
The Mission Statement Primer

Matthew J. Taylor, PhD
Center for the School of the Future
Utah State University
Logan, UT

January, 2008



Writing a Mission Statement

A Mission Statement is an agreed upon set of declarations concerning the purpose of an organization. Mission statements vary in length and format, and although your team is welcome to approach this task in any way they want, this primer will walk you through a process that should produce a mission statement that will both serve the school and simplify the accreditation process.

To create your Mission Statement, this primer will suggest a process that starts with 1) brainstorming components, followed by 2) prioritizing and finalizing these components, 3) choosing a format, 4) writing the mission statement, and ultimately gaining consensus from the school community. Below is a brief description of that process followed by examples. Latter sections provide a more extensive treatment of these steps along with suggestions on how to revise a current Mission Statement.

I Brainstorming Activity – The brainstorming activity is nothing more than the mission writers responding to the following four questions until they exhaust favorable ideas:

1. What outcomes are we trying to produce?
2. What is needed to accomplish our goals?
3. What do we value?
4. What do we believe?

II Prioritize and Finalize Components –The goal of this step is to reduce the products of the brainstorming activity to components that will be included in the final Mission Statement. This will require three steps:

1. Reduce the list of answers from the brainstorming activity to 10 – 15 components
2. Evaluate each remaining component by writing a definition and identifying available data sources to summarize status or change
3. Reduce the list to 6 – 8 components that will be included in the final Mission Statement

III Choose a Format – There are many format styles that Mission Statements can take, but we suggest you draw from the ones listed below:

- Mission Statement - A mission statement is an agreed upon set of declarations concerning the purpose of an organization.
- Value Statements – Value statements are usually lists of single words (or constructs using more than one word) followed by supporting statements.
- Guiding Principles – Guiding principles state beliefs concerning how groups of people are, or become successful.
- Motto – Mottos summarize desired attributes in a text that is intended to be memorized by all members of the school community.

IV Write the Mission Statement – Although Mission Statements are not usually written using a formula, it should be noted that the final form your Mission Statement takes is secondary to its components and how they will be evaluated. The last section of this primer includes writing formulas that may be helpful.

Example

What follows is an example from a fictitious school; the George Washington High School Eagles. This example takes you through each step, eventually branching at the end to demonstrate many options presented in this primer.

I Brainstorming Activity – Below is the result of the Brainstorming Activity for George Washington High School. Although a real session might yield a list many times this size, for simplicity sake, we provide you with a few examples of components.

After this list was complete, voting took place and the components in green made it to the next step.

1. What outcomes are we trying to produce?
 - a. Academic Excellence
 - b. Cultural Tolerance
 - c. Quality Citizens
 - d. Parent Involvement
 - e. Safe Environment
 - f. Breadth of Experiences
 - g.
2. What is needed to accomplish our goals?
 - a. Highly Qualified Teachers
 - b. Unified Vision
 - c. Community Involvement
 - d. Happy Employees
 - e. Collaborative Spirit
 - f. Quality Facilities
 - g.
3. What do we value?
 - a. Integrity
 - b. Hard Work
 - c. Excellence
 - d. Dedication
 - e. Accountability
 - f. Understanding
 - g.
4. What do we believe?
 - a. All students can learn
 - b. Instruction is more effective if data are used to drive decisions
 - c. Students flourish in supportive environments
 - d. Students and their families are our customers
 - e. Teachers can make a difference in parent support and student commitment
 - f. Leadership is the foundation of school success
 - g.

II Prioritize and Finalize Components –The next step was to evaluate each remaining component (the ones in green from the last step). The writers started by defining each component to help unify their thoughts. The writers were careful to define what audiences they were referring to (e.g., students, teachers, administration, all school staff, everyone). If your team needs help, the Internet is a good resource for definitions. Remember that there is typically no one correct definition for any component, so find as many as you can and assemble them to represent how your team sees that component.

Next, the writers brainstormed what data were available to summarize each component. This table shows the results and breaks things into tests of knowledge, counts of behaviors or events, and collections of opinions. For now, the writers only needed to identify one or two indicators for each component, and didn't worry about finding one of each kind. The idea here was to determine if the component is too vague to make it to the next step. As an example, see Cultural Tolerance in the table below. The writers were able to define it, but couldn't come up with indicators to summarize it, so it was eliminated.

