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A Shared and Inclusive Vision and Mission

Our values drive everything we do or say and, in turn, inform our vision.

—Frattura and Capper (2007, p. 41)

There's nothing revolutionary about setting a clear vision and mission and fostering buy-in from a school community—it is basic School Leadership 101. However, what we are proposing here is an *inclusive* vision and mission, setting the groundwork for not only establishing equality for all students but *equity* as well—opportunities to help level the playing field for the not-so-common learner.

What does an inclusive vision for diverse learners look like? How do we design and carry out a mission of inclusion for all students? What do we need to do to improve learning for those who are deemed not-so-common learners? When we have approached school leaders with these and other similar questions, we have found that they held various viewpoints:

- Some administrators maintained a broad-based vision for the successful academic achievement and college readiness for all students.
- Other building leaders held that each teacher must take personal responsibility for the learning of each student, and their role as leaders in the process has been to learn more about and promote the use of differentiated instructional strategies in every class.

- A few principals have expressed their convictions for building a school culture in which teachers understand and embrace the cultural background of every child.
- One administrator in particular shared a more detailed, visionary plan that included the elimination of *separate* classes—English as a second language (ESL), literacy support services, resource room for students with disabilities (SWD)—that segregate some students in order to create a more inclusive school environment.

What these school leaders have in common are strongly held convictions that all students in their charge can become capable and productive citizens, yet they each may have a different point of view and overall plans for how these aspirations for students might be attainable.

AT A GLANCE

In this chapter, we focus on how to involve all stakeholders to achieve a set of common goals through consensus building and develop a shared vision and mission that is truly inclusive of all learners in light of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (2010). In order to embrace the high expectations as identified by the CCSS for all students, we maintain that members of the school community engage in the following:

- Understand how teaching may change *and* how it should remain the same as a result of building inclusive and culturally proficient practices in tandem with the CCSS;
- Determine measurable, achievable goals and how to accomplish them;
- Commit to core professional learning for all stakeholders; and
- Foster belief in and support for collaboration between and among all members of the school community.

Additionally, all stakeholders need to embrace that all of these undertakings will take a great deal of time, patience, and leadership from both administrators and faculty alike.

AN INCLUSIVE, COLLABORATIVELY DEVELOPED VISION AND MISSION

For decades, many educational leaders have addressed the importance of identifying a shared vision and mission—or an *organizational platform* (Daresh & Lynch, 2010)—for all learners in their school communities. The results are

often a mix of broadly stated yet fairly complex mission statements that have little buy-in or support from the faculty, staff, parents, and broader community. As a consequence, “when school goals are developed from mission statements without shared values and clear vision, then the goals and action plans will be nebulous and the mission will, again, not address the needs of all students in the school” (Frattura & Capper, 2007, p. 41).

With the idea of a collaborative vision and mission in mind, first and foremost, we advocate for an assessment of the school communities’ shared set of values. As the quote we selected at the beginning of the chapter so aptly stated, values inform our vision, and if the members of the school community do not value the same ideas, a vision and mission that truly include all students will rarely take shape.

Remaining Unbiased

Dealing with various groups of learners can be overwhelming, and coming to consensus about a vision and mission for all students can be problematic. For this reason, we must develop to the best of our ability an understanding of multicultural and multiethnic issues as well as the learning needs of struggling students. We must also never equate that students from any one particular ethnic or cultural background will automatically have learning difficulties. However, many school community members remain unaware of their own discomfort or outright biases with certain student populations such as those with extreme poverty, neglect, interrupted formal schooling, homelessness, and so on. They may also be unaware of the faulty basis in which their beliefs have been rooted.

