Using School Mission Statements for Reflection and Research

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Abstract

Purpose: Efforts to compare schools nationally tend to focus on educational outcomes (e.g., test scores), yet such an approach assumes that schools are homogeneous with regard to their overall purpose. In fact, few studies have attempted to systematically compare schools with regard to their primary aims or mission. The present study attempts to fill this gap by exploring the utility of school mission statements as a data source for comparing and systematically reflecting on the core purposes of schools nationwide. **Research Design:** A mixed-methods research design was implemented. In Study 1, true random samples of 50 high schools were selected from each of 10 geographically and politically diverse states, yielding a total of 421 mission statements that were ultimately coded and quantitatively compared. In Study 2, structured interviews were conducted with principals from diverse high schools to evaluate their perspectives on the usefulness of school mission statements. **Findings:** Results indicate that mission statements can be reliably coded quantitatively and that schools vary systematically and sensibly with regard to both the number and types of themes incorporated into their mission statements. Furthermore, consistent with prior research, the qualitative results showed that principals generally regard mission statements as

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an important tool for shaping practice and communicating core values. **Conclusions:** School mission statements are a valuable source of data that can be quantified for educational researchers and administrators interested in reflecting on school purpose, comparing schools with regard to their core mission, and monitoring changes in school purpose over time.

Keywords

mission statement, vision, organizational learning, school purpose, content analysis

One of the most fundamental questions in the field of educational research relates to the underlying purpose of schooling. Yet, as Pekarsky (2007) has pointed out, "thoughtful, systematic attention to larger questions of purpose is rarely at the heart of American social and educational discourse" (p. 424). Theoretically speaking, the answer to the question of school purpose should influence, in a predictable way, how resources are allocated, which programs are implemented, and a host of policy decisions made by the educational community and policy makers. Indeed, Wagner and Benavente-McEnery (2006) have suggested that "an inability to achieve minimal agreement between thinkers and power-brokers on matters of educational purpose leads to a conceptual chaos when deciding on matters of pedagogical style, tactics, methodologies, featured studies, and so on" (p. 7). Strike (1991) too has noted that such disagreements often result in "public schools that have a thin and educationally incoherent culture" (p. 473).

Philosophers, scientists, politicians, government organizations, private corporations, and the general public all have perspectives on the purposes of formal schooling that have been examined and documented across various fields of literature. Curiously, however, there is little existing empirical work examining the perspective of the school, as an organization, or its educational administrators on this important issue. One possible reason for this omission is the lack of a clearly accepted methodological approach for ascertaining the school perspective. In the current article, we review both historical and contemporary perspectives held by various stakeholders and interest groups on the purpose of school in the United States. We then present the results of a mixed-methods study designed to examine the efficacy of using school mission statements as a source of empirical data for investigating school purpose and as a reflective tool for enhancing vision-guided education and practice.[1]

Background

The theoretical framework guiding this study is drawn from the program evaluation literature (Fitzpatrick, Sanders, & Worthen, 2010; Madaus, Scriven, & Stufflebeam, 1996). Specifically, the current article is guided by the objectives-based approach to program evaluation (Tyler, 1990). The Tyler model stresses the importance of alignment among program objectives (e.g., school mission), implementation (e.g., curriculum and instruction), and assessment. Although there has been some discussion in the education literature about the alignment between instructional objectives and high-stakes assessments (Martone & Sireci, 2009; Roach, Niebling, & Kurz, 2008), there has been far less discussion about the overarching objectives of public schooling and the alignment of these objectives with instruction and assessments. Indeed, one of the potential weaknesses of the objectives-based approach to program evaluation is that the program objectives are often taken for granted and go unchallenged. This article provides an empirical challenge to the assumptions made by policy makers about the purposes of schooling in the United States.

The purposes of schooling have likely been debated since the inception of formal schooling. From ancient times, a vast array of philosophers have both studied and shaped education. Philosophers as diverse as Aristotle, Emerson, Plato, Mo Tzu, Locke, and Confucius wrote extensively on the purpose and role of education and schooling in their respective cultures (Johnson & Reed, 2007; Noddings, 2006). More recently, educational philosophers such as Dewey, Counts, and Adler have put forth systematic and detailed arguments regarding the purposes of schooling in a modern society. For example, John Dewey (1938) argued that the primary purpose of education and schooling is not so much to *prepare* students to live a useful life but to teach them how to live pragmatically and *immediately* in the context of their current environment. By contrast, George Counts (1978), a leading progressive educator in the 1930s, critiqued Dewey's philosophy, stating, "The weakness of progressive education thus lies in the fact that it has elaborated no theory of social welfare, unless it be that of anarchy or extreme individualism" (p. 5). Indeed, Counts emphasized that the primary purpose of school is preparation for social integration and social reconstruction (Schiro, 1978). Shortly thereafter, Mortimore Adler (1982), a notable philosopher and educator put forth the Paideia proposal, which specified a somewhat integrated approach of Dewey and Counts, outlining three objectives of children's schooling: (a) the development of citizenship, (b) personal growth or self-improvement, and (c) occupational preparation.

In contrast to these perspectives, Labaree (1997) has argued that rather than serving idealistic philosophical functions, schools more pragmatically fill a credentialing function in American society. In addition, deMarrais and LeCompte (1995) noted that issues of school purpose are also intimately related to specific theoretical frameworks, such as functionalism, which sees school purpose as consisting of intellectual purposes (e.g., development of reading and mathematics skills), political purposes (e.g., assimilation of immigrants), economic purposes (e.g., job preparation), and social purposes (e.g., promote social and moral responsibility). Echoing these sentiments, Tyack (1988) has argued that from a historical perspective, the purpose of schooling has been specifically tied to social and economic needs. Goodlad (1979) too has noted that schools have historically served many functions, including intellectual development, vocational training, enculturation, ethical development, and the promotion of emotional well-being.

In addition to the historic roles outlined by educational philosophers, current educational practices are a more direct function of the community and government organizations, which underwrite and typically manage education. Because the U.S. Constitution makes no mention of the purpose or function of schools, the responsibility for schooling and formal education is a matter that is delegated to the discretion of each state. State constitutions vary in the degree to which they explicate the purposes of schooling, but perhaps the most comprehensive view is put forth by the Massachusetts constitution. Representing the very first state constitution, author John Adams speaks pointedly and directly to the purpose of schooling in postcolonial Massachusetts:

> Wisdom, and knowledge, as well as virtue, diffused generally among the body of the people, being necessary for the preservation of their rights and liberties; and as these depend on spreading the opportunities and advantages of education in the various parts of the country, and among the different orders of the people, it shall be the duty of legislatures and magistrates, in all future periods of this commonwealth, to cherish the interests of literature and the sciences, and all seminaries of them; especially the university at Cambridge, public schools and grammar schools in the towns; to encourage private societies and public institutions, rewards and immunities, for the promotion of agriculture, arts, sciences, commerce, trades, manufactures, and a natural history of the country; to countenance and inculcate the principles of humanity and general benevolence, public and private charity, industry and frugality, honesty and punctuality in their dealings; sincerity, good humor, and all social affections, and generous sentiments among the people. (Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 2010)

Thus, as early as 1780, the Massachusetts constitution formally established a broad, multifaceted scope for education. A more modern example, the state constitution of Florida, articulates both common and unique elements related to the purpose of school compared to Massachusetts. Specifically, the Florida constitution, rewritten in 2006, clearly illustrates Florida's concern with providing a safe environment for its children and an emphasis on early childhood education. In addition, the constitution emphasizes the importance of children's cognitive, social, and emotional development:

> The education of children is a fundamental value of the people of the State of Florida. It is, therefore, a paramount duty of the state to make adequate provision for the education of all children residing within its borders. Adequate provision shall be made by law for a uniform, efficient, safe, secure, and high quality system of free public schools that allows students to obtain a high quality education and for the establishment, maintenance, and operation of institutions of higher learning and other public education programs that the needs of the people may require. . . . (b) Every four-year old child in Florida shall be provided by the State a high quality pre-kindergarten learning opportunity in the form of an early childhood development and education program which shall be voluntary, high quality, free, and delivered according to professionally accepted standards. An early childhood development and education program means an organized program designed to address and enhance each child's ability to make age appropriate progress in an appropriate range of settings in the development of language and cognitive capabilities and emotional, social, regulatory and moral capacities through education in basic skills and such other skills as the Legislature may determine to be appropriate. (Florida Legislature, 2010)

Another government source of opinion on the purposes of American schooling has come from the judicial branch. Specifically, the late 1980s saw a series of landmark legal cases to help to redefine the purposes and responsibilities of U.S. schools. In 1989 (*Rose v. Council for Better Education*, 1989), the Kentucky State Supreme Court ordered the General Assembly to provide funding "sufficient to provide each child in Kentucky an adequate education" and to reform the property tax system. In defining an adequate education, the court enumerated seven learning goals that have been widely cited as precedent and have since been adopted by numerous other states (e.g., *McDuffy v. Secretary*, 1993). The seven distinct components of education include the development of (a) sufficient oral and written communication skills to enable

a student to function in a complex and readily changing civilization; (b) sufficient knowledge of economic, social, and political systems to enable students to make informed choices; (c) sufficient understanding of government processes to enable the student to understand the issues that affect his or her community, state, and nation; (d) sufficient self-knowledge and knowledge of his or her mental and physical wellness; (e) sufficient grounding in the arts to enable each student to appreciate his or her cultural and historical heritage; (f) sufficient training or preparation for advanced training in either academic or vocational fields so as to enable each child to choose and pursue life work intelligently; and (g) sufficient level of academic or vocational skills to enable public school students to compete favorably with their counterparts in surrounding states, in academics or in the job market.