Component	Definition		
	Test of Knowledge	Count of Behaviors	Gathering of Opinions
Academic Excellence	Academic excellence describes an education that provides students with the means to pursue any career path, and insures that every student reaches mastery over basic math, science, and language skills.		
	Criterion Referenced Tests	Students entering post-secondary options	School satisfaction surveys
Cultural Tolerance	Cultural tolerance is the capacity for, or the practice of recognizing and respecting the beliefs or practices of other cultures, ethnicities, political views, religions, and lifestyles.		
	NA	NA	NA
Safe Environment	A safe school environment is one where students do not fear for their physical and emotional safety and emergency plans are reviewed and practiced regularly.		
	NA	Safe-school violations, attendance	School climate surveys
Highly Qualified Teachers	A highly qualified teacher is one who has (1) fulfilled the state's certification and licensing requirements, (2) obtained at least a bachelor's degree, and (3) demonstrated subject matter expertise.		
	NA	Teachers achieving "Highly Qualified" status in this state	Teacher satisfaction surveys
Unified Vision	A unified vision implies that school staff members share explicit common goals for students, faculty, and the school community as a whole.		
	Progress on explicit goals evident in every class		School climate surveys

Collaborative Spirit	A collaborative spirit implies that teachers work together and individually to achieve common goals without worry that their efforts will meet open or furtive resistance or contradiction.		
	NA	Attendance, tardies, ODR	School climate surveys
Integrity	Being honest and having a steadfast adherence to a strict moral or ethical code.		
	NA	Honor code violations, dress code violations, ODR, tardies	NA
Dedication	Students demonstrate selfless devotion to completing goals in academic achievement and citizenship.		
	NA	Homework completion rates, graduation rates, attendance, tardies, extracurricular participation	NA
Accountability	Accountability is the obligation administrators, teachers, and students and other school staff have to take responsibility for their actions and the state of their responsibilities.		
	Criterion Referenced Tests	Attendance, tardies, ODR	School climate surveys
Understanding	Understanding is characterized by comprehension, sensitivity, and empathy.		
	NA	Safe-school violations	School climate surveys
Learn	To learn is to obtain desirable and useful knowledge, skills, or understanding as a product of participating in the school process and culture.		
	Criterion Referenced Tests	ODR, Attendance, tardies	NA
Supportive Environment	A supportive environment is one that prioritizes the reinforcement of acceptable behavior over the punishing of misbehavior.		
	NA	ODR, Safe-school violations, Attendance	School climate surveys
Leadership	Leadership is the ability to inspire others by providing an appropriate behavior model and by building relationships with others in the school community so that accomplishments can be proactively engineered.		
	Criterion Referenced Tests	Attendance, graduation rates	School satisfaction surveys

III Choose a Format (Example #1) – Below are the remaining components. Following the component evaluation and final vote, the components in red were selected to be part of the Mission Statement. Given that this example identified components that were outcomes, resources, values, and beliefs, the team chose to write a single mission statement to incorporate them all.

1. What outcomes are we trying to produce?
 - a. **Academic Excellence**
 - b. ~~Cultural Tolerance~~
 - c. **Safe Environment**
2. What is needed to accomplish our goals?
 - a. **Highly Qualified Teachers**
 - b. **Unified Vision**
 - c. Collaborative Spirit
3. What do we value?
 - a. **Integrity**
 - b. Dedication
 - c. **Accountability**
 - d. Understanding
4. What do we believe?
 - a. **All students can learn**
 - b. **Students flourish in supportive environments**
 - c. Leadership is the foundation of school success

IV Write the Mission Statement – For this example, the team followed the basic formula for the mission statement.

Eagle Mission

George Washington High School is dedicated to producing **academic excellence** in a **safe environment** by engaging **highly qualified teachers** with a **unified vision**. We value **integrity** and **accountability** and believe that **all students can learn** and **flourish in a supportive environment**.

III Choose a Format (Example #2) – Below are the remaining components. Following the component evaluation and final vote, the components in red were selected to be part of the Mission Statement. For this example, the team selected several components that were values, so they chose to write value statements along side their mission statement.

