

EVERY SCHOOL

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THE MISSION OF SCHOOL

THE MISSION OF SCHOOL MAY SEEM SIMPLE. HOWEVER, I FOUND very little agreement on what is the mission of school. In fact, I would argue that this lack of a common understanding is one of the major reasons schools and school districts fail to effectively educate such a large percentage of their students. The development and solid support of a mission statement is, in my opinion, essential to improving the educational attainment of students served by our public schools.

As I traveled around the country, I asked hundreds of people involved in education the simple question, “What is the mission of school?” I asked because I was genuinely interested in knowing what we were trying to do with school. I had never thought about that question before, but I assumed people in the world of public education would definitely know. They would tell me and I could then get on to the question of how best to help schools achieve their mission.

Perhaps not surprisingly, I found there was no common definition or firm knowledge about the mission of school. Everyone had an opinion, but none was very specific nor of much help in providing clear direction for managing a school.

Many times I asked the question and received a blank stare. Sometimes I received an amused look. In some cases I was looked upon as being stupid for asking a question to which everyone supposedly knew the answer. In other cases, I received a variety of pat answers, such as:

- To educate children

- To prepare young people for life in the twenty-first century
- To prepare young people for the world of work

In one instance, a teacher told me the mission of school was, “to deliver the state-mandated curriculum to students.”

In time it became obvious I was asking a question rarely asked by anyone. However, when pressed, even long-time educators had difficulty answering the question with any specificity and none of them came up with a response that was, in my mind, accurate or adequate.

The old adage, “if you don’t know where you are going, any road will get you there” could apply to our schools. Because without agreeing on the mission of school, it is impossible to generate a plan to make schools effective and to have them achieve their intended purpose.

Most people believe the mission of school is to educate children. However, that is so obvious it does not really tell us anything. It’s like saying the mission of business is to make a profit. Both sound correct, but neither is a true mission. Rather, educating children and making a profit are goals. Neither goal defines the real purpose of the organization, nor does either provide the people working in it with a clear understanding of why the organization exists. All businesses want to make a profit, but they exist for totally different reasons. For example, if the mission of business was to make a profit, then the missions of Apple, General Motors, Holiday Inn, and the corner dry cleaner would all be the same. Of course, each of these businesses has a different mission even though they all share the same goal of wanting to be profitable.

In the same way, if the mission of school is to “educate children,” then that applies equally to K–12 schools, Sunday schools, community colleges, universities and the local karate studio. The term “educate children” does apply to all schools, but it is not a mission statement—it is a goal. It is also a goal of parents, or it should be. Moreover, what does it mean to “educate children?” What is an educated child?

Thus, the question stands: “What is the mission of school?” To answer that, one must first decide what the objective is and then decide what is required to meet that objective. A mission statement defines the purpose for an organization’s existence. To be useful to the organization, the mission statement must be clear, concise, understood and committed to by the members of the organization.

Since no one gave me an answer that I found useful, I developed my own. I thought about the role of public schools in our society, and how schools relate to what I believe we need to achieve through the education of our young people. I looked at the history of our schools and tried to assess what might have worked in the past, what is working now, and what is not working now. How did we turn out a Jefferson or a Lincoln without compulsory public schools? What is it that a person needs to learn to be considered educated? What role does school have in turning out educated adults? These and other similar questions influenced my thinking in developing a mission statement for school.

If the goal of school is to turn out an educated child, then we must define such a child. In other words, we must define what an educated child should know and be able to do, and we should know when we have achieved the goal.

An Educated Child

IN 1992, the Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) of the federal Department of Labor prepared a report on what young people would need to know and be able to do in order to be employable in the twenty-first century. That report suggested five mandatory skills. Those skills were the ability to:

- Manage resources
- Work with others
- Acquire and use information
- Understand systems

- Use technology⁴⁰

Note: Some 20 years later, not a single state requires the mastery of even one of these skills in order to graduate from high school.