In recognizing the many goals of public education, statements such as those from the Kentucky precedent dictate that public schooling should not simply be an academic or cognitive experience for the students. Specifically, the Kentucky and Massachusetts documents demonstrate an equal emphasis on a variety of student outcomes including cognitive, civic, emotional, and vocational development. However, since the 1990s there has been growing public and political interest in international educational comparative studies that focus exclusively on cognitive achievement (e.g., Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study [Martin et al., 2008; Mullis et al., 2008], Progress in International Reading Literacy Study [Mullis, Martin, Kennedy, & Foy, 2007], Programme for International Student Assessment). Indeed, the recent trend of many states and the federal government, via the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and the Race to the Top (U.S. Department of Education, 2009) initiative, has been to reform existing educational models so that cognitive assessments (i.e., student tests) are now often synonymous with school quality. Despite the growing federal influence in American education over the past 30 years, which has largely emphasized only cognitive development and vocational preparation (e.g., Goals 2000: Educate America Act, 1994; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; NCLB, 2002; U.S. Department of Education, 2009), court rulings to date have largely maintained individual states' rights to self-determine the goals of their public educational systems.

As this brief summary of philosophical and political perspectives illustrates, there has been substantial thought and debate about the purposes of schooling in American culture. However, the amount of systematic empirical research examining broader questions of school purpose is strikingly limited, particularly when compared to other domains of study in the field of educational research (e.g., pedagogical techniques, educational technology). Document analysis of school curricula represents one such empirical approach that has

been employed to help improve our understanding of school purpose. For example, Tanner and Tanner (1990) used document analysis of historic textbooks and teacher lesson plans to conclude that in 1830s America the inculcation of morality and character development dominated over academic subject matter. However, they found that by the 1880s the primary emphasis in curricular documents had shifted toward cognitive development. The prime objective of education in that era was to prepare the next generation of thinkers while serving to "weed out those unable to profit from a curriculum aimed at developing intellectual power" (Tanner & Tanner, 1990, p. 106).

In addition to document analyses, perspectives on school purpose have also been quantitatively and qualitatively studied through the use of surveys and interviews. For example, a survey of California residents (Immerwahl, 2000) showed that the majority of respondents believed the purpose of higher education was multifaceted. Specifically, the poll showed that the California public perceived the purpose of postsecondary education was to develop a sense of maturity and an ability to manage independently (71%), develop skills to get along with people different from oneself (68%), develop problem-solving and thinking abilities (63%), develop specific expertise and knowledge in a chosen career (60%), develop writing and speaking ability (57%), and develop a sense of responsible citizenship (44%).

Increasingly, corporate America has also been looked on to help determine the direction and purpose of schooling in this country through surveys and other queries. In a recent survey study on the purpose of school, the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development (2005) asked more than 400 New Jersey employers to express their views on the purpose of higher education and to evaluate how well the state's colleges and universities were preparing students across 16 skill areas. The results revealed that employers cited teamwork (46% of respondents), social skills and critical thinking (32%, respectively), and integrity and honesty (30%) as the most important qualities they expected educated students to possess.

In summary, a great number of perspectives contribute to and influence the continuous debate on the purpose of schooling in modern America. However, despite the numerous examples of theoretical and philosophical commentary, as well as research representing views on the purpose of school from parents, citizens, philosophers, politicians, researchers, historians, and corporate leaders, we found surprisingly little empirical research considering the perspective of the schools themselves. The perspective of the schools themselves is important because schools are not simply passive recipients of declarations by external organizations but possess a long history of self-determination of their own purposes via the tradition of in loco parentis, local control of schools. Indeed,

Pekarsky (2007) urges schools to engage in vision-guided educational practice, whereby the educational vision of a school is collaboratively determined by key stakeholders and then made explicit, often in the form of a mission statement.

Using Mission Statements in Empirical Research

In exploring school mission statements, which are articulated by the schools themselves for public display, it is useful to keep in mind the pioneering work by Bernstein (1971) in the domain of communication. According to Bernstein, the language codes that individuals and organizations use come to symbolize their social identity. Furthermore, there are two different types of linguistic codes to consider. The first type of code is a restricted code, which is shorter, is condensed, is primarily intended for "inside" audiences, and assumes some degree of background knowledge and prior information on the part of the reader. The second type of code is an elaborated code, which is much more explicit, is formal, and assumes no prior background knowledge. It is likely that different mission statements invoke different linguistic codes.

The present authors have explored the efficacy and value of using school mission statements as a source of empirical research data across a variety of studies (Bebell & Stemler, 2002, 2004; Stemler, 1998; Stemler & Bebell, 1999). Based on this work, we argue that school mission statements represent a useful source of data for gaining access to the school perspective on matters of purpose for at least four reasons. First, nearly all major school accrediting bodies require a mission statement from schools seeking accreditation (AdvanceED, 2010). Indeed, the very first standard articulated by the nation's largest secondary school accreditation body requires that

> the school establishes and communicates a shared purpose and direction for improving the performance of students and the effectiveness of the school. In fulfillment of the standard, the school: (i) establishes a vision for the school in collaboration with its key stakeholders, (ii) communicates the vision and purpose to build stakeholder understanding and support, (iii) identifies goals to advance the vision, (iv) ensures that the school's vision and purpose guide the learning process, and (v) reviews its vision and purpose systematically and revises them when appropriate. (AdvanceED, 2010, p. 1)

As recognized by most accrediting boards (as well as many business, civic, and private organizations in America), mission statements represent an important summation or distillation of an organization's core goals represented by

concise and simple statements that communicate broad themes. Furthermore, school mission statements are one of the only written documents outlining purpose that nearly all schools have. As nearly all American schools have one, the mission statement provides a common measure allowing for systematic comparison across diverse institutions.

Second, school mission statements tend to be publicly available and easily accessible, making them well suited for study, particularly in the age of online data collection.

Third, research has demonstrated that mission statements can be systematically and reliably coded by applying content analysis techniques (Bebell & Stemler, 2004; Berleur & Harvanek, 1997; Stemler & Bebell, 1999; Stober, 1997). In 1999, Stemler and Bebell introduced a coding rubric for school mission statements, using emergent analytic coding, that allowed mission statements to be classified into 10 major thematic categories (e.g., social development, cognitive development, emotional development, civic development, physical development) as well as 33 specific subcategories. Across a series of studies, these authors found their rating system exhibited median consensus estimates of interrater reliability ranging from .77 to .80 (Bebell & Stemler, 2004; Stemler & Bebell, 1999). Thus, a given school mission statement can be dichotomously coded on independent traits, which then allows for quantitative or statistical analyses of these traits across samples of schools.

Last, a wide range of school effectiveness research has consistently shown that commitment to a shared mission statement is one of the leading factors differentiating more effective schools from less effective schools (Claus & Chamaine, 1985; Druian & Butler, 1987; Perkins, 1992; Renchler, 1991; Renihan, Renihan, & Waldron, 1986; Rutter & Maughan, 2002; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). Researchers suggest that the school mission can serve to represent the core philosophy and working ethos of a school and that a shared mission may be a necessary prerequisite for an effective and highly functioning school. Although we would not argue that the mission is the only indicator of a school's cultural values, we do argue that it provides a straightforward and accessible indicator.

Despite the prominent role that mission statements often play in education, educational researchers have generally ignored mission statements as a source of empirical research data. We have generally encountered two criticisms voiced regarding the use of mission statements for research purposes. The first criticism generally assumes that school mission statements actually say nothing at all of any value, either because they are filled with vacuous platitudes or because they end up being catch-all statements that attempt to be all things to all people. The second critique has centered around the lack of data on how

closely the school mission statement correlates with the actual day-to-day functioning of a school. In an effort to empirically evaluate the validity of these two criticisms and potential limitations, we developed and conducted two research studies presented below. The first study examines the extent to which schools vary in their mission statement content (Study 1). The second study examines school principals' perspectives on the relationship between their mission statement and the practices at their school (Study 2).

