Elementary School Mission Statements of Exemplary and Academically Unacceptable Campuses in Texas[*]

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1 Introduction

"An organization without a plan is seen as reactive, shortsighted, and rudderless" (Bolman & Deal, 2003, p. 279). Schools have binders full of campus plans, budget plans, parent involvement plans, and behavior intervention plans. However, when schools do not articulate their mission, the core foundation of their improvement initiatives is unlikely to withstand the stresses that accompanied their efforts (Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour, 2002). Sustained academic performance is an overarching goal for most schools and school improvement initiatives are frequently a part of a school's mission. Implementation of a school's mission puts actions to words to ensure school improvement initiatives are implemented.

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The terms *mission statement* and *vision statement* are often used in business and academic literature. Robbins and Judge (2009) defined *vision* as a long-term strategy for attaining goals and *vision statement* as a formal articulation of an organization's vision or mission (p. 415). Daresh (2001) defined the term *mission statement* as the "public declaration of an organization's vision and commitment" (p. 50). An organization's mission statement is refined during the strategic planning process (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2008). Once a vision statement is established, the leader then communicates high performance expectations and expresses confidence that followers can attain the vision statement (Robbins & Judge, 2009, p. 415).

Mission statements are created to represent organizational values and guide the actions of schools and districts. Teachers and school professionals involved in the day-to-day business of educating children may view these documents as just formally articulated words that are hung on walls and have little relevance to teaching and learning. With increased demands of academic accountability for all student groups, school leaders are under tremendous pressure to ensure and maintain high levels of academic performance even for groups of students who are at-risk. To meet these accountability demands, leaders must be prepared to *re-culture* schools, or seek ways to shape shared values and vision that shift a school from a culture of isolation to a culture of meaningful collaboration (Eaker et al., 2002). Eaker et al. (2002) identified the process of developing a mission statement as a critical first step toward re-culturing schools. Barth (2004) explained that a sense of joint purpose provides teachers and principals with an increased sense of certainty, security, coherence, and accountability.

1.1 Problems Principals Encounter

As principals re-culture the schools they lead, it is important for them to understand the obstacles that leaders typically encounter as they work to shape a shared vision aimed at school improvement. Kotter (1996) identified eight common errors when leaders try to lead change in their organizations. Common errors included allowing too much complacency, failing to create a guiding coalition, underestimating the power of vision, under-communicating the vision, allowing obstacles to block the vision, failing to create short-term wins, declaring victory too soon, and neglecting to anchor changes firmly in the culture (Kotter, 1996). Kotter commented that half of the errors leaders make commonly were related to an organization's poorly stated or understood mission statement, misalignment of organizational vision and core values with actual day-to-day practice.

Covey (2003) also identified lack of vision as one of the common universal problems in organizations. When a shared vision and values are lacking, there was either no mission statement or no deep understanding or commitment to the mission (Covey, 2003). Mission statements are most effective when they result from the effort and input from all levels of an organization. However, it is the duty of the principal as the instructional leader to articulate core beliefs and values to organizational members in a way that truly creates a common vision (Daresh, 2001).

1.2 Studies on School Mission Statements

A small number of studies were located in which researchers had focused on examining school mission statements. Two recent studies regarding K-12 schools were reviewed for this investigation. Slate, Jones, Wiesman, Alexander, and Saenz (2008) discovered that the mission statements of high-performing schools had an explicit focus on academic success and challenging environments. In their qualitative study of the mission statements of 100 Texas public elementary schools, Slate et al. (2008) identified 15 themes: academic success, caring environment, challenge, citizenship, collaboration, commitment, empowerment, life-long learning, opportunity, partnership, physical development, productivity, responsibility, safe environment, and social development. Boerma (2006), in a study of the mission statements of private schools serving 12th grade students, generated 120 themes which merged into five larger meta-themes: school beliefs, school goals, environment, services offered, and parental involvement.

Other research studies on mission statements at educational institutions have been conducted at the college and university level. Kenney-Wallace, Cox, Lu, and Slate (2006) analyzed mission statements of 105

two-year community colleges in Texas and New Mexico by rural, suburban, and urban characteristics. Using qualitative analysis strategies they identified 10 themes: comprehensive; vocational/technical need; life-long learning; college transfer; fulfillment of individual and community needs; enhancement of educational, cultural, and economic development; providing accessible, affordable, high-quality education; job entry, workforce training, and career development; commitment to teaching and learning; and general/well-rounded education. Of the 10 themes, 3 themes consistently emerged among the three community college settings: a focus on life-long learning, fulfilling individual and community needs, and providing accessible, affordable, and high-quality education. In another study, Kreber and Mhina (2007) identified 12 values present in the mission statements of 58 Canadian universities: service, truth, equality, community, spirituality, freedom, human dignity, tradition, justice, leadership, lifelong learning, and learning and development.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the mission statements of Exemplary and Academically Unac-ceptable elementary public schools in the state of Texas. An area of research that is limited is the analysis of mission statements related to school accountability. We believe that the more information that is made available about school mission statements, the more likely it is that mission statements may be used by school leaders to create a climate of shared leadership and ownership, impacting student achievement.