This list was perhaps influenced by an insightful article in *Fortune Magazine* (January 22, 1992), in which the authors suggested that an educated child would need to have:

- An ability to communicate effectively, orally and in writing
- A thorough grounding in literature and the social sciences, especially history and geography
- An understanding of the principles of higher mathematics, including the ability to apply those principles to daily life
- Knowledge of the physical sciences, including how these disciplines relate to the environment
- Mastery of at least one foreign language and culture
- Enough familiarity with computers and other technology to retrieve and use information easily
- An appreciation for the fine arts
- A genuine understanding of how the U.S. government and economy function
- Concern for physical health
- Above all else, the ability to identify problems and work creatively toward solutions⁴¹

A few years later, Howard Gardner in his book *Globalization: Culture and Education in the New Millennium* suggested seven skills needed for life in the twenty-first century. Those skills include an ability to:

- Understand global systems
- Think analytically and creatively within disciplines

40. Department of Labor, *Secretary's Report on Necessary Skills* (1992).

41. Kenneth Labich, "What Our Kids Must Learn," *Fortune Magazine* (January 27, 1992), 64–66.

- Tackle problems and issues that do not respect disciplinary boundaries
- Interact civilly and productively with individuals from different backgrounds—both within one’s society and across the world
- Understand and respect their own cultural traditions
- Foster hybrid or blended identities—the ability to work, think and play across cultural boundaries
- Foster tolerance within and across nations⁴²

The above lists of skills represent some good thinking. The *Fortune Magazine* list strikes me as being the best and most complete. It delineates what a child would need to learn to be considered a well-educated person. Education scholars have updated and expanded this list to emphasize skills they deem important in this age of global commerce, but they tend to agree on key details. Based upon their scholarship and my own observations, I have developed the following list. Here is what I think a high school graduate needs to know and be able to do to be considered educated. The graduate must have:

- Communication skills:
 - Is able to read, write and speak the English language
 - Is able to use technology to acquire and use information
- Citizenship skills:
 - Has an understanding of this country’s history and the Constitution, has an appreciation of the right to vote, and intends to exercise that right
 - Has a basic understanding of economics and of how our economy works
- Global skills:
 - Has studied another language and culture

42. Howard Gardner, *Globalization: Culture and Education in the New Millennium* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 23–24.

- Has a reasonable understanding of world geography
- Math and science skills:
 - Can use and apply mathematical skills in daily life
 - Has an understanding of the physical sciences
- Personal qualities:
 - Does not lie, cheat or steal
 - Appreciates the needs of others
 - Is understanding of differing viewpoints
 - Has a good work ethic
 - Takes responsibility for his or her own actions
 - Has an understanding of the human body and how to live a healthy life

David Brooks, in his book *The Social Animal* asserts that *character* is a quality critical to the successful living of life. He describes people with character as being: “energetic, honest and dependable. They were persistent after setback and acknowledged their mistakes. They possessed enough integrity to live up to their commitments. They tried to recognize their weaknesses, atone for their sins, and control their worst impulses.”⁴³

I like Brooks’ definition and feel it is a good description of the personal qualities needed to live a successful life in a civilized society. Willard Daggett further reinforces this point in his paper on “Addressing the Issue of Character.” There he notes:

Whether we look at the basic characteristics of good citizenship from a democratic, religious, cultural or social/economic perspective, the same set of guiding principles keeps manifesting itself. Respect, responsibility, trustworthiness, loyalty, honesty, compassion, perseverance, courage, deliberateness, initiative, optimism and adaptability are

43. David Brooks, *The Social Animal* (New York: Random House, 2011), 8.

all important qualities regardless of a person's gender or political, racial and religious convictions."⁴⁴

Character education takes on even more importance when you look at the history of societies. As Lawrence W. Reed, President of the Foundation for Economic Education, states in his excellent article on the history of the Roman Empire:

The paramount lesson of the Roman experience is actually not peculiar to Rome. It may be, in fact, the most universal lesson of all history: No people who have lost their character have kept their liberties.⁴⁵

Brooks summarizes the discussion of character education by saying, "We are good at teaching technical skills, but when it comes to the most important things, like character, we have almost nothing to say."⁴⁶

You will note there is nothing in my list of education skills and principles that relates to grade point averages or the number of degrees or letters that appear after a person's name. Society does not measure people that way, nor should it. Rather, society measures people based on character, on personality, on morals, on work ethic, on devotion to family, on patriotism, on civic-mindedness, and on overall preparedness for living in a civilized society.

Education provides preparation for life. It is about equipping a young person to live in our society and become a productive citizen. It is not about whether the child is good or bad at math or science, although those are important. It is about knowing how to live and to contribute, in the child's own way, to the betterment of our world.

A young person possessing the skills and attributes listed above is able to take care of himself or herself, is able to earn a living, will not be a burden on society and accepts accountability and responsibility for his

44. Willard R. Daggett, "School Reform," International Center for Leadership in Education, Inc. (1998), 2, http://www.arkansased.org/public/userfiles/Learning_Services/Curriculum%20and%20Instruction/Char%20Cent%20Teach/dagget.pdf.