Study 1: Quantitative Study of School Mission Statements

Purpose

The purpose of Study 1 was to systematically content analyze a sample of high school mission statements to better gain a perspective on the purpose of schooling as represented and defined by the educational institutions themselves. The investigation was guided by the following specific research questions:

1. How much variability is there in the number and types of themes articulated across school mission statements? In a sample of public high school mission statements from 10 distinct states, is there agreement on the primary purposes of school?
2. Do high school mission statements systematically differ in their content depending on (a) contextual variables such as the geographic location of the school, (b) input variables such as the urbanicity of the school, or (c) output variables such as the school's NCLB classification?

In light of the long history of local control in American education, it could be reasonably assumed that U.S. high schools have diverse mission content customized to their specific student populations and community needs. Conversely, recent reforms of state and federal educational policies (including NCLB in 2001) may have served to increase the homogeneity and standardization of school mission statements.

In addition to the mission statements, demographic information was collected across the sample of high schools to explore the relationship between the mission content and a range of school demographic characteristics. In this study, the null hypothesis states that there are no significant differences in either the number of themes or the types of themes present in school mission statements depending on their geographic location, urbanicity, percentage of minority enrollment, percentage of students eligible for free lunch, and NCLB status.

Method

Sample. Because one of the aims of this study was to determine the degree of diversity within school mission statements across the country, a purposive sample of 10 states was selected to provide a cross-section of geographical, political, and demographic diversity. One criterion for determining geographical diversity was an examination of which states were under the purview of each of the 10 U.S. Department of Education's regional educational laboratories. The 10 states ultimately composing the sample include (a) Alabama, (b) California, (c) Colorado, (d) Florida, (e) Iowa, (f) Michigan, (g) New York, (h) North Carolina, (i) Texas, and (j) Washington. From each of the 10 states, a random sample of 50 public high schools was selected.

Procedures. Although the states selected were not intended to be statistically representative of the country as a whole, it was important that the schools selected *within* each state be a truly representative sample of schools in that particular state. To obtain a truly random sampling of schools within each state, we identified a complete online list of public secondary schools in each state and used a random-number generator to select schools from each list. Although our initial inclination was to use the U.S. Department of Education's Common Core of Data (CCD) to construct the sampling frame, at the time the study was conducted, the CCD website did not allow for the generation of statewide lists of schools that were capable of filtering out public versus private schools and schools at different levels on the K-12 spectrum. Thus, the directories of public high schools were obtained using two websites (http://publicschoolreview .com and http://www.en.wikipedia.org). For each state, a random sample of 50 schools was created using a web-based random sampler (http://www .randomizer.org). The selection criteria for inclusion in the current study required that each state had at least 70% of the selected school mission statements available for analysis.

Between April 2006 and September 2006, the research team acquired mission statements from the sample by first going to the school's website where typically mission statements are posted. If a mission statement was not found on the school website, a research team member called the school and the mission statement was provided via fax, email, or phone. In cases where a school was unable to be reached, the central district office was called. From the original random sample of 500 schools, mission statements were obtained from 421 schools (84%). Table 1 summarizes the Study 1 sample across the 10 participating states.

The results in Table 1 also show the demographic characteristics of schools in the sample. Urbanicity information was obtained for a total of 416 of the 421 schools with mission statements (99%). It should be noted the CCD

Table 1. Demographic Data for Schools Sampled in Study 1

State	Sample information				Urbanicity				AYP 2005-2006 status		
	n of schools sampled	n of missions obtained	% of missions obtained	Valid n with mission and urban data	% City	% Suburban	% Town	% Rural	Valid n with mission and NCLB data	% Passing	% Failing
1. Alabama	50	45	90	44	11	21	11	57	39	74	26
2. California	50	36	72	35	26	29	11	34	35	77	23
3. Colorado	50	42	84	41	22	10	22	46	41	66	34
4. Florida	50	43	86	43	33	35	2	30	42	50	50
5. Iowa	50	49	98	49	10	4	20	65	49	88	12
6. Michigan	50	38	76	38	13	32	16	40	34	79	21
7. New York	50	43	86	43	5	40	14	42	43	86	14
8. North Carolina	50	44	88	42	24	7	14	55	41	56	44
9. Texas	50	44	88	44	36	21	25	18	43	72	28
10. Washington	50	37	74	37	22	32	8	38	37	70	30
Total	500	421	84	416	20	22	15	43	404	72	28

Note: AYP = Adequate Yearly Progress; NCLB = No Child Left Behind.

recently changed its system of classifying schools by urbanicity so that each school in the sample was categorized as falling into one of four major categories: (a) large city, (b) suburb, (c) town, or (d) rural. The demographic results show that Iowa schools had the highest proportion of rural schools in the sample (65%). By contrast, Texas had the largest proportion of schools randomly selected from urban locations (36%). Across all states, 20% were drawn from urban areas, 22% from suburban areas, 15% from towns, and 43% from rural areas.

Information on each school's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) status for the 2005-2006 school year provides some approximation of each school's level of academic success and was obtained directly from each state department of education's website. Although controversial and with many shortcomings, schools' AYP status provided a simple and common measure for analyses that was obtained for a total of 390 out of the 421 schools with mission statements (93%). The results in Table 1 show that a total of 28% of schools across the sample failed to make AYP whereas 72% of schools achieved either provisional or satisfactory levels of AYP. State-by-state results show the range in the percentage of schools making AYP varied dramatically across states. For example, 88% of Iowa high schools in the sample successfully achieved AYP whereas only 50% of Florida schools in the sample made AYP. Additional demographic information was obtained from http://www.greatschools.net, including the percentage of minority student enrollment and the percentage of students eligible for a free or reduced-price lunch.

Instrumentation. The coding rubric used in this study was developed by Stemler and Bebell (1999) using the technique of emergent coding (Haney, Russell, Gulek, & Fierros, 1998; Holsti, 1969; Stemler, 2001; Weber, 1990). Specifically, in that study, 60 school mission statements, drawn from elementary schools, middle schools, high schools, and colleges, were randomly selected and reviewed independently by two researchers who then extracted the dominant themes that emerged from the sample of statements. The researchers then met and reached consensus as to the major themes that emerged across all statements. From these themes, the explicit coding rubric was developed. The researchers then used the newly developed rubric to independently code a new sample of mission statements and proceeded to quantify interrater reliability. The next step was to provide the rubric to a new set of independent raters with no prior relationship to the project who were given example mission statements and coding instructions and then asked to independently rate the themes found in a new sample of mission statements. These raters were found to reach acceptably high levels of interrater agreement (i.e., $\kappa > .70$).

The mission statements analyzed in the current study were coded according to a slightly modified version of the rubric described by Stemler and Bebell (1999). Specifically, the final category of "faculty/staff" from the original rubric was revised to form two categories corresponding to "providing safe and nurturing environment" and "provide a challenging environment." The scoring rubric used in this study allowed for mission statements to be classified according to 11 broad themes. These themes include (a) foster cognitive development, (b) foster social development, (c) foster emotional development, (d) foster civic development, (e) foster physical development, (f) foster vocational preparation, (g) integrate into local community, (h) integrate into global community, (i) integrate into spiritual community, (j) provide safe and nurturing environment, and (k) provide challenging environment (see the appendix for a full copy of the scoring rubric). An example of how the scoring rubric is applied is shown in Figure 1.

Using this scoring rubric, each mission statement has 11 possible coding categories. To establish the interrater reliability of the scoring procedures in the current study, both percentage agreement and Cohen's kappa statistics were calculated across two independent raters for 10% of the total sample (44 mission statements). For example, if Rater 1 felt that Mission Statement 1 included the categories A, B, and C from the rubric and Rater 2 felt that the same mission included categories A, C, E, F, and G, then their percentage agreement would be 64% because they agreed that A and C were present and that D, H, I, J, and K were absent (i.e., they agreed on 7 out of 11 categories). The two raters disagreed on B, E, F, and G. The Cohen's kappa statistic, which corrects for chance agreement, would be .27. In the current study, percentage agreement and Cohen's kappa were calculated separately for each mission statement. Percentage agreement ranged from 55% to 100% across a sample of 44 statements, with a median of 91% and a median kappa value of .70. Because the interrater consensus agreement ratings were adequately high, the remaining mission statements were subsequently divided and each mission statement was coded by one of the two researchers.