We frequently draw from our own experiences in the field working with both teachers and administrators to illustrate our perspectives. In laying the preliminary groundwork for a vision and mission to be developed, one such instance comes to mind. During a professional development workshop, a group of veteran middle school teachers in a suburb of New York City shared with each other that they used all manner of strategies in teaching their lessons, but the lack of academic progress of their students rested on the shoulders of both students and their families. These teachers expressed the strong belief that most, if not all, of their Latino students lack motivation, and that their parents do not value education; they cited evidence of their students’ frequent absences, lack of class preparation, and incomplete homework assignments. Without a doubt, if you have teachers who truly believe that a certain segment of your student population is unwilling to or cannot learn, any vision and mission that aims particularly to include all learners will most likely fail.



Tool #1: The *Developing Core Values Checklist* in the Essential Toolkit (Appendix) will help to evaluate and reflect on possible biases that may interfere with developing an equitable vision and mission.

Inclusive Practices for All Students

A major part of developing an inclusive, shared vision and mission involves forging a school culture that genuinely values all learners and fosters integrated learning opportunities for all students to thrive. Yet sometimes, teachers as well as administrators with the best of intentions believe that placing youngsters in separate classes or programs that might better suit their needs is beneficial to them. For example, long-established self-contained special education classes or stand-alone, pull-out ESL programs are perceived as a benefit for diverse learners although they remove students from their average-to-above-average achieving, English-speaking peers.

What are the dangers of keeping these students in ongoing remediation programs? For one, it will undoubtedly prevent them having *access* to necessary preparation and learning that is provided by content-area experts—the regular classroom and core-subject teachers. The more you segregate students, the less likely it is for all learners to be exposed to or taught the same curriculum. Thus, segregation places youngsters with special needs at a further disadvantage.



Tool #2: The *CCSS for Academically and Linguistically Diverse Learners: Equity Audit* in the Essential Toolkit (Appendix) will support the examination of equitable beliefs and practices in relation to the CCSS and diverse student populations.

The Importance of School Culture

Moving beyond the sole focus of expectations specified by the Standards, we make a case for building a school culture that embraces diversity and fostering the development of a vision and mission that includes all learners. As a part of that culture, the whole school community must uphold the importance of not segregating students who are more capable of independently meeting grade-level requirements from those who need a wider variety of assistance to make the grade. In this way, all

stakeholders “understand the importance of developing a mission that can set the stage for meeting the needs of each and every learner without segregation” (Frattura & Capper, 2007, p. 42).

THE RATIONALE

Although it might come as a surprise to some, to make an even stronger case for an inclusive shared vision and mission, we look to the CCSS documents and the broader intentions expressed there. In order to further the goal of all students being college and career ready, “the Standards also lay out a vision of what it means to be a literate person in the twenty-first century” (CCSS ELA, 2010, p. 3).

It is clear that literacy is a common and essential theme that is addressed throughout the Standards. Therefore, we recommend any shared vision include that all learners need to develop literacy skills in the disciplines, and these skills are best afforded when all students have access to mainstream classes. In addition, as part of the school mission, the planning for and instruction of diverse learners in disciplinary literacy must incorporate teachers from curriculum areas of study as well as language, literacy, and special education experts working together to ensure student success.

Guiding the Way

But why do we promote a *shared* vision and mission? We strongly believe that to truly obtain stakeholder buy in, all members of the school community must have a voice in shaping its vision and mission, particularly when diverse learners are at stake. Moreover, the role of school leaders is to guide the way to provide clarity and support as well as promote balance and commitment (Fullan, 2007). Most crucial is to maintain an active and ongoing collaboration among school leadership, faculty, staff, students, and the greater community so that the school’s mission—the plan of action to carry out its overall vision—can be regularly reviewed and revised when necessary (Frattura & Capper, 2007).