1. What outcomes are we trying to produce?
 - a. **Academic Excellence**
 - b. ~~Cultural Tolerance~~
 - c. **Safe Environment**
2. What is needed to accomplish our goals?
 - a. **Highly Qualified Teachers**
 - b. **Unified Vision**
 - c. **Collaborative Spirit**
3. What do we value?
 - a. **Integrity**
 - b. **Dedication**
 - c. **Accountability**
 - d. Understanding
4. What do we believe?
 - a. All students can learn
 - b. Students flourish in supportive environments
 - c. Leadership is the foundation of school success

IV Write the Mission Statement – Again, the team followed the basic formula for both the mission statement and the value statements. Notice that the definitions used to evaluate the components made their way to the value statements.

Eagle Mission

George Washington High School is dedicated to producing **academic excellence** in a **safe environment** by engaging **highly qualified teachers** with a **unified vision** and a **collaborative spirit**.

Eagle Values

Integrity – Our students and staff will exemplify steadfast adherence to a strict moral and ethical code.

Dedication – Our students and staff will exemplify selfless devotion to completing goals in academic achievement and citizenship.

Accountability – Our students and staff will take responsibility for their actions and the state of their responsibilities.

III Choose a Format (Example #3) – Below are the remaining components. Following the component evaluation and final vote, the components in red were selected to be part of the Mission Statement. For this example, the team selected several components that were beliefs, so they chose to write guiding principles along side their mission statement.

1. What outcomes are we trying to produce?
 - a. **Academic Excellence**
 - b. ~~Cultural Tolerance~~
 - c. **Safe Environment**
2. What is needed to accomplish our goals?
 - a. Highly Qualified Teachers
 - b. Unified Vision
 - c. **Collaborative Spirit**
3. What do we value?
 - a. **Integrity**
 - b. Dedication
 - c. Accountability
 - d. Understanding
4. What do we believe?
 - a. **All students can learn**
 - b. **Students flourish in supportive environments**
 - c. **Leadership is the foundation of school success**

IV Write the Mission Statement – Again, the team followed the basic formula for both the mission statement, but took some liberties with the guiding principles.

Eagle Mission

George Washington High School is dedicated to producing **academic excellence** in a **safe environment** where we value **integrity** and a **collaborative spirit**.

Eagle Principles

- **All students can learn** given effective instruction.
- **Students flourish in supportive environments.**
- **School success depends on the quality leadership** of administration, teachers, and students.

III Choose a Format (Example #4) – Below are the remaining components. Following the component evaluation and final vote, the components in red were selected to be part of the Mission Statement. For this example, the team selected only three components and chose to write a motto as their entire Mission Statement.

1. What outcomes are we trying to produce?
 - a. **Academic Excellence**
 - b. ~~Cultural Tolerance~~
 - c. Safe Environment
2. What is needed to accomplish our goals?
 - a. Highly Qualified Teachers
 - b. Unified Vision
 - c. Collaborative Spirit
3. What do we value?
 - a. **Integrity**
 - b. Dedication
 - c. Accountability
 - d. **Understanding**
4. What do we believe?
 - a. All students can learn
 - b. Students flourish in supportive environments
 - c. Leadership is the foundation of school success

IV Write the Mission Statement – Since there was no formula for mottos, the team had to get creative. Although this motto won't get on TV, it is short and suggests the highest priorities of the school.

George Washington High School Motto

Eagles strive for **academic excellence**, demonstrate **integrity**, and look for **understanding**.

Further Explanation

Mission Statements can address a variety of different constructs related to school processes, culture, and outcomes. For this primer, we will refer to these constructs as “components.” When considering components of a mission statement, we suggest that mission writers draw from the following domains:

- Outcomes – The desired products of both instruction and experiencing school activities and culture.
- Resources – The characteristics of school staff and facilities needed to produce the desired outcomes.
- Values – The most desirable positive attributes of all members of the school community.
- Beliefs – Principles that universally describe how schools or groups of people are, or become successful.

These domains provide a good starting place, and they cover almost every descriptor that could be included in a Mission Statement.

To create your Mission Statement, this primer will suggest a process that starts with 1) brainstorming components, followed by 2) prioritizing and finalizing these components, 3) choosing a format, and finally 4) writing the mission statement, and gaining consensus from the school community.