Results

Variability in the content of school mission statements. Figure 2 shows the extent to which there was variability in the number of themes present in school mission statements. The distribution of the number of themes listed in mission statements across schools followed a normal distribution ($N = 421$, $M = 3.4$, $SD = 1.9$), with a range from 0 to 9 themes included in any given mission statement.

EXAMPLE A
Example of broadly conceived school mission statement

Curtis Senior High School, WA

Each person affiliated with our school is a valued, needed member of the Curtis Viking community. Every Viking is responsible for promoting positive learning opportunities in a caring, equitable manner. This environment will enable all to develop fully their academic[1], emotional[2], social[3], and physical[4] potential and, thus be empowered to assume responsible citizenship[5] in our local[6], national, and global[7] communities. To this end, we value achievement, respect[2] and concern for others[2], affiliation and pride, diversity, equity and opportunity, communication, safety[8] and order, collaboration, responsibility and accountability, and trust[2] as cornerstones of our learning community.

CODING:
[1]cognitive development, [2]emotional development, [3]social development, [4]physical development, [5]civic development, [6]local community, [7]global community, [8]safe environment

EXAMPLE B
Example of overly-broad mission statements with no codable themes

Wicksburg School, Alabama "Striving for excellence"

Merino Junior-Senior High School, Alabama "Building tomorrow's leaders today"

Figure 1. Examples of mission statements scored using rubric

Figure 3 shows an overall picture of the frequency with which each of the 11 major thematic categories was found across schools in the sample. Civic development was the most frequently articulated theme (58%), followed by emotional development (55%) and cognitive development (53%). The least frequently cited elements were physical development (8%) and integration into spiritual community (1%).

State-by-state comparisons. Table 2 presents the frequency of themes found in school mission statements across states. A series of chi-square tests of independence were conducted to determine whether schools in each state tended to focus on themes similar to schools in other states or whether schools in different states emphasized different primary purposes. In addition, a series of chi-square tests of independence was run for each state to determine the extent to which the most frequently cited theme across all schools in the state
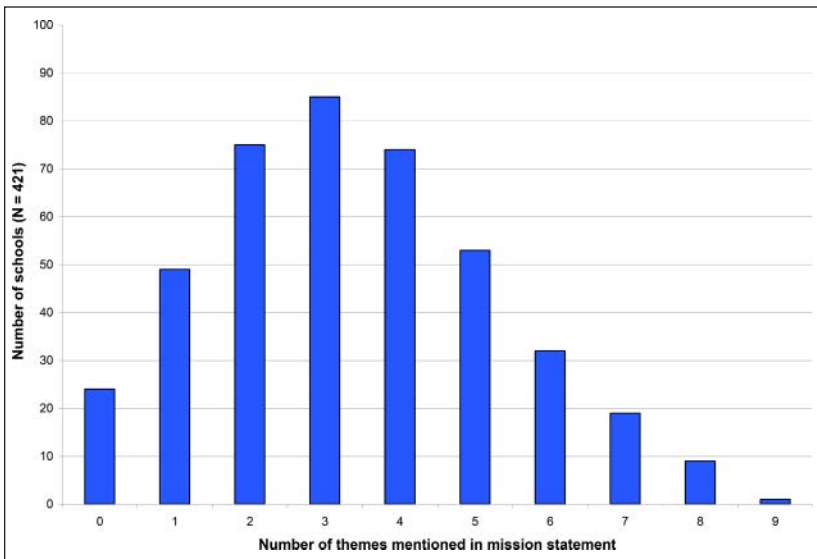
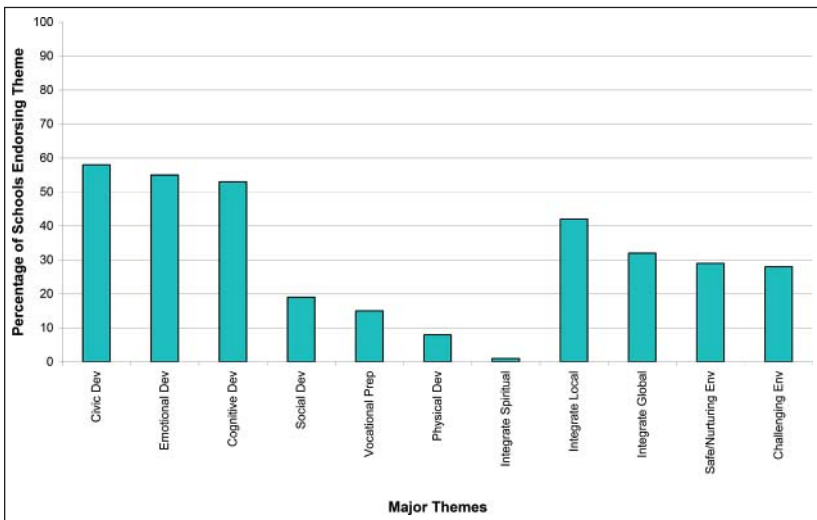**Figure 2.** Distribution of number of themes endorsed across all schools in sample

Figure 3. Frequency with which each major theme was cited across all schools in sample

Table 2. Percentage of Schools by State Endorsing Each of 11 Major Themes in Their School Mission Statement

Theme (*n* of schools)	All (421)	AL (45)	CA (36)	CO (42)	FL (43)	IA (49)	MI (38)	NY (43)	NC (44)	TX (44)	WA (37)
Cognitive development	**53**	**44**	**67**	**52**	**65**	**43**	**40**	**65**	**39**	**64**	**54**
Social development	19	16	22	17	23	10	21	26	14	20	22
Emotional development	**55**	**60**	**61**	**57**	40	**55**	**55**	**63**	**39**	**55**	**73**
Civic development	**58**	**58**	**72**	**57**	42	**57**	**53**	**72**	**57**	**55**	**57**
Physical development	8	9	6	5	9	2	5	9	5	11	19
Vocational preparation	15	4	39**	10	30	12	8	9	7	11	22
Integrate into local community	42	31	46	**43**	37	37	**39**	53	45	**45**	41
Integrate into global community	32	29	46	27	35	24	29	44	**41**	23	22
Integrate into spiritual community	1	0	0	5	0	0	0	0	0	2	0
Safe and nurturing environment	29	**42**	20	**62****	30	20	11	33	20	23	24
Challenging environment	28	**40**	31	**43**	33	24	16	21	9	36	22

Note: Values in bold indicate the most frequently cited themes per column (state). Values in bold are not statistically significantly different from other bold values within a column. All comparisons have been corrected for Type I error inflation using the Bonferroni procedure. **Difference is statistically significant at $p < .01$ when comparing schools in this state to all schools in the sample.

was significantly different from themes represented in other states missions. All analyses were corrected for multiple comparisons using the Bonferroni procedure.

The results of these analyses revealed several interesting findings. First, despite the range of political and geographical diversity found in the sample, there was a fairly clear consensus across schools from all states on at least three major purposes of secondary education: (a) civic development (58%), (b) emotional development (55%), and (c) cognitive development (53%). However, there were also notable differences in thematic emphases within states. For example, in addition to endorsing the three major purposes of schooling, schools in Alabama and Colorado placed an equal emphasis on creating a safe and nurturing environment and creating a challenging environment. Furthermore, 7 out of 10 states in the sample had schools that in addition to endorsing the three primary themes also equally emphasized integration
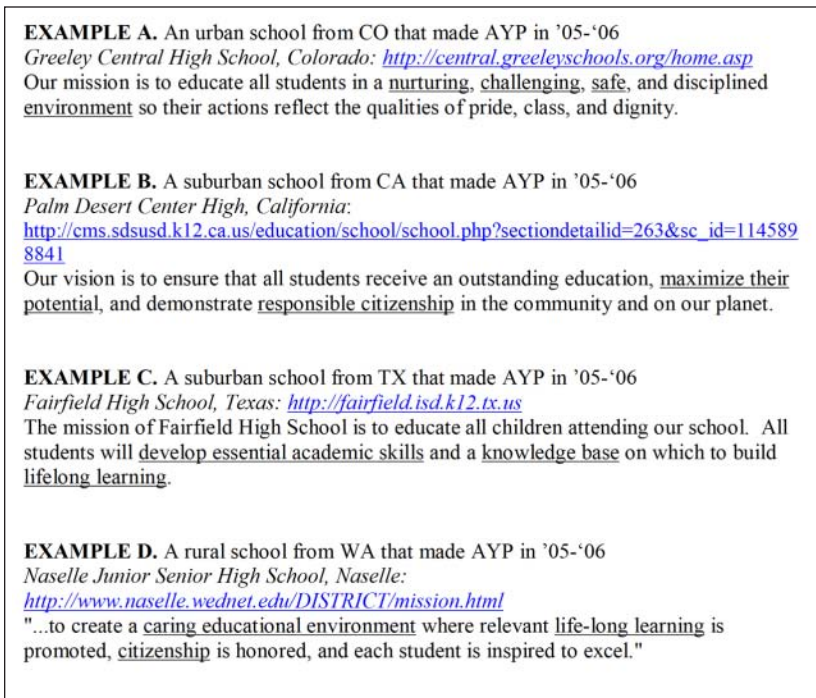
EXAMPLE A. An urban school from CO that made AYP in '05-'06
Greeley Central High School, Colorado: http://central.greeleyschools.org/home.asp
Our mission is to educate all students in a <u>nurturing</u>, <u>challenging</u>, <u>safe</u>, and disciplined <u>environment</u> so their actions reflect the qualities of pride, class, and dignity.