Supporting Individual Learners

In light of the rigor that the Common Core contributes to instruction, all members of the school community must not lose sight that “it is the purpose of schools to bring all students to their full potential and to a level of education that was once reserved for the very few” (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 61). It is without question that all stakeholders have a vested interest in

providing instruction that meets the needs of individual learners, and any shared vision or mission to instruct diverse learners either stated or otherwise assures “curriculum, instruction, and assessment techniques that acknowledge their individual differences while supporting their need to belong” (Frattura & Capper, 2007, p. 44). The idea of tailoring instruction to meet the needs of individual learners is further supported by the CCSS for English language arts that states

The Standards do not mandate such things as a particular writing process or the full range of metacognitive strategies that students may need to monitor and direct their thinking and learning. Teachers are thus free to provide students with whatever tools and knowledge their professional judgment and experience identify as most helpful for meeting the goals set out in the Standards. (p. 7)

In other words, we must be diligent in forming a vision and mission for the not-so-common learner that recognizes both the intentions and limitations of the Standards in that they identify expectations for what students should know and do but “not how teachers should teach” (p. 4).

THE EVIDENCE

Researchers have identified the importance of a clear vision and mission that are the basis for specific goals, expectations, and plans for how to bring about school improvement (Bolman & Deal, 2003; Cotton, 2000; Levine & Lezotte, 1990). DuFour and Eaker (1998) investigated the value of a shared vision and noted “the lack of a compelling vision for public schools continues to be a major obstacle in any effort to improve schools” (p. 64). More specifically, the clarity and direction provided by a collaborative vision and mission are the basic building blocks for school reform.

A Collaboratively Developed Vision

In an investigation by the Southern Regional Education Board (2010) as to the building leaders’ role in turning around failing high schools, the findings revealed that it is vital for building leaders together with faculty to develop a vision that focuses students for career goals in the 21st century. With a clear vision, solutions can be developed that are “tailored to the unique needs of their own students and communities” (p. iii). It is apparent from this report that without a set vision, a mission that defines plans for school improvement cannot be put into place. Furthermore, the

results clearly emphasized the strong need for administrators and teachers to jointly create a vision that encompasses the fundamental concerns of students in the school community.

Beliefs That Shape Our Practices

In setting a vision, people's thoughts often translate into desired action. As a basis for this idea, Carol Dweck, a renowned researcher in the field of motivation, revealed that an individual's views concerning his or her own intelligence and abilities actually could influence what they accomplish. Dweck (2006) identified that if people believe their intelligence and talents are set in stone, they might be led to more limited paths of action. However, if people have a growth mindset—a belief that their talents can be cultivated—they most likely will achieve greater success. In other words, who we think we are most likely shapes what we do. Translated to classroom practices, Routman (2012) described how “teachers’ awareness of how their beliefs drive their practices is absolutely crucial for highly effective teaching” (p. 58), and she further cautioned that in the absence of a meaningful belief system as well as instructional practices that support those very beliefs “there can be no consistent academic rigor” (p. 58). Therefore, the belief system behind a collective vision most often will be the driver of the end result.

The Future of Teaching

At the 2012 Labor Management Collaboration Conference, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan along with other national leaders in education signed in a shared vision for the future of the teaching profession (*Transforming the Teaching Profession*, 2012). Among the seven elements determined to reconstruct teaching, fostering a culture of shared responsibility and leadership was identified. This component of the shared vision outlined how administrators and faculty must take joint ownership of student learning and participate in shared decision making that “provide educators with the collaborative autonomy to do what is best for each student” (para. 7).

A Foundation for Transforming Schools

In their work with building a foundation for professional learning communities, DuFour and Eaker (1998) outlined the importance of vision and mission through the description of four basic questions:

- **Mission**—*Why are we doing this?* This question calls for stakeholders to investigate the main purpose of the organization.

- Vision—*What might we become?* A school’s vision offers direction for endeavors of improvement, setting its sights on “a realistic, credible, attractive future for the organization” (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 62).
- Values—*How must we act for our shared vision to become evident?* What a school community values is critical to the achievement of any enterprise. For this reason, stakeholders must reach consensus on a shared philosophy and values that will be promoted and nurtured by the community.
- Goals—*What steps must be taken, and in what order must they be achieved?* The creation of an organizational plan will help stakeholders prioritize and identify the steps that need to be accomplished.