I Brainstorming Activity – The brainstorming activity is nothing more than the mission writers responding to the following four questions until they exhaust favorable ideas:

1. What outcomes are we trying to produce?
2. What is needed to accomplish our goals?
3. What do we value?
4. What do we believe?

There are many ways to conduct brainstorming (e.g., free response, using props, shuffling papers, etc). You can find examples and suggestions on the Internet, or hire a facilitator trained to elicit the most from a group. Any way you choose, aim to list as many desirable answers as possible to the questions above.

II Prioritize and Finalize Components – The goal of this step is to reduce the products of the brainstorming activity to components that will be included in the final Mission Statement. There are many ways to go about this, but I suggest that whatever remains, leads to attributes of the school process and products that can be evaluated with ongoing assessment. By considering these processes and products now, your entire school improvement plan can be seamless (from Mission Statement to accreditation) and easier to follow. This will require three steps:

1. Reduce the list of answers from the brainstorming activity to 10 – 15 components
2. Evaluate each remaining component by writing a definition and identifying available data sources to summarize status or change
3. Reduce the list to 6 – 8 components that will be included in the final Mission Statement

Step 1 – When your mission writing team has completed the brainstorming activity, make a clean list of your components (answers to questions 1 thru 4) with room for votes to be cast, and make copies for each member. Each of the mission writers are allowed to cast 7 votes. They can spread them out over 7 different components, cast all 7 votes for one component, or

spread their votes out any way they choose. A single member counts the votes and makes the results public. From this vote, reduce the number of components to from ten to fifteen. The actual number will depend on how the votes cluster. Make sure this list represents a consensus of opinions. This can be done by a show of hands. If members dissent, add or delete items until a consensus is achieved.

Step 2 – The next step requires that each remaining component be evaluated. First, write definitions for components that came from questions 1, 2, and 3 (outcomes, resources, and values). Also, write definitions for appropriate terms used in components that came from question 4 (beliefs). Second, determine if there are measurable indicators for each remaining component. List at least one related construct that can be quantified using existing or proposed data collection. You will need to determine if there are data already available to summarize the indicator, or if you can locate or create appropriate assessment tools for that purpose. Consider three types of indicator data that can serve your purpose: opinions, behaviors, and knowledge. Data necessary to monitor these components can most often take the form of surveyed opinions (e.g., school climate surveys), counted behaviors or events (e.g., attendance, school safety violations), or tested knowledge (e.g., standardized tests). If a component cannot be well defined, or it is either difficult or too expensive to gather indicator data, then remove it from the list.

Step 3 – The last stage is to finalize your list of components. To do this, conduct another vote on the remaining components (those that were identified by the first vote AND met evaluation criteria). This time, reduce the number of votes to 5. The final list should not exceed 9 or be less than 3. Most typically the list will contain six to eight components. Again, make sure the final list represents a consensus of opinions.

NOTE: Although this process is set up to facilitate creativity and can produce an infinite array of final components, it is hard to believe that academic achievement in one form or another is not on your final list. In fact, I would suggest that it *must* be on the list. Your ability to gain consensus across all stakeholder groups will be severely limited without it. Also, consider including components that reflect the social and civic responsibilities that schools exemplify. These three elements; academic, social, and civic, create a sound base to work from.

III Choose a Format – There are many format styles that Mission Statements can take, but we suggest you draw from the ones listed below. Although it is confusing, Mission Statements (upper case – and the subject of this primer) usually contain mission statements (lower case – a subset of the upper case Mission Statement) and may or may not include some or all of the other format styles. There are two other format styles that we did not include for use with schools. First, Vision Statements seem so much like mission statements in a different tense that they become redundant. And second, Goal Statements are typically financial in nature, and are therefore not typically appropriate for public schools. That said; you may wish to include them anyway, but it is enough if you do limit your team to the styles listed below:

- Mission Statement (lower case) - A mission statement is an agreed upon set of declarations concerning the purpose of an organization. They vary in length, but are best if kept short. They typically start with the name of the institution.
- Value Statements – Value statements are usually lists of single words (or constructs using more than one word) followed by supporting statements. Value Statements are best employed when the final list of components, after prioritization and finalization, contains at least 3 values (answers to question 3).