EXAMPLE B. A suburban school from CA that made AYP in '05-'06
Palm Desert Center High, California:
http://cms.sdsusd.k12.ca.us/education/school/school.php?sectiondetailid=263&sc_id=114589 8841
Our vision is to ensure that all students receive an outstanding education, <u>maximize their potential</u>, and demonstrate <u>responsible citizenship</u> in the community and on our planet.

EXAMPLE C. A suburban school from TX that made AYP in '05-'06
Fairfield High School, Texas: http://fairfield.isd.k12.tx.us
The mission of Fairfield High School is to educate all children attending our school. All students will <u>develop essential academic skills</u> and a <u>knowledge base</u> on which to build <u>lifelong learning</u>.

EXAMPLE D. A rural school from WA that made AYP in '05-'06
Naselle Junior Senior High School, Naselle:
http://www.naselle.wednet.edu/DISTRICT/mission.html
"...to create a <u>caring educational environment</u> where relevant <u>life-long learning</u> is promoted, <u>citizenship</u> is honored, and each student is inspired to excel."

Figure 4. Examples from different states that illustrate differential thematic emphases

into the local community. Finally, schools in Texas, New York, Florida, and California showed a particular emphasis on cognitive development, with approximately two thirds of the schools in each of these states incorporating some aspect of cognitive development in their mission. Some additional noteworthy patterns emerged when comparing school results across states. In particular, schools in California focused significantly more on vocational development compared to the full sample of schools (39% vs. 15% overall), $\chi^2(1, N = 421) = 13.5, p < .05$. In Colorado, the entire sample of school mission statements emphasized the importance of creating a safe environment significantly more frequently than did other schools in the sample (62% vs. 29% overall), $\chi^2(1, N = 421) = 19.0, p < .05$.

Figure 4 provides qualitative examples of school mission statements from selected states to demonstrate the range of different thematic emphases observed in mission statements within the sample.

Table 3. Percentage of Schools by Urbanicity and No Child Left Behind Status Endorsing Each of 11 Major Themes in Their School Mission Statement

Theme (*n* of schools)	All (416)	City (83)	Suburb (93)	Town (61)	Rural (179)	All (390)	Failing (109)	Passing (281)
	Percentage of schools endorsing each theme by urbanicity and AYP 2005-2006 status							
Cognitive development	**53**	**58**	**60**	**51**	47	**55**	55	55
Social development	19	17	23	16	19	19	23	17
Emotional development	**56**	42	**55**	**61**	**61**	**55**	50	**57**
Civic development	**58**	48	**63**	**59**	**59**	**58**	53	**60**
Physical development	8	5	6	13	8	7	6	7
Vocational preparation	15	20	20	11	10	14	20	12
Integrate into local community	41	**48**	42	34	40	43	**51**	39
Integrate into global community	31	30	34	30	31	33	28	34
Integrate into spiritual community	1	0	1	2	1	1	0	1
Safe and nurturing environment	29	30	33	28	26	30	**38**	27
Challenging environment	28	**37**	28	21	25	29	36	26

Note: AYP = Adequate Yearly Progress. Values in bold indicate the most frequently cited themes per column (e.g., urbanicity). Values in bold are not statistically significantly different from other bold values within a column. All comparisons have been corrected for Type I error inflation using the Bonferroni procedure.

Comparisons by educational inputs and outputs. A multiple linear regression analysis was conducted in which the number of themes present in the mission statement was regressed on urbanicity of the school, percentage minority enrollment, percentage of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch, and AYP status. The regression equation was not significant, $F(6, 320) = 1.62, p > .05$, $R^2 = .03$, and none of these variables was a statistically significant predictor of the number of themes incorporated into school mission statements.

Table 3 and Figure 5 illustrate the percentage of schools endorsing each of the 11 major coding themes across city, suburban, town, and rural schools. Table 3 reveals that although no significant differences were observed in the number of mission themes based on school's urbanicity, the types of the themes that were present did vary somewhat. Across the coded categories, the most frequently cited themes in all types of school were (a) civic development,
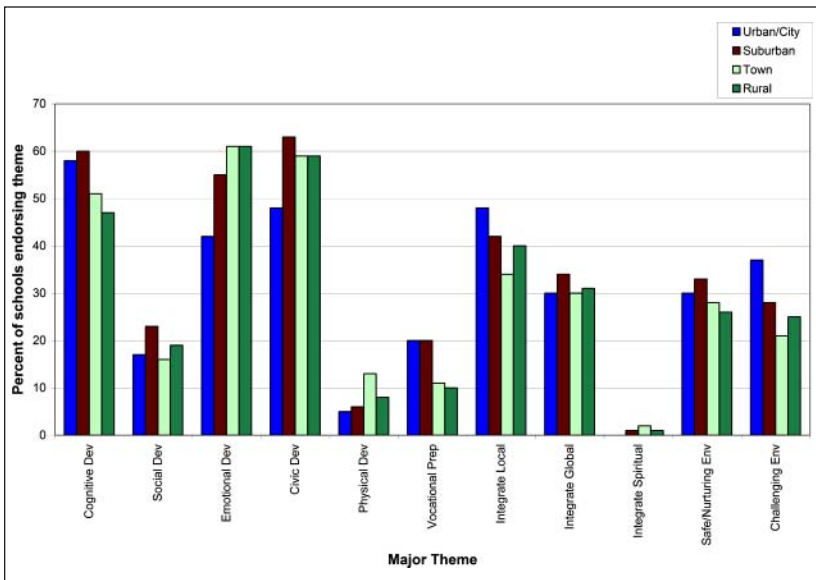
Figure 5. Percentage of schools by urbanicity endorsing each major theme

(b) emotional development, and (c) cognitive development. However, urban (city) schools also mentioned integration into the local community (48%) and providing a challenging environment (37%) significantly more frequently than did other types of schools.

Although there were no statistically significant differences in the number of themes emphasized between schools making AYP and those not, Table 3 and Figure 6 show that schools failing to make AYP were emphasizing systematically different elements in their mission statements than were schools that had achieved AYP. Both failing and passing schools emphasized the most frequent three primary themes; however, schools failing to make AYP also tended to emphasize vocational preparation (20% vs. 12%), integrating into the local community (51% vs. 39%), and the importance of creating a safe environment (38% vs. 27%) more frequently than schools that had achieved satisfactory AYP. After correcting for multiple comparisons, such differences were not statistically significant; however, the results of this exploratory analysis suggest that future studies targeted at specifically examining these areas may be warranted.
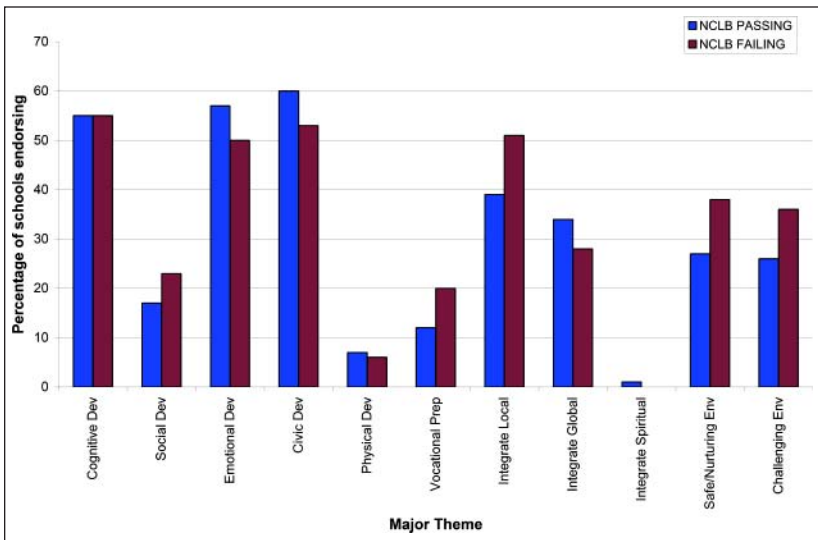
Figure 6. Percentage of schools by 2005-2006 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) status (Adequate Yearly Progress) endorsing each major theme

Study 2: Qualitative Study of the Use and Context of School Mission Statements

Purpose

The purpose of Study 2 was to provide additional context on the role that mission statements play in the actual day-to-day functioning of school. Specifically, by administering a qualitative interview with a small random sample of high school principals, we sought to address numerous questions concerning the use and potential validity of mission statements, including the following: Who determines the mission of the school? When and why do school missions change? Is there any link between what is said in the mission statement and what actually goes on in the high school classroom?

