what they intend to accomplish (Li-Ping Tang & Hsing Liu, 1989; Rader, 2005). For example, if you were to embark on a road trip you would not leave your house without an address in your cars' global positioning system. It would be pointless to drive around wasting time and gas while adding to air pollution. A personal finishing point helps professional stay on track to accomplishing the best possible outcomes (Davies, 2015).

Organizations are no different when it comes to needing focus (Capps, 2014). There are many different variables that could pull an organization toward disaster if there is no clear focus. Much like the individual wasting time taking a road trip without a clear objective, an organization is bound to waste time without their predetermined end point. Both the gas tank of a car and a gas tank of an organization require more money and time than what is necessary if the end point is not clear. This is not only frivolous monetarily, but kinetically as well. Unfortunately, organizations without a mission have the capability to mimic this problem. Organization do this by creating a polluted work climate littered with confusion, bad attitudes, lack of work ethic, and no unifying purpose for both the individual and the organization as a whole. The mission statement aids in creating work parameters, identity, and keeps the organization on target for mission accomplishment. In effect, the mission statement is the pathway to a clear, purposeful vision.

Just as any other organization; schools have a cliental, staff, and systematic agenda that must be met in an organized manner. Like other organizations the mission statement driving a school might vary from school to school. After all, there are different locations, different academic focuses, different students, staff, and resources. Since each school is likely to have a different mission statement this also means that schools climates could be different per focus of their mission. However, there are components that enable schools to be similar. National standards, local standards, national exams and local exams are just a few of the common elements that demonstrate how schooling is becoming more aligned. To understand if teacher behavior is changed by a schools' mission statement it is best to understand the mission statements function. First, the creation of a mission statement unique to the field of education is examined. The statement for a school will vary greatly from that of a business counterpart as there are no capital gains or stock holders to drive the purpose. A school does not contain a tangible product thusly changing the dynamics. According to the website *educationworld* (2011) a school's mission statement should be a reference point and a reminder. A mission statement should be a length that people will remember while reflecting the goals, values, and student population of a school. The site adds that the downfall of most schools is when they make the mission statement too long. People cannot recall the statement so it becomes fallow. The website for the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (2015) has an example of considerations for a school's mission statement:

Developing strong vision and mission statements can help stakeholders in your school reach such a common understanding. A vision is your school's goal—where you hope to see it in the future. The mission provides an overview of the steps planned to achieve that future. A vision is concise and easy to recall, whereas a mission is lengthier and more explanatory in nature. Your school may also want to establish targets along the way to measure progress toward its vision.

Per the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, the purpose of the mission statement is help a school reach a common understanding. A common understanding would demonstrate a shared experience within a school. Many schools demonstrate collective type characteristics. In a person's lifetime, the schooling environment is an environment in which people will have an aligned, shared experiences. While other experiences may not guarantee a focus like unified, collective education.

To help answer these questions an article was examined that dealt directly with schools mission statement creation. Boerema (2006) writes about a one schools' ideas about providing instruction to grades K- 12 and shared their process in creating a mission statement. Per the article, researchers shared that their mission statements were more likely to deviate from those of the district school. The researchers conducted an internal study on their diversity. From this, several concepts where made into five categories.

These categories included the following headings: goals and objectives, concepts outlining the environment, services offered, and parental involvement. There are a few categories demonstrated that are more unique to a smaller private school.

The school examined used each of the mentioned categories to create and structure their mission statement.   In doing so, they made everyone involved a shareholder in the formation of the mission statement.   This, as we will later see, aids in all parties knowing the mission statement and makes them more invested to work to make towards the common goal.   The organization has created the wordage of their mission statement around their demographic, resources, and ultimate aim.   Therefore, the words used are only a vehicle to help express what they believe to be possible.

1.3 Leadership

Historically schools have leaders that must adhere to a defined role. Research has shown that interpretations of the role differ, and in some schools traditional leadership roles are changing. Leaders bring different variables to schools in the form of their perceptions, interpretations, and ideas of how to fulfill or create a mission statement. Like any other set of variables, the leader's perceptions, interpretations, and ideas can have a positive or negative outcome.

A traditional leader is often looked to for direction not only by the school's faculty and students, but by parents and the community as well. With this type of hierarchical approach, an ideal school setting would be for a leader to motivate staff and help them fulfill their duties in accordance with the school's mission statement. Quality leaders should ensure this happens while allowing teachers to work with their own degree of personal style and attributes. Hacker *(2005) writes about the importance in a leader motivating others.* This article makes the point that a quality leader must be able to spot what Hacker refers to as *work place zombies*. A leader can do this though the use of conversation and observation of behaviors. If a worker has become a zombie they need to be snapped out of their zombie state by being reminded of organizational policy. This would include both the organization's mission statement and goals. The apex of hierarchical leadership would include a gentle, continuous reminding of these overarching goals while still motivating the staff to evolve.

Gibson (2005) writes that it is all too often that a schools' mission statement stands forgotten on a webpage. He adds that each leader must know the mission statement and they must also have the ability to change it when it is no longer relevant. Indeed, a leader who did not know the school's mission statement could not help other fulfill its purpose. Likewise, what good would a mission statement be if it was outdated? Comparatively, we can see that the mission statement can exists as an incarnation of empty words. This article highlights that a good leader must help the mission statement take shape and the leaders themselves must not fall prey to work place zombies. When workers fall prey to work place zombies, leaders must help facilitate proper actions based on a mission statement that can create positive change and deter negative behavior.   From this example, one can see how it is possible for a mission statement to be ineffective when it remains only as a website banner hovering in cyberspace.   When left ignored, a mission statement has no power over affecting behavior.   This leaves the responsibility to a leader for breathing life into the concept and aiding teachers to use a mission statement to fuel their identity, work, and climate in a school.