1.4 Research Questions

The following research questions were addressed in this study: (a) What are the themes revealed in the mission statements of Exemplary and Academically Unacceptable elementary schools? and (b) What are the similarities and differences in the themes that can be identified in the mission statements of Exemplary and Academically Unacceptable Texas elementary schools?

2 Method

2.1 Sample

During the 2007-08 school year, the state of Texas accountability system, the Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) registered data on a total of 4,383 elementary schools located throughout the state (Texas Education Agency, 2009b). The 2007-08 AEIS data set consisted of public schools, including charter schools. Accountability data on private and alternative schools were not included. After removing 133 elementary charter schools from this sample, the state accountability ratings of 4,250 public elementary schools were examined.

Similar to other states, Texas has an accountability system in which school campuses and school districts receive one of four ratings: Exemplary, Academically Recognized, Academically Acceptable, or Academically Unacceptable. Specific and detailed criteria for how each rating is assigned can be located at the Texas Educa-tion Agency Academic Excellence Indicator System website (http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/account/2008/manual/ta²). The accountability rating of Exemplary is assigned when a school campus or school district meets 90% of the state-standard for each academic area, 95% for completion rate, and 2% standard for dropout rate. The accountability rating of Academically Unacceptable is assigned when a school campus or school districts meets 45% to 70% of the state-standard in each academic area, less than 75% for completion rate, and less than the 2% standard for dropout rate. Accountability ratings for school districts and for school campuses can be obtained by accessing the state website, school district website, or school campus website. As such, accountability ratings are public information.

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²http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/account/2008/manual/table7.pdf

2.2 Procedures

The governing agency over the Texas public school system articulates its mission on the homepage of its website, "The mission of the Texas Education Agency is to provide leadership, guidance and resources to help schools meet the educational needs of all students" (Texas Education Agency, 2009a). As TEA's mission statement was publicized on its webpage, we analyzed individual school websites to examine if a purposeful randomly-selected sample of Texas public elementary schools offered a clear articulation of their mission. Upon identifying the elementary Exemplary and Academically Unacceptable campuses to be included, an Internet search was conducted to retrieve each campus's mission statement. Each campus mission statement was copied from the Internet and pasted into a word document for analysis. In the event that a campus did not have a mission statement posted, the district mission statement was used. If the district did not have a mission statement posted, a notation was made for analysis.

Of the 50 Academically Unacceptable schools in this study, 35 mission statements were analyzed. Fourteen of the 50 schools did not have a campus or a district mission statement available on the Internet. One school district was represented twice in the list and neither campus had a campus-specific mission statement, so the district mission statement was analyzed once. Of the 58 Exemplary schools randomly selected in this study, 49 mission statements were analyzed. Seven of the 58 did not have a campus or a district mission statement available on the Internet. Two district mission statements repeated themselves, so they were not included in the analysis.

2.3 Data Analysis

Our intent in conducting this study was to categorize the themes that were present in the mission statements of Exemplary and Academically Unacceptable elementary campuses. Qualitative content analysis and open coding techniques were used. Strauss and Corbin (1998) identified open coding as the process by which possible themes or patterns emerge.. Patton (2002) explained the first reading of data is used to develop a coding system, whereas formal, systematic coding begins with the second reading (p. 463). , Strauss and Corbin (1998) defined "open coding" as an inductive process to determine all of the possible codes in a data set (p. 453).

For a theme to be identified as being present, the theme had to emerge a minimum of 10 times to be counted as being present. After multiple readings and coding, a check for trustworthiness was performed. A peer review process was used during which three doctoral students read mission statements and coded present themes. Coding was determined to be consistent across raters.

3 Results

As a result of this examination of the mission statements from Exemplary and Academically Unacceptable schools, 15 themes emerged.