Method

Sample. A subset of schools from Study 1 was randomly selected. A total of 14 principals (21%) out of 67 contacted ultimately participated in the

Table 4. Demographic Characteristics of Schools That Participated in Study 2

School name (pseudonym)	State	AYP 2005-2006 status	Urbanicity	% Minority	% Free lunch
Washington	MA	Made AYP	Rural: fringe	16	4
Adams	NC	Failing	N/A	N/A	N/A
Jefferson	MA	Made AYP	Suburb: large	5	10
Madison	NC	Made AYP	Urban	45	0
Monroe	MA	Made AYP	Suburb: large	13	21
Jackson	MA	Made AYP	Suburb: large	12	2
Van Buren	IA	Made AYP	Rural	2	19
Harrison	AL	Failing	Urban	28	29
Tyler	AL	Made AYP	Urban	1	13
Polk	MI	Failing	Rural	6	62
Taylor	IA	Made AYP	Rural	1	15
Fillmore	WA	Made AYP	Suburban	2	28
Pierce	IA	Made AYP	Rural	3	20
Buchanan	TX	Made AYP	Suburban	15	N/A

Note: AYP = Adequate Yearly Progress.

interviews. The most common reasons for nonparticipation were associated with inability to directly contact the principal (e.g., messages were not returned) or a self-reported lack of time. Table 4 reveals that Study 2 participants represented a wide range of schools including urban (43%), suburban (36%), and rural (21%) locales and exhibited variation in their percentage minority students (0%–45%; $M = 23.3\%$, $SD = 18.1\%$) and percentage of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch (0%–62%; $M = 11.4\%$, $SD = 15.5\%$). To protect the identity of study participants, each school has been assigned a unique pseudonym corresponding to the name of an early U.S. president.

Table 5 illustrates the particular themes that were incorporated in the mission statement of each participating school from Study 2. The dominant themes endorsed across the 14 participating schools were consistent with and reflective of the findings of Study 1 (civic, emotional, and cognitive development were emphasized). The number of themes endorsed ranged considerably and was also reflective of the larger variation found in the full set of schools explored in Study 1.

Procedures. Each principal was sent an email inviting him or her to participate in a brief phone interview related to school purpose. All principals were

Table 5. Mission Statement Themes Endorsed by Schools Participating in Study 2

School name	Cog	Soc	Emot	Civic	Phys	Voc	Local	Global	Spirit	Safe	Chal	# Themes
Washington	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	1	1	9
Adams	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Jefferson	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Madison	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Monroe	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	10
Jackson	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	1	1	9
Van Buren	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
Harrison	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	5
Tyler	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	4
Polk	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	4
Taylor	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	3
Fillmore	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Pierce	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Buchanan	0	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	6
Total												
n	8	6	8	12	3	4	3	7	0	4	6	
%	57	43	57	86	21	29	21	50	0	29	43	
M	4.36											
SD	3.13											

Note: Cog = cognitive development; soc = social development; emot = emotional development; civic = civic development; phys = physical development; voc = vocational preparation; local = integrate into local community; global = integrate into global community; spirit = integrate into spiritual community; safe = safe and nurturing environment; chal = challenging environment.

sent an advance list of five general questions for discussion. A research team member followed up with each principal by phone and email within one week to set up the interviews for those who were interested.

Instrumentation. A member of the research team interviewed each participating principal separately via a brief phone interview (less than 20 minutes) consisting of five structured interview questions. Participants were asked the following: (a) Why does your school have a mission statement? (b) Who was involved in writing the mission statement? (c) How familiar is the school community with the mission statement? (d) When and why was your mission statement last revised? (e) Is the mission statement related to practice in the school? The interviewer took detailed written notes of all responses.

Results

Although we had some general expectations about potential descriptive codes, we employed a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to develop descriptive codes that emerged from the data. For example, we suspected that the accreditation requirement would be one reason that schools reported having a mission statement, but the data also revealed two additional codes. Below, we present and briefly discuss the results of each general thematic category and question.

   1. Why does your school have a mission statement? Principals tended to emphasize three primary reasons that their schools had a mission statement. The first reason was to fulfill the bureaucratic requirement of an accrediting body. The second reason for crafting a mission statement was to foster a dialogue among key stakeholders regarding the primary purpose of their particular school. Last, mission statements were viewed as a way to "communicate to the world" the results of these discussions and deliberations.

   Schools tended to vary with regard to the extent that they embraced each of these three purposes. Indeed, 62% of the principals we interviewed specifically noted the bureaucratic function of the mission statement in accreditation whereas 21% reported that a mission was not required. As noted by the principal of Washington High School, "The [regional accreditation body] requires a mission statement be part of the 10 year evaluation." One principal, who was less than enthusiastic about the bureaucratic function of the school mission statement, noted, "Everybody's got to have a mission and it's been general practice that schools have a mission. They're fairly general covering a broad range of information" (Monroe High School). A principal from Taylor High School added, "I think it's probably mandated by our school board."

   Yet even while acknowledging the required nature of the mission statement, most principals saw their mission statement as something more. The majority of principals (77%) viewed the mission statement as a powerful tool for facilitating conversation among stakeholders and providing direction. They noted that "it creates a connection" (Jefferson High School) and provides "something for everyone to rally behind" (Adams High School). These sentiments were echoed by the others, including the principal of Washington High School, who noted,

   In the process of developing a mission, a community has to get together to talk about it. You have this rich conversation with parents and teachers. In fact, we developed our mission about 2 and a half years ago with a committee of parents, students, and teachers. Their rough draft was sent to everybody and then the mission was redone.

Finally, 93% of principals interviewed replied that their mission statement provides the school with direction, focus, and purpose. The principal of Madison High School succinctly noted that the function of their mission statement was "to clearly convey our primary purpose." Similarly, even the principal of Taylor High School, who was quick to emphasize the mandatory nature of the mission statement, also stated, "I think it makes sense to have a mission statement so that people can see what you're about."

Thus, the majority of principals interviewed in our study viewed mission statements as an important, although often mandatory, document that tends to reflect the consensus beliefs of the school community regarding their primary purpose. Furthermore, the mission serves as an important tool for helping to communicate that purpose to a broad audience.

2. Who was involved in writing the mission statement? According to the principals interviewed within this study, the creation of each high school mission statement was a collaborative process. The vast majority of principals (93%) mentioned that committees or teams worked together to write the mission statement. For example, the principal of Monroe High School said, "We set up committees. There were a couple of teachers and administrators I recall who were responsible for tweaking goals and of course it was all approved by the staff." A similar description was provided by the principal of Adams High School, who noted that the individuals involved in crafting its mission were from "the leadership team that includes the teachers from each of the departments, parents, students, and the principal." There was only one school where the mission statement was handed down directly from the school board: "It would have been whoever was on the board at that time. It is a board-directed mission statement" (Van Buren High School).

Interestingly, exactly half of the principals in the sample explained that community members outside the high school were involved in writing the mission statement. For instance, the principal at Harrison High School stated that the creation of his high school's mission statement included "administration, staff, parents, community leaders, and students. We try to involve as many people as we possibly can; it's just a collaborative approach." Even in situations where a smaller number of individuals were involved in crafting the initial draft, the school mission statement nearly always had to be approved by at least the school staff and often by a committee of parents and outside community members as well.

3. How familiar is the school community with your mission statement? In the interview, each principal was asked to rate his or her school community's familiarity with the mission statement on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 representing no familiarity and 5 representing a degree of familiarity. The majority of principals (57%) rated their community's familiarity to be 4 or greater. One

principal who gave a rating of 4 pointed out, "It's never a 5 by the way because of freshmen coming in—there's a constant cycle of re-education" (Washington High School). Yet two principals did rate their school's familiarity as a 5. The principal of Polk High School said, "I would say very—5. That's why we have it in every single classroom and in the office and in the counseling office." Indeed, in some schools, familiarity with the school mission statement was taken very seriously: "Let's put it this way: we had a competition by department who could recite it. People were competitive about it. I would say 80% of staff memorized it and recited it" (Jefferson High School).

