

FROM THE TRENCHES

Mission and Vision in Education

by Edward G. Rozycki

Happy talk, keep talking happy talk,
 Talk about things you'd like to do,
 You gotta have a dream, if you don't have a dream,
 How you gonna have a dream come true?

—Rodgers and Hammerstein, *South Pacific*

Junk Food

Like all sweet things, happy talk risks being addictive. Our educational institutions, responding to public pressure for the upbeat and the heart-warming, have become intellectually obese with happy talk: sweet slogans that enervate clear definition of goals, that obscure inquiry into their achievability, and that have provoked the “fad diets” of standardized testing, teacher accountability, and lockstep curriculum.

A recent vogue has been to introduce another layer of happy talk on top of the timeworn expatiation on missions and goals: statements of vision. Theoretically, we might say that vision statements justify leadership claims on resources. A non-academic might ask, “Just what do you do to earn your salary?” “Provide vision,” comes the answer. Absent critical examination, however, there may be precious little difference between vision and delusion, if by “statements of vision” we mean verbal concatenations mistaken for causal analyses.

As generally conceived, vision statements provide the impetus for missions. And mission statements provide the targets for goal statements. We might find the relationships easy to understand with this simple illustration:

Vision statement: We'll have pie in the sky by and by.

Mission statement: We'll bake something that flies.

Goal statement: We'll make some dough.

Unfortunately, as the history of American education so vividly attests, once this goal has been reached, the missionaries absent themselves from the educational scene with alacrity. The point here is not to ridicule visions or missions, but to suggest they be tempered with a sense of proportion, a knowledge of resources available, and cool evaluation of the likelihood of success. Above all else, it is important to stop sacrificing the Good to pursuit of a Vision of the Best.

Mission and Vision Statements: The GIGO Effect

Much criticism has it that teachers are ill prepared in college for the reality of their jobs in schools. Little attention has been paid, however, to how teachers are subjected, once they have been hired, to group-think processes of indoctrination, usually called “staff development.” Staff development works not infrequently to increase their credulity, stultify their normal critical abilities, and undermine their capacity for reasoned judgment. Much staff development in education is dedicated to examining mission and vision statements.

Here is a mission statement from an affluent school district just outside Philadelphia: *Empower each student to succeed in life and contribute to society.* There is perhaps no more certain indicator of the depth to which our society has been secularized than in the mission statements of those who arrogate to themselves heretofore Divine attributes of Omnipotence and Omniscience. Imagine educators in a middle or high school knowing that they have empowered their students to succeed in life—or perhaps that is merely hyperbole for teaching the students to be literate and minimally mathematical. Are we, then, to imagine that educators are so ego-deficient that someone must routinely, grandiosely, recast their humble yet important achievements of basic schooling as feats of historical significance?

Another nearby community has its schools profess: *The mission of the X School District is to ensure that every student is inspired and prepared to be a passionate lifelong learner and a productive, invested participant in the local and global communities.* (Can one even say this aloud without hyperventilating?) Weeks of faculty time are spent cooking this mission down into supposedly operational goals. On the surface, the issue is this: how are teachers to bring the mission into their day-to-day pursuits? Instruction time is forgone as teachers meet to pursue this will-o'-the-wisp. In their committees they find out that the surface is only to be polished: hardly ever scratched. Insightful or possibly critical questions are deflected during the group-think process by the school's resident lickspittle, who cajoles those assembled into “preserving a collegial atmosphere” and “keeping everyone on task”—an insinuation that probing inquiry is “out of place” or “not quite professional.”

Whatever scatterbrained confabulations the staff generates are taken as answers, solemnly recorded and duly acceptable to local, state, and regional accrediting agencies. As they say in the computer-programming world, GIGO—garbage in, garbage out.

Such activity wastes time, spirit, and intellect—ask any educator (in private)—because the mission statement is never subjected to careful scrutiny prior to attempts to “operationalize” it: “Our vision is yadda, yadda. Our mission, therefore, is blah, blah, blah. What does this mean for your classroom?” “For me it means *glug, glug, glug!*” “Excellent! We’ll definitely meet our accreditation requirements now.”