3.1 Theme One: Academic Success

The theme *Academic Success* appeared in the mission statements of 21 Academically Unacceptable school mission statements, compared to 38 Exemplary school mission statements. Representative examples include: "all students will be empowered by parents, staff, and the community to achieve excellence everyday" (Winn Elementary) and "strive to provide each child with a quality education" (Glen Loch Elementary.

3.2 Theme Two: Caring Environment

The theme *Caring Environment* was more evident in Exemplary school mission statements than in Academically Unacceptable mission statements: 14 and 6 respectively. Representative examples include: "we focus on providing a positive, caring environment which meets the individual needs of our students" (Provident Heights Elementary) and "provide a nurturing environment where all members are important" (Commonwealth Elementary).

3.3 Theme Three: Citizenship

The theme *Citizenship* was more evident among mission statements of Exemplary schools than in Academically Unacceptable schools: 21 and 11 respectively. Representative examples include: "all students will graduate with the knowledge and skills to become productive and responsible citizens" (Roger Q. Mills Elementary) and "to help students to define their values and goals and to cause students to respect themselves and the rights of others" (Academy Elementary).

3.4 Theme Four: Collaboration

The theme *Collaboration* was more evident in Exemplary school mission statements than in the Academically Unacceptable mission statements: 24 and 8 respectively. Representative examples include: "a neighborhood school reaching out to families and extended families to unite a community in a common goal of academic excellence (J. H. Hines Elementary) and "through the combined efforts of educators, families, and community members..." (Oak Ridge Elementary).

3.5 Theme Five: Commitment

The theme *Commitment* was more evident in Exemplary schools than in Academically Unacceptable schools: 16 and 9 respectively. Representative examples include: "committed to providing each student with a quality environment that is conducive to learning" (Doris Miller Elementary) and "Brownwood ISD commits to developing self-directed and academically prepared graduates" (Woodland Heights Elementary).

3.6 Theme Six: Life-long Learning

The theme *Life-long Learning* was more evident in Exemplary schools than in Academically Unacceptable schools: 15 and 6 respectively. Representative examples include: "every child will leave with an unquenchable thirst for learning and a destiny for success" (Fondren Elementary) and "provide each student with the skills to achieve life long success and to make a contribution to society" (Merrifield Elementary).

3.7 Theme Seven: Opportunity

The theme *Opportunity* was more evident in Exemplary school mission statements than in Academically Unacceptable school mission statements: 24 and 9 respectively. Representative examples include: "ensure each student is allowed educational experiences that will promote maximum intellectual, social, and emotional growth" (Mitchell Boulevard Elementary) and "provide engaging learning opportunities" (Dove Elementary).

3.8 Theme Eight: Safe Environment

The theme *Safe Environment* was evident five times in both the Exemplary and Academically Unacceptable school mission statements. Representative examples include: "providing a safe and positive learning environment" (Dr. Tomas Rivera Elementary) and "providing a safe and nurturing environment for teaching and learning" (Northrich Elementary).

3.9 Theme Nine: Educating All

Explicitly stating that a school exists to educate all students was identified 41 times, in 14 Academically Unacceptable schools and in 27 Exemplary schools. Representative examples included "we dedicate ourselves to educate all children" (Becker Elementary) and "provide exemplary education for all students" (Seguin Elementary).

3.10 Theme Ten: Professional Development

The theme *Professional Development* was evident five times in both Academically Unacceptable and Exemplary campus mission statements. Representative examples included "enhance the growth of students, staff, and community through Professional Learning Communities" (Norman Elementary) and "through customized, innovative learning experience led by a visionary staff and community" (Lakeside Elementary).

3.11 Theme Eleven: Meeting the Needs of a Changing Society

The theme *Meeting the Needs of a Changing Society* was more evident in Exemplary rather than in Academically Unacceptable schools, 18 and 8 respectively. Representative examples included "to meet the challenges of a competitive, technological, and multicultural society" (Benavidez Elementary) and "to educate each student to be successful in an ever-changing world" (Leander ISD).

3.12 Theme Twelve: Curriculum Alignment

The theme *Curriculum Alignment* was more evident in Exemplary than in Academically Unacceptable schools, 8 and 3 respectively. Representative examples included "utilize the 'best practices' model and emphasize reading and writing across the curriculum" (Pleasant Hill Academy Elementary) and "engage in powerful learning opportunities which use research based instructional strategies" (County Place Elementary).

3.13 Theme Thirteen: Developing Problem Solvers and Critical Thinkers

The theme *Developing Problem Solvers and Critical Thinkers* was evident in five Academically Unacceptable and six Exemplary mission statements. Representative examples included "each child will be challenged to think critically, to problem solve" (Crockett Elementary) and "we will develop students who are creative thinkers and problem solvers" (Smith Elementary).