Fullan (1993) summarized the building of a shared vision as part of a skill set to influence change. He borrowed from Senge (1990) to describe collective vision as “a deepening, reinforcing process of increasing clarity, enthusiasm, communication, and commitment” (p. 277). From the research and literature on the subject, one could easily conclude that a shared vision and mission are the foundation for any lasting school reform.

PROMISING PRACTICES

A Vision for Common Core Instruction in a New York City Middle School

As leaders of a middle school in New York City, the principal, Dr. Reginald Landeau Jr., and assistant principal, Dr. Daphne VanDorn, held to the same idea expressed by a well-known quote from John Kotter (1996): “Leaders establish the vision for the future and set the strategy for getting there; they cause change. They motivate and inspire others to go in the right direction and they, along with everyone else, sacrifice to get there” (p. 25). Sparked by this idea, both of them knew they needed to involve key staff to implement strategies and instruction to meet the Common Core Standards schoolwide. Together they created a Common Core Instructional Team consisting of the school administrators, literacy and mathematics coaches, and one teacher from each of the four core content areas.

The preliminary purpose of the team was to develop an institutional tipping point where change in pedagogical practice mirrored the established Citywide Instructional Expectations and could be achieved by all stakeholders in their school. Primarily starting with English language arts and mathematics, both Dr. Landeau and Dr. VanDorn programmed those

departments to have grade-level instructional team planning periods during the normal school day. During this time, teachers and instructional coaches could meet with a shared goal of designing and planning Common Core units of study.

Over the first year of the implementation, the anxiety during the planning meetings was palpable, but this was not new ground for these two administrators. They started with becoming knowledgeable about the Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS) as an instructional cabinet. As they *unpacked* the CCLS, they focused at first on the similarities and differences between the CCLS and the New York City as well as the New York State Learning Standards. Comparing and contrasting the different sets of standards enabled them to obtain a deeper understanding of the necessary work ahead of them.

Next, they decided that the Common Core Instructional Team members turnkey professional development to individual departments. Fostering transparency with all stakeholders, the team believed that before they were able to create or develop these units of study and learning tasks, everyone involved had to be aware of the nuances and demands of the CCLS. For this reason, they also partnered with Pearson Literature, who was releasing its first edition of its *Prentice Hall Literature: Common Core Edition* (2012) textbook. Having a textbook gave the team materials and a guide for their units and lesson plans.

Each week, they worked on tasks, lessons, and units of study or, as the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) called them, *task bundles*. As an instructional team, they decided to create their own units, modeling them after the NYCDOE's task bundles. Select classes and teachers were recruited to pilot a protocol for looking at student work, revising lessons and tasks, and identifying anchor papers to include in the unit of study bundle. This process of creation, implementation, and revision continued until June. Led by Common Core Instructional Team members, the teams were able to infuse Common Core aligned tasks into every lesson, thereby developing a Common Core aligned curriculum calendar for the 2012–2013 school year, exceeding New York City mandates. As a result of their work, they were one of only thirty-seven schools designated as a New York City Common Core Lab school.

Their work as a Common Core Lab school propelled them to the forefront of Common Core instruction in New York City. The 2012–2013 New York City Citywide Instructional Expectations set the groundwork for all schools to have at least two Common Core aligned units of study in each of the four major content areas: English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. With the firm foundation school leaders

provided the staff the previous year, they were able to far surpass the expectations set forth by New York City. Increasing the time for teacher teaming, improving their professional development, and designating funds for Common Core planning time after school elevated the unit production by teachers. As building leaders, with the help of dedicated staff, they have manifested a reachable and obtainable Common Core instructional vision for all.

Once the sustained effort was made to embrace the Common Core, the outcomes were tremendous. Their school was transformed from the bottom ranked middle school in the district to the highest rated within one year. On New York City's Progress Report rating system, they received the only A-rating in the district, while improving 14 points to the top 14% of New York City schools including examination-entry and charter schools. Thus, it is evident that thoughtful and systematic Common Core implementation and instruction can have substantial benefits in the schools that embrace the concept.