On the other hand, there were two principals (14%) who rated their community's familiarity as 2 or less. One principal offered the following explanation: "I'll go the middle of the road. Some of the new teachers are trying to survive so I'm sure they're not looking for philosophy" (Monroe High School). For the most part, however, principals seemed to think that their communities' familiarity with their mission statements was high.

4. When and why was your mission statement last revised? When asked about the last time their mission statements were revised, principals' answers spanned from 1997 to 2006. Other than the high school whose mission statement was last revised in 1997, each high school had revised its mission statement at least within the previous 5 years. Two principals (14%) said that their mission statements were currently under revision, and three (21%) said that they review theirs annually.

One of the most common reasons (reported by 50% of principals) for revising the school mission statement was in preparation for a reaccreditation visit. "This year we are revising it because we are in the process of going through an accreditation visit in early May. But the way we do things here is that we basically review the situation each year" (Harrison High School). Although half the principals focused on the mandatory nature and bureaucratic need to revisit their mission statement, the remaining 50% of the principals saw the revision process as an opportunity to align practice with vision. The principal of Monroe High School noted that their mission was changed, "probably because we were up against the reaccreditation. The mission statement didn't speak to what we were doing." Two principals (14%) gave nonspecific reasons for why their mission statements had been revised. For example, one principal replied, "Just to accommodate our children I guess" (Tyler High School), and another responded, "It just needed updating" (Buchanan High School).

When asked how frequently their mission statement gets revised, the results suggested that schools' missions are highly likely to change over time. The principal from Madison High School explained, "We review our purposes and our founding principles every year. We design the school together and as we

have grown as an organization we have become more focused." Another principal noted, "It's important just to look it over and see if there's a change in our mission" (Taylor High School). Federal policy shifts may spur a change in mission as well. As the principal of Washington High School noted,

> [Our state] for years believed in local control of schools. What NCLB has done and our state testing program has done is remove the local autonomy to a large degree. What that means is that the vision of schools is becoming more similar across states than 10 years ago. The problem for me is that it's either a good or bad thing. If you didn't have a mission then it's a good thing. If you're a high-functioning school and your mission and purpose has been working pretty well, then you may come in odds with NCLB.

5. Is the mission statement related to practice in the school? If so, does the mission statement drive practice or does practice drive your mission? The high school principals were asked last about the extent to which the mission statement was connected, in any meaningful way, to actual practice in the school. The vast majority of principals (86%) believed there was a strong link between mission and practice. For example, the principal of Pierce High School noted that a change to the mission would affect practice to "a major extent because it would be changing our entire philosophy on how we educate students." Similarly, the principal of Washington High School stated that "decisions are made based on our mission statement."

By contrast, two principals (14%) believed that practice was driving their vision. For example, the principal of Taylor High School noted, "I'd say practice drives vision. . . . If you like what you're getting that would drive your mission statement." Similarly, the principal of Monroe High School noted,

> We can certainly change without changing the mission statement. I think the mission statement is a reflection of what you're already doing. Does it change the school dramatically? I think it helps to refocus. I think your ideas are there and it just needs to be adjusted to what's happening in today's world.

Echoing this sentiment, the principal of Pierce High School noted,

> I think in many cases it's a two-way street. It's not one or the other. I think your vision helps with your practice. Education is really changing nowadays. Every once in a while something comes along that's a major shift so you have to change your vision as you go along with it.

In cases where principals were hesitant about the impact of the mission statement on practice, it was often because they did not have a clear idea of how to measure the impact of the mission. "What's very hard is to determine how to quantify a mission statement. How do you establish and report on those benchmarks?" (Washington High School). The principal of Taylor High School also noted that the utility of the mission statement was tied to its capacity for assessment, "I think it's important so that people can get a view of what we're supposed to be doing and they can make assessments based on the mission statement."

Only two of the principals interviewed (14%) felt that the mission statement was almost entirely unrelated to practice. For example, the principal of Monroe High School stated, "You know when you're in the classroom with 30 kids the mission statement gets lost in the day-to-day stuff." And the principal of Jackson High School stated, "I don't think those two [mission and practice] are necessarily related at all. I think vision is a misunderstood subject and it's influenced in a number of ways that we can't get control of. Practice isn't necessarily one of them."

Discussion

The objectives-based approach to program evaluation emphasizes the alignment among objectives (i.e., school purpose), implementation (i.e., curriculum and instruction), and assessment. In the wake of the NCLB Act, many educational research studies have focused on the alignment of assessment with instruction (e.g., Martone & Sireci, 2009; Roach et al., 2008); however, few studies have taken direct aim at systematically and empirically investigating the larger objectives of formal schooling. In the current article, both historical and contemporary perspectives on the purpose of school in America were presented from a variety of stakeholders and interest groups; however, the perspectives of the schools themselves were found to be notably absent from the extant literature. Goodlad (1979) delineated three distinct elements that are relevant to discussions of school purpose. The first element involves what schools are expected, or called on, to accomplish. The second dimension relates to what schools should do. The third element pertains to the functions for which they are used (e.g., hidden curricula, etc.). In this article, we have been primarily concerned with using school mission statements as a source of empirical data related to the first two of these dimensions. The current article serves to directly confront some of the limitations and criticisms of mission statements and to establish their utility as a potential source of viable empirical research data.

The results of Study 1 showed, by using a random sample of 421 mission statements from 10 geographically, politically, and demographically diverse states, that school mission statements can be reliably coded and that meaningful and systematic differences in their content can be empirically captured and quantified. Specifically, the results indicate that most high school mission statements tended to emphasize between two and five distinct main themes on average. Although quite simple, this finding suggests that even though a small subset of schools displayed vacuous or catch-all mission statements, the vast majority of the high school statements in our sample focused on a discrete and purposive number of themes and objectives. In addition, the thematic content of school mission statements was found to vary by context (e.g., state), inputs (e.g., urbanicity of the school, percentage of minority enrollment), and outputs (e.g., AYP status).

At the broadest level of analysis, the high school mission statements drawn from all 10 states in our sample showed consensus on at least three major purposes of education across high schools: (a) civic development, (b) emotional development, and (c) cognitive development. This finding provides some empirical support for the philosophical position of Adler (1982), who proposed that the major purposes of schooling were to foster citizenship, personal growth, and occupational preparation. It also corroborates Goodlad's (1979) historical analysis that schools serve many functions including intellectual development, vocational training, enculturation, ethical development, and the promotion of well-being. And finally, it echoes the rulings of the courts that the purposes of schooling are far broader than just cognitive or academic development but also include civic development, emotional development, and vocational preparation. This empirical finding has potentially important legal and policy implications. If we are to accept the assumptions of objectives-based program evaluation that there should be an alignment among school purpose (i.e., objectives), program implementation (i.e., curriculum and instruction), and assessment, then it is worth considering how the current state and federal testing mandates align with the broader objectives articulated in school mission statements. Most high-stakes exit exams used across the country, in their current form, tend to measure only a limited range of curricular subjects (generally mathematics, science, and language arts) that are classified within our framework as "cognitive" components of schooling. Yet the random sample of school mission statements analyzed from each of the 10 states in this study refer to both the civic development of students and the emotional development of students as equal, if not more frequently cited, purposes of formal schooling. Thus, the data from Study 1 reveal a misalignment between the stated purposes of schooling and

the approach to measuring those important purposes that currently exist in many states.

Looked at from another perspective, however, one might point out that only three themes (civic, emotional, and cognitive development) were incorporated by more than 50% of the high schools within the sample. In other words, many high school mission statements have shared content and themes, but the individual statements were actually far more different than they were alike. Such variance in the results suggests that, at least in many instances, schools themselves establish and interpret the purpose of schooling in terms of local and community needs, despite the increasing presence of state and federally mandated educational reforms. Thus, it is perhaps the case that the broader issue of alignment should be evaluated within the context of the specific aims of each individual school.

When analyzed by context, systematic and substantively interpretable differences were found across the 10 states in the current study. For example, in New York and California, both states with historically large immigrant populations, the most dominant theme emphasized in high school mission statements was civic development (72% of schools in both states). In addition, California schools showed a significantly greater emphasis on vocational preparation than schools in other states in our sample. Colorado exhibited the largest percentage of mission statements containing references to a safe learning environment (62%), perhaps in response to the nation's deadliest high school massacre at Columbine High School in 1999. Two states recognized as early advocates of standards-based reform and high-stakes testing, Texas and Florida, both emphasized the cognitive development theme in their high schools mission statements more frequently than other states in the sample (64% and 65%, respectively). These results validate the utility of mission statements as a tool for detecting meaningful differences across contexts.