A high degree of success is demonstrated in organizations that contain leaders that lead by example (Dannenberg, 2015; Gächter, Nosenzo, Renner, & Sefton, 2012; Johnson, 2015). Leaders that successfully spotted, stopped, and suppressed work place zombies fared better than leaders that had forgot about their mission statements. The true pinnacle of leadership would be embodiment of the mission statement itself.   Kotter's book *Leading Change* states "Often the most powerful way to communicate is through behavior." He goes on to highlight that if leaders all *live* to drive their organizational culture, employees will understand it much better than reading about it in an organization's newsletter. "When employees see management acting out the vision, a whole set of troublesome questions about credibility and game playing tends to evaporate."(2012, p. 97)

The last aspect of leadership examined is the shift away from a hierarchal approach. More and more, schools are changing to groups of teacher leaders, and faculty is more responsible for fostering leadership. This leaves the principal free to help out, observe and engage in the community. Cocklin and Wilikinson (2011), *A Case Study of Leadership Transition: Continuity and Change,* examine this change in school structure. What the researchers uncovered was that many schools are nourished by this change with a positive climate and stronger tie to the community. A schools success would then be attributed to the faculty as they are teaching and taking on more leadership roles. The unified focus of a mission statement ensures that a teachers' behavior is aligned with those of their peers. The mission statement exists to clearly state goal orientated questions once reserved to be answered by a principal.

Deviation from the age old-school hierarchy ensures that one individual's personal views/opinions cannot pollute the workplace environment. In the *Rise and Fall of Management* (2009) by Pearson shares that organizations are normally dominated by management with an Anglo-Saxon background. A structure change would help foster diversity. Through diversity, school's best practices toward a mission statement are illuminated by different perspectives. When people are clearly focused, forward thinking, and working toward a common goal, the easier and better the outcome will become.

1.4 Teaching Staff

Once different leadership have been examined, the next logical place to look is at the teachers themselves. After all, it is their perceptions and interpretations that outnumber that of their leaders. Barandiaran-Galdos, Barrenetxea, Cardona-Rodriguez, Miljangos-Del-campo and Olaskoaga-Larrauri (2012) write in their article, *Attitudes of Spanish University Teaching Staff to Quality in Education,* that the teaching staff they examined in an empirical study, comply with their educational policies and use modern teaching techniques and ideas. The educational policies do include their institution's mission statement. The information gathered showed that professors believed that the mission statements did influence the climate and culture of the teachers. Modern teachers provide modern educational services within the context of a university's aging mission statement. Here, the professors are working with the mission statements in order to fulfill them, but using up-to-date ways of accomplishing the end goal. This is an example of contemporary behavior working in a way to directly embody a long established mission statement.

According to Edmiston (2011), one of the functions of the schools system in the United States is to promote and protect liberty. The best way to demonstrate liberty is by giving teachers more freedom and allowing them to break away from a hierarchal system. Riley and Baldridge (1977) wrote that you must hire an educator who can function on their own and are able to work in a changing environment. A changing environment might be a school developing a mission statement or a teacher adapting to a new mission statement after a transfer. In either example, a mission statement would ultimately be filtered by human interpretation and ones' perception to bring them to life.

In the articles previously examined by this research, importance is placed upon the competence of the teaching staff. Creating robots that spend their days mindlessly toiling at work and trying to meet each bullet point of a mission statement is not necessary. Schools function best when they have a group of people within their educational space that can function with a degree of freedom. The goal should be to foster the ability to bring a mission statement to life, not function as a beehive with a mission statement of the one queen bee. Once a schools' mission statement is established, what is asked of the leader is also required from the teaching staff.

1.5 Conclusion

It is simple to say that schools and school cultures that are unaware of their mission statement cannot fulfill them. Likewise, leaders who do not set examples that embody the mission statement will fall short of having a productive organization. Workers are not able to function within the guidelines that a mission statement creates if there is no defined goal to work toward. While a school might have a mission statement that exists, if not purposefully enacted, it becomes empty of its true purpose.

When discussing morale and how to create a climate with positive moral, Bolman and Te Deal (2008) and Block (1987) write that there must be a challenge to work towards. Block claimed that "there must be an image of greatness." He goes on to define this as: a vision and contributions that are meaningful and worthwhile. A mission statement can set the tone and spark the idea for meaningfulness to occur. Leadership must know and live the mission statements while helping others to live the same statement. In turn, workers must hold themselves and their co-workers accountable to ensure that the mission statement is something driving their daily activities and preparations.

From the literature reviewed one can see that the mission statement is like the destination address in a car's global positioning system. Both the mission statement and address are unable to do anything on their own. A mission statement needs leaders to know the destination and they must be willing and working to get others there.

It also takes effort from the faculty to create an environment where they will help everyone involved to work toward a pre-defined end point. Teacher behavior is influenced by a mission statement only when words, intentions, and actions all reflect a climate working toward the end goal of the mission statement. A mission statement left as words is rendered powerless.

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