Field Elementary Restructuring Plan—Strategic Staffing

Connie Bouwman, deputy superintendent of Littleton Public Schools in Colorado, shared with us how careful examination of current research guided the decision-making process in creating a shared vision and mission for one of their schools: Field Elementary, a school consisting of students with a high rate of poverty (85%) as well as many English language learners from a variety of backgrounds—including a large Hispanic population—with many students having limited success academically.

Building on the idea of transformational leadership to develop a school culture of high expectations and ownership of student outcomes, high-capacity, collaborative teacher teams were proposed to adjust instruction using assessment data on student progress. In addition, core academics were prioritized and time for individualized interventions for struggling students was identified. To support an effective turnaround strategy, necessary resources and central support were put into place. The overall plan for Field Elementary School also included a series of benchmarks to evaluate the plan's progress on a quarterly basis including specific benchmarks for teachers and the leadership team among others.

In an effort to ensure access to the Common Core for all students, a comprehensive plan was developed, which included the following:

- An additional 53 minutes of instructional time as well as a 75-minute planning time for each teacher added to each day
- A 45-minute grade-level common scheduled intervention time

- The creation of three lab classrooms, each shared by a .5 teacher with a specialty in either literacy or mathematics; these teachers to serve as instructional coaches in their area of specialty for the other half of the day

Coaching was identified as an integral part of onsite, sustained professional learning. The intention of coaching was deemed to focus on the implementation of the Common Core and the 21st Century Skills as outlined in the Colorado Academic Standards.

To further the academic progress of all students, a new leadership team was developed, and positions for an assistant principal as well as a full-time psychologist were added. Other program changes included the ELL and special education teachers adopting coteaching models of instruction for their respective students. The cost of this change in staffing was accommodated within the existing weighted staffing formula in combination with Title I funds. The district was able to shift some additional Title I dollars and general funds to accommodate the staffing plans for Field Elementary School.

THE LOOK FORS

Consider the following essential elements for creating a shared and inclusive vision and mission for schools based on current research and best practices:

- A strong commitment by all stakeholders to an inclusive culture of learning
- Deep-rooted trust and sincere respect among school leaders, faculty, staff, students, and parents
- A democratic style of leadership that fosters teacher autonomy and shared decision making
- Models of instruction that enable mainstream classes to support the learning of all students
- Administrators, faculty, and staff that appreciate the importance of collaboration and engage in the sharing of their knowledge and expertise
- Assessment and progress reporting that reflect the whole child

SOMETHING TO REMEMBER

A school vision and mission needs to be championed, nurtured, and guided—having clear oversight for setting collective beliefs into action. To the point, school leaders—burdened, overloaded, and oftentimes isolated

by the demands of complex educational change—need not go it alone. Creating a shared sense of responsibility (Staehr Fenner, 2013a) and cultivating a school culture that fosters teacher leadership are ways to promote and perpetuate an established vision and mission that is truly inclusive of all learners.

KEY RESOURCES

- DuFour, R., & Eaker, R. (1998). *Professional learning communities at work: Best practices for enhancing student achievement*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.
- Frattura, E. M., & Capper, C. A. (2007). *Leading for social justice: Transforming schools for all learners*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Linton, C. (2011). *Equity 101: The equity framework*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Staehr Fenner, D. (2013). *Advocating for English learners: A guide for educators*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Center for School Change

<http://centerforschoolchange.org/publications/minnesota-charter-school-handbook/vision-and-mission/>

This site offers steps for creating a shared vision and mission.

Vision of Learning: A Common Core Standards Adoption Plan

<http://www.d123.org/newsletter/documents/D123CurriculumPlan.pdf>

This website contains an example of an organizational plan for Common Core implementation.