When examining the AYP results, both failing and passing schools frequently endorsed the same three core themes; however, failing schools also tended to cite vocational preparation, integration into the local community, providing a safe and nurturing school environment, and providing a challenging environment more frequently than the schools that had successfully achieved AYP. Although these trends did not reach a level of statistical significance after correcting for multiple comparisons, the general trends suggest that future research aimed at examining these specific differences would be worthwhile. In summary, the results of Study 1 reveal that far from being generic, interchangeable documents with little empirical worth, school mission statements tend to be

more divergent in their content than they are similar, and these differences appear to be meaningfully interpretable.

The results of the principal interviews (Study 2) further suggest the utility and validity for using mission statements to accurately represent schools' much-ignored voice in the continuous debate on the purpose of school in America. Although we must use caution in light of the small sample, the sentiments of the high school principals interviewed clearly suggest that mission statements can be a dynamic and thoughtful approximation of a school's core values and purpose. According to the high school principals interviewed in our study, there were three primary reasons why schools have a mission statement: (a) they are often mandated by a school board or accrediting body, (b) they promote connectedness and dialogue among the school community, and (c) the mission serves as an efficient method of communicating the primary purpose of school to a broad audience. These purposes map directly onto the communication codes articulated by Bernstein (1971). It is clear that some principals view the mission statement as a document intended to communicate a restricted code for insiders (e.g., the school community), whereas other principals view the mission statement as a way to communicate an elaborated code for a broader audience. Building on the findings from the current study, future analyses of school mission statements using more nuanced communicative frameworks seems promising.

All of the interviewed principals stated that the creation of their school mission statement had been a collaborative process involving many authors within the school community. So although the content of the school mission statement may consider global and national objectives, it is clear that the document itself is a product of the immediate school community (students, teachers, administrators, parents, and the local community). Similarly, the principals in our study reported that staff typically had surprisingly high levels of familiarity with and exposure to the school mission. In addition, principals shared that high school mission statements tend to be revised frequently, perhaps making them one of the most dynamic and central documents obtainable to educational researchers. Given the frequent revisions that school mission statements generally receive, mission statements could potentially serve as an indicator of policy shifts (as well as other major events) affecting education. It is not difficult to envision the possibility of systematically tracking changes in the themes incorporated into school mission statements over time in the same way that changes in student test scores over time are currently tracked. For example, references to the importance of fostering physical development as a key purpose of school were infrequent across

the entire set of schools in the current sample (mentioned by 8% of schools overall). As policy discussions surrounding the importance of acting to reduce obesity rates in the United States gain momentum, it will be possible to analyze whether this priority becomes more frequently incorporated into school mission statements over time.

For the principals themselves, mission statements were widely cited as an important tool for shaping school vision and practice. Such results echo the school effectiveness literature (Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000), which has noted that schools typically identified as more effective tend to have a stronger commitment to a shared vision.

In direct response to the question of whether school mission statements reflect actual school practices and core goals, principals overwhelmingly agreed that their own school mission statements reflected the actual practices and aims present in their school (though the direction of influence was debated). The results from Study 2 provide an initial examination of the processes and involvement elements related to school mission statements. Although the results presented here suggest that from the principals' perspective mission statements provide a valid approximation of a school's purposes and practices, future research aimed at corroborating these findings with different constituencies is warranted.

The two studies reported in this article each carry with them a number of assumptions and limitations. One limitation of the content analysis rubric used to code the high school mission statements in Study 1 may be the dichotomous nature of quantifying themes within each mission statements. Our dichotomous (present or absent) approach to coding mission statements does not differentiate whether individual themes mentioned in school mission statements are of greater value to a school than others themes present. For example, a school might list civic, cognitive, and emotional development in their mission statement, but the primary emphasis may actually be on civic development; however, using our rubric, each theme would be coded equally and given equal "weight." In addition, this study takes the language used in the mission statement at face value and does not attempt to analyze it through more nuanced communicative frameworks such as those proposed by Bernstein (1971).

In both of the empirical studies presented here, the response rates and sample sizes could be improved somewhat. Although we argue that mission statements are widely available and easy to collect, we found that locating our own random sample of mission statements for some states was occasionally more difficult than it was for others. Furthermore, at the time the study

was conducted, there was no formally sponsored state or federal database of schools in each state that was searchable online and publicly available, so we had to rely on sources such as http://publicschoolreview.com and http://www .en.wikipedia.org, which, despite their comprehensive nature, may not have been perfectly reflective of all schools in all states. Finally, we also recognize the limitations of our demographic measurements (e.g., percentage of minority students, percentage free lunch eligible) and school success categorizations (AYP status) used in our analyses; however, we justify the use of such summary statistics since such data were used for only exploratory analyses and in representing large cohorts of students.

In the interviews with school principals, both their limited availability and the lack of any incentive resulted in only a 21% response rate. Given the heavy administrative demands placed on principals, many did not have extra time to devote to participation in our study, and thus those who did participate may be systematically different in some undetermined way from those who did not participate.

An additional limitation is the difficulty inherent in attempting to link the values espoused in the mission statement with their actual execution in practice. Although we attempted to better understand the link between mission and practice by interviewing principals, it is possible that principals, as primary members of the school leadership team, may possess a different perspective on the utility of the school mission statement than would other stakeholders, such as teachers, parents, students, and community members. Future research should consider how various school stakeholders view and use school mission statements and how the values articulated by school mission statements are manifest in day-to-day practice.

The research presented in this article demonstrates that school mission statements can be relatively easily obtained, reliably coded using a quantitative rubric, and meaningfully interpreted. Although we are not suggesting that this is the only method and technique for considering schools' role and voice, we believe that however it is ultimately conceived and implemented, bringing the perspective of the schools themselves into the debate on school purpose promises to enrich and broaden the longstanding public discussion of our nation's educational goals.

Revisiting the literature on educational purpose, we find that few other empirical data sources have been developed to represent the school viewpoint or perspective. Although mission statements are not without their own limitations and drawbacks, we feel that our efforts to use school mission statements for systematic reflection hold promise for both the research community and

various educational stakeholders. Recent research by Kurland, Peretz, and Hertz-Lazarowitz (2010) has found that "school vision, as shaped by the principal and the staff, is a powerful motivator of the process of organizational learning in school" (p. 7). For example, a conversation among parents, school board members, and school leadership on how much time teachers spend doing test preparation could be further illuminated and contextualized through systematic reflection on the school's mission statement. More generally, our results suggest that the systemic analysis of school missions over time or environments may offer educators and policy makers a window into a perspective on school purpose that has been largely absent from the empirical research literature.

Appendix

A = COGNITIVE/ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT
    0 = Misc.
    1 = foster cognitive development
    2 = problem solving
    3 = creativity
    4 = effective communication
    5 = critical thinking
    6 = literacy
    7 = acquire knowledge
    8 = participate in the arts
    9 = improve student achievement/test scores

B = SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT
    0 = Misc.
    1 = social interaction
    2 = become effective parents

C = EMOTIONAL DEVELOMPENT
    0 = Misc.
    1 = positive attitudes
    2 = ethical morality
    3 = joy for learning
    4 = life-long learning
    5 = self-sufficient
    6 = self-discipline
    7 = reach potential
    8 = emotional skills
    9 = promote confidence
    10 = spiritual development
    11 = respect for others

D = CIVIC DEVELOPMENT
    0 = Misc.
    1 = productive
    2 = responsible
    3 = public service
    4 = contributing member of society

E = PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT
    0 = Misc.
    1 = Physical development

F = VOCATIONAL PREPARATION
    0 = Misc.
    1 = competitive in the workforce
    2 = marketable skills

G = INTEGRATE INTO LOCAL COMMUNITY
    0 = Misc.
    1 = promote community
    2 = community partnerships

H = INTEGRATE INTO GLOBAL COMMUNITY
    0 = Misc.
    1 = appreciate diversity
    2 = global awareness
    3 = adaptive students

I = INTEGRATE INTO SPIRITUAL COMMUNITY
    0 = Misc.
    1 = religious education/environment

J = SAFE/NURTURING ENVIRONMENT
    0 = Misc.
    1 = safe environment
    2 = provide nurturing environment
    3 = person-centered

K = CHALLENGING ENVIRONMENT
    0 = Misc.
    1 = provide challenging environment
    2 = technologically advanced
    3 = provide engaging work
    4 = highly qualified faculty

Coding Rubric

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

Note

1. Although the terms *purpose*, *mission*, and *vision* have distinct connotations in some literatures, for the purposes of this study we treat the terms as synonymous. Each of these three terms and their associated statements, in essence, tends to articulate broad thematic purposes of schooling that are the primary focus of this study.

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