3.14 Theme Fourteen: Capitalizing on Students' Individual Strengths

The theme *Capitalizing on Students' Individual Strengths* was evident in 13 Exemplary mission statements whereas it was not present in any of the Academically Unacceptable school mission statements. Representative examples included "will assist students in developing individual talents and teach them to relate the experience of the classroom to the outside world" (Milam Elementary), "we will help all children achieve their individual potential" (Iles Elementary), and "providing each student's academic and social experiences to maximize their individual abilities" (McWhorter Elementary).

3.15 Theme Fifteen: Describing School Environment

The theme *Describing School Environment* was more evident in Exemplary school mission statements than in Academically Unacceptable school mission statements, 9 and 2 respectively. Representative examples included "creating an environment in our classrooms that engages students in academic rigor" (Travis Elementary), "provide an atmosphere that launches school and personal pride" (Taylor Ray Elementary), and "committed to promoting a positive learning climate" (Jackson Elementary).

3.16 Comparisons of Exemplary and Academically Unacceptable Themes

As noted in Table 1, elementary schools in the state of Texas showed both similarities and dissimilarities in the themes that were present in their mission statements. For example, academic success was the most common theme in the mission statements of both groups of schools. Similarly, the second-rated theme in both groups of schools was that of educating all students. These two groups of schools, though, differed in the extent to which certain themes were present. For example, the theme of capitalizing on individual

students' strengths was present in 13 of the mission statements of Exemplary schools but was not present in a single mission statement of the Academically Unacceptable schools. Similarly, the themes of life-long learning and a caring environment were in many more Exemplary schools' mission statements than were in the Academically Unacceptable schools' mission statements. Readers are referred to Table 1 for more comparisons involving these two groups of schools.

Themes	Unacceptable	Exemplary	Total
Academic Success	21	38	59
Educate All	14	27	41
Opportunity	9	24	33
Citizenship	11	21	32
Collaboration	8	24	32
Meeting the Needs of Changing Society	8	18	26
Commitment	9	16	25
Life-Long Learning	6	15	21
Caring Environment	6	14	20
Capitalizing on Students' Individual Strengths	0	13	13
Curriculum Alignment	3	8	11
Describing School Environment	2	9	11
Developing problem solvers/critical thinkers	5	6	11
Safe Environment	5	5	10
Professional Development	5	5	10

Table 1: Themes Present in the Missions Statements of Public Elementary Schools in the State of Texas by School Type

4 Discussion

Senge (2006) stated that nothing happens until vision is present. In this study, the themes that emerged through the content analysis of Texas elementary school mission statements may communicate organizational values, and therefore, influence school vision and culture, as well as teaching, learning, and academic performance. Although further research is needed to determine relationships between mission statements and the values and behaviors that are actually manifested in a school as these themes relate to students' academic achievement, some practical implications may be drawn from this study. As such, elementary school leaders should support the collaborative development of campus-specific mission statements. Furthermore, elementary school principals need to share their personal vision with their staff that articulates the type of organization they what to have. Also, mission statements should be readily identified on campus websites to enhance communication with parents and the community. Padgett (2006) stated that information should not be buried on a website; visitors want quick access Overall, core values describe how the school is run on a day-to-day basis. Followers refer to an organization's core values to guide their decisions. However, Senge (2006) reminded leaders that core values are only helpful if they are translated into concrete behaviors.

An area for future research would be to delve deeper into how Exemplary and Academically Unacceptable mission school statements manifest themselves among the school community. A mission statement does not make a school Exemplary, rather we believe it is a reflection of the Exemplary nature of the school and its

personnel. That is, simply writing a mission statement that would incorporate many of the themes listed in our Table 1 would not generate an effective school. Our findings are clearly correlational in nature, not causative.

We believe, however, that having a shared mission statement is a starting point to re-culture schools. As we stated in the beginning of this study, mission statements represent organizational values and provide direction for employees. Future research may include examining specific school actions that create their mission statement as well as school actions that are generated from their mission statement. School observations and interviews of staff members can further uncover the levels of implementation and internalization of campus mission statements.

A limitation to this study was the number of mission statements analyzed. Of the 50 Academically Unacceptable schools, 14 schools did not have a mission statement accessible on the Internet. Of the 58 Exemplary schools, 7 schools did not have a mission statement accessible on the Internet. Furthermore, 8 Academically Unacceptable schools and 16 Exemplary schools did not have a campus-specific statement, so their district mission statement was analyzed.

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