Mission and Vision Statements: Organizational Sporks

Unless you have dealt with preschoolers, you may not have encountered a Spork. Sporks are plastic spoons with a few dull tines molded into their tips so they can work somewhat like forks to pick up food. Sporks are for novices—those too inexperienced to handle spoon and fork expertly on their own. We also give children Sporks if we do not trust them to use them as we want, e.g., as eating utensils rather than as swords for dueling or shovels for digging, or whatever fertile imagination may dream up. Sporks are safe. But they are hardly precision instruments.

The primary use of mission or vision statements is as dull utensils of publicity and persuasion: they are slogans intended to motivate people to selected ends and to obscure the real differences of opinion normally found in school communities. Clever staff-development processes invite all members of the school community to “contribute” to the formulation of mission statements but leave the authority for interpreting those vague residues of concern in the hands of the few. That’s why probing questions are discouraged. When authority and control of resources are the real issues, educators are invited to keep talkin’ happy talk.

Educator Dementation

I work with doctoral students in education. Most of them are principals, superintendents, or other school administrators. They are intelligent, dedicated, hard-working people. But they are so involved in the political environment of the schools that they confuse the language appropriate to such an environment with that necessary to delineate a research problem carefully. They imagine that visions, missions, and goals automatically relate as causes and effects. They believe that ideas which are articulable are variables which are measurable; that voices which are ignored are voices of assent.

When I talk to my students about non-educational matters, I notice that they have not lost their capacity for careful judgment; they have a clear sense of costs and benefits and of the likelihood of achieving them.

They have a normally developed conception of cause and effect. And they know how to deliberate on ethical issues as well as anyone. But when the discussion wanders into the field of education, their common sense suddenly shrivels: they treat their general knowledge, their life's wisdom, as nothing. That, I believe, is the consequence of the indoctrination they have received as educators. That is what is wrong with the pre-service training of teachers, not some lack of technical expertise or content-area knowledge. In-service staff development—in particular, the perpetual blather about visions, missions, and goals—just reinforces their intellectual, psychological, and moral lobotomy.

Assessing Visions and Missions

So I train my students to ask questions. I assure them it is legitimate to subject the dogmas and slogans of their profession to the same kind of scrutiny that they do other concerns of life. In particular, I teach them to consistently formulate two kinds of questions: critical questions, and criteria questions.

Critical questions worry the causal assumptions of a vision or mission statement. They may also look to uncover alternatives to the means-ends relationships alluded to. Criteria questions ask how we identify items mentioned in a mission or vision.

For example, let's examine the mission mentioned earlier:

The Mission of the X School District is to ensure that every student is inspired and prepared to be a passionate lifelong learner and a productive, invested participant in the local and global communities.

Critical questions are:

1. How does what happens to students during the time they are in X School District cause them to be lifelong learners? Are there later important influences? How can we ensure that outcome?
2. Need they be passionate about it?
3. Is inspiration necessary or sufficient to have that effect?
4. How does what happens to students during the time they are in X School District cause them to be productive participants in either the local or global community? Are there later important influences?
5. Need it be both local and global communities?
6. Will we not be satisfied if they are not "invested"?

Criteria questions hammer away at two points: what are the criteria for identifying important terms, and how will we know at any given time that those criteria have been met? Some examples are:

7. What are the criteria for being a lifelong learner? How can we tell whether an eighth-grader will meet those criteria at age forty-five, or if he will be “passionate” about it?
8. Does a successful, compulsive gambler count as a passionate life-long learner?
9. What do we mean by a “productive, invested participant”?
10. What kind of participation counts as being in the local, or global, community?

My students who undertake analyses of vision or mission statements find this activity easy, once they get over the shock that I am inviting them to think along these lines. They burst out frequently in gleeful laughter yet insist that they will never have the opportunity to ask such questions on the job.

I ask them, “Why is that, do you suppose?”

I get many variations on the same answer: “You ask questions like that and they’ll take you for a troublemaker.”

Then I get down to the moral of the lesson: Be assertive. Tell your potential critics that you are coming at the vision and mission statements from a research and implementation perspective. If they will not or cannot answer your critical and criteria questions, then all the visioning and missioning in the world will not amount to anything more than wishful thinking and wasted time.

Edward G. Rozycki is a twenty-five-year veteran of the school district of Philadelphia. He is an associate professor of education at Widener University, Widener, Pennsylvania.