45. Lawrence W. Reed, "Are We Rome," Foundation for Economic Education (2014), 4, http://www.fee.org/files/doclib/20130620_FEEAreWeRomeCover1V5.pdf.

46. David Brooks, *The Social Animal* (New York: Random House, 2011), 14.

or her behavior. Such a person can best be described as a responsible citizen. This being the case, then one of the missions of school is to turn out responsible citizens.

Who Has the Responsibility?

WHO IS primarily responsible for the education of a child? Common wisdom suggests the school. Whenever student performance fails to meet expectations, parents, other citizens, policy makers and the media first blame the schools, or teachers, or both. Schools definitely impact student performance, but they are not where the primary blame belongs.

In 1992, President George H. W. Bush held an Education Summit in Charlottesville, Virginia, which Bill Clinton chaired. The summit resulted in a report, "Goals 2000."⁴⁷ The report included an amazing statistic. It stated that, "between birth and age 18, a young person will spend 90 percent of his life somewhere other than in school."⁴⁸

Initially I didn't believe this figure and so calculated it myself and came up with 89.7 percent. This profound statistic suggests that schools are only one component of a child's education, but they are not the most important component. The statistic shows that **the primary responsibility for the education of a child rests with the child's parents or guardians, not with the school.** It also shows that because parents and guardians have the primary responsibility for the education of their child, schools actually serve parents in the work of educating their child. **Expressed another way, parents are the true customers of schools.**

This reasoning is not common in public education, but it has long been recognized by private schools. Private school parents are not only the primary source of funding, they are also considered the primary teachers of children. Private school teachers and administrators know

47. Department of Labor, "Raising Standards for American Education" (1992), <http://www.scribd.com/doc/143404039/National-Council-On-Education-Standards-and-Testing-Raising-Standards-for-American-Education>.

48. *Ibid.*, 2.

that without extensive parental involvement in a child's education, that child will struggle. Successful public schools have also figured this out.

Children who have no parents or have parents unable or unwilling to participate in their child's education must receive such nurturing from another caring adult. Sometimes that is a grandparent, a neighbor, a teacher or another who provides a positive daily influence on a child. Teachers in private boarding schools can fill this role, or they should. The involvement of a caring adult in a child's education is vital, and since schools only occupy 10 percent of a child's life, the caring adult's intervention can best be done at home. It is becoming increasingly obvious that no child can be adequately prepared for adulthood without the care, nurture and love of an involved adult.

If parents are the primary educators of children, then schools, to be successful, must engage parents. They must treat parents as customers/partners and encourage parental involvement both at school and in the home. This reality is borne out of any analysis of high-performing schools, whether private or public. You will almost never find a high-performing school that does not have an inordinate amount of parental involvement. Such schools encourage, even demand, such involvement because they recognize the vital importance of parental participation in student learning.

This reality dictates how schools and districts must operate. They must cater to parents, meet parental requirements, and become parent-friendly. Smart schools and districts are creating *parent rooms* in schools. These rooms are designated for—and only for—parents to use during their school visits. Successful schools set goals for parental involvement and keep track of such involvement. Even in poverty-stricken neighborhoods, successful schools are able to engage parents in ways that are truly amazing. I have visited schools where welfare mothers, living in tenement housing, spend long hours in their children's school and come to believe that their children can be successful and that they, as parents, play an important role in making that happen.

Parents have many other partners who share in their responsibility—family members, friends, neighbors, peers, churches, synagogues or mosques and, of course, schools. Of those, however, the primary partner is the school.

The Mission

THUS, MY definition of the mission of a school recognizes the role of parents and the need to educate the child beyond the area of academics. My definition of the mission of a school is:

**To serve as the primary partner, with parents,
in the total development of their child into a
responsible citizen.**

Implications

FROM THIS mission statement, the following conclusions become obvious:

- The customer of a school is the parent, not the child, a labor union or the government.
- Parental involvement is essential for the successful operation of a school and for the successful education of a child.
- Communication between parent and teacher is essential.
- Schools need to teach more than academics.
- Parents are the most important teachers of their child.

The above conclusions also show why neighborhood schools are so important. They are particularly important in urban neighborhoods where parents may not own a car and have difficulty becoming involved in their child's school if it is located a significant distance from the child's home.

Separation of parent and school by distance explains why mandatory busing, a social experiment, was unsuccessful. It failed, not because of racism (although race was certainly a factor), but because busing sys-

tematically removed parents from the education of their child and from involvement in their child's school.

I have come to the conclusion that the racial integration of our schools is really a question of the real estate market, not a social policy issue. There will always be concentrations of like people in specific neighborhoods. We saw that in various cities in the early years of our country's development. Italian people concentrated in one part of town, Irish people in another and Polish people in still another. Most major cities have a Chinatown. This is normal and predictable.

Today, we see Korean neighborhoods, Vietnamese neighborhoods, Hispanic neighborhoods, etc. We have always had African-American neighborhoods, part of which was due to past racism, but part due to a desire to live near people of like backgrounds. This concentration of similar people causes neighborhood schools to have concentrations of like types of students. This is to be expected and should not be discouraged or denied. Rather, parents must maintain control of where their child goes to school, and having that child as close to home as possible is beneficial to that child's education, particularly in the early grades. This belief will often yield highly concentrated populations of racially and/or ethnically similar children. Some call this the re-segregation of our schools. However, if a parent chooses the school closest to home and lives in a racially concentrated community, then that is not segregation. It is parental choice.

The important question is not, "Who is sitting next to my child in class?" but rather, "Is my child attending a quality school?" School districts, cities and the courts should spend more time improving the quality of all schools rather than managing the racial, ethnic or cultural makeup of particular student bodies. Also, total choice with a preference to the neighborhood school is, in my mind, the best type of "student assignment" policy.

Role of the Parent

SCHOOLS MUST have parental involvement if they are to be successful in achieving their mission. In one school I visited, there was a contract between the school and the parents. The school agreed to ensure that their child would perform at grade level or higher in every subject, if the parents agreed that the child would come to school well fed, clean, rested and adequately clothed, that the parents would attend meetings at the school as requested, and that they would perform at home those tasks requested of them by the teachers.

Parents were asked to commit to reading to their child every day for at least 20 minutes. This was an elementary school located in a low-income neighborhood. The population of the school was 80 percent minority students, and over 70 percent of the student body qualified for free or reduced lunches (the definition used in education to define poverty). The students did very well. There was high parental involvement and virtually no disciplinary problems.

Total Development

I SELECTED the term *total development* very carefully. Total development means the child is taught values, learns right from wrong, acquires self-confidence and can get along with others. The child also has a good work ethic, in addition to knowing math, science, English, reading, writing, and other subjects.

Total development cannot occur only in school, but it must be a part of school. Total development demands that the adults in school serve as excellent role models for the children. Teachers must help instill the traits needed for successful living. As we know, core habits of motivation, empathy, self-control and persistence are necessary for living in our society and are also key components in a child's ability to learn. Self-discipline is more important than IQ when it comes to academic performance.⁴⁹ Also, "conscientiousness—a tendency to be responsible, hard

49. Amanda Ripley, *The Smartest Kids in the World* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013), 120.

working, and organized—matters at every point in the human life cycle. It even predicts how long people will live—with more accuracy than intelligence or background.”⁵⁰

Responsible Citizen

THE TERM *responsible citizen* means that the child, upon graduation, is able to take care of himself or herself and will not become a burden to society. It means the child will enter adulthood capable of making a living or capable of continuing his or her formal education. It means that he or she recognizes personal ownership of behavior, self-management and creating success. A responsible citizen is an adult knowledgeable enough about our country’s history, government, Constitution and economic system to be an informed voter. Finally, a responsible citizen is an adult capable of being a responsible parent.

Conclusion

IF WE, as a society, could instill in our young people the skills and character traits listed above, we would have an educated, responsible electorate. We would reduce poverty and crime, and our country would become extraordinarily competitive in world markets. Our government would operate more effectively and efficiently, because there would be far fewer people dependent upon the social safety-net services provided by government.

This mission statement suggests that our schools should operate differently than they do today. Not only must schools recognize their role in the total development of a child, they must recognize the role of parents and of the community. They must be attuned to meeting the requirements of both the parents and the child. They must give parents greater opportunity and responsibility to be involved in their children’s education.

Schools should become community learning centers where not only the child but also the parents and members of the community can gather

50. Ibid., 123.

to learn and to participate in the total development of the child. School employees must model behavior and structure that will enhance the total development of the child. Teachers and administrators need to understand that their role extends far beyond teaching a subject; they need to be teachers about life. They need to be role models in everything they do.

In summary, the mission of school can provide the very foundation upon which our society can be improved and rebuilt. It is obvious that our society has many problems today at all levels. It is equally obvious that the trouble starts early in life and continues from one generation to another. If we can get back to basics by promoting personal accountability and by teaching strong character traits to our young people, in addition to academics, a multitude of other social ills will start to heal. Understanding the mission of school is the key starting point.