- Guiding Principles – Statements that summarize guiding principles are typically written as full sentences with one sentence per principle. Guiding Principles are best employed when the final list of components, after prioritization and finalization, contains at least 3 beliefs (answers to question 4).
- Motto – Mottos summarize the most desired components in a text that is intended to be memorized by all members of the school community. This may be your choice if the final list of components is very short (e.g., 3 components) and the Motto is all you plan to have as your Mission Statement. Mottos can also be used to accentuate one or two components with the rest used in other format styles.

Select which of the format styles above are to be included in your Mission Statement, then decide which components will be incorporated into each format style. The next step is to write a first draft.

IV Write the Mission Statement – There are two methods you can employ here. First, you can write as a group with a facilitator taking dictation. Or second, you can use one or more members to write all or part of the Mission Statement on their own for later group editing. Neither is preferred over the other, but it should be clear that the final product needs to have the consensus of the mission writing team. This can be accomplished by a group negotiation and a show of hands, or by making a copy of successive drafts given to each member to mark privately until no more edits are suggested.

Although Mission Statements are not usually written using a formula, it should be noted that the final form your Mission Statement takes is secondary to its components and how they will be evaluated. That said, here are some formulae:

- Mission Statement – “[institution name] is dedicated to producing [list of outcomes] by means of [list of resources]. We value [list of values] and believe that [list of beliefs].”
- Value Statements – “[value word] – We (or Our Students, etc.) will exemplify [definition of the value word].”
- Guiding Principles – It may be easy to think of guiding principles as belief statements starting without “We believe.” Guiding principles state how persons, places, or things have a quality under certain circumstances. This may take the form: “[noun] is [adjective] when [condition].”
- Motto – Be creative. Mottos are short and memorable. They may state a vision, be a reminder, or act as a headline. They are certainly not required, but can be fun to try.

Revising a Current Mission Statement – Current Mission Statements can be in dire straits and need major revision, while others are well received and only need a quick evaluation to determine if nothing is being overlooked. This section provides some suggestions for schools looking only to revise their Mission Statement.

For those Mission Statements in very poor shape, your school can either start from scratch, or follow these steps:

1. Break the current Mission Statement into components
2. Use these components as your initial answers to the questions in the brainstorming activity
3. Continue brainstorming answers
4. Complete the remaining steps in this primer

For those Mission Statements in great shape, there is still work that can be done to determine if any edits are desirable.

1. Break the current Mission Statement into components
2. Evaluate those components by writing definitions and determine if there are data from measurable indicators available
3. Brainstorm any additional components using the four questions from the brainstorming activity
4. Evaluate any new components
5. Finalize the list and proceed to choosing a format and writing the Mission Statement

Gain Consensus from your School Community – Part of the school improvement planning process includes gaining a consensus or buy-in from all important stakeholder groups. This is an important step in the process, and it is important to realize that this step needs special attention.

There is a fine line between encouraging participation in the process and having the process feel mandated. The reward for successful accreditation can be distant and vague for some members of the school community, so participation in any part of the process may seem onerous. Providing background about accreditation and how their efforts will lead to something rewarding for the school will help.

Keep in mind that every time you request feedback from a group or person, there is incentive for them to find something wrong just to show they were paying attention. As different groups get a chance to give opinions, two things will reduce extraneous criticism. First, set deadlines for feedback. If there is constructive feedback to give, it will generally come back right away. Second, subtly give permission for stakeholders to like the Mission Statement as it stands. You can do this by writing instructions that include statements like, “If you like this Mission Statement, please let us know, the steering committee worked very hard on this and the compliment will be appreciated.” This shouldn’t stop constructive responses, and it should limit false leads.

Below is a list of important stakeholder groups and some ideas about how to get their feedback for the Mission Statement and other aspects of the strategic plan.

- School Administration – If the steering committee does not include the school principal, then this is the first place to go. Once the principal endorses the Mission Statement, enlist his/her help in promoting it to the other groups. The principal should also get the opportunity to comment on and edit the indicators.
- Faculty – The easiest way to gain consensus from this group is to make a short presentation to them at a faculty meeting. Use the format provided in the example. That is, show the results of the brainstorming activity, the complete evaluation of components, and how each vote went. This will give faculty members a better understanding and increase the chance that their comments are constructive. Comments can be collected verbally or copies of the Mission Statement can be passed out for written editorials. Faculty members should also be given a chance to respond to indicator choices.
- Parents – Each school is likely to have some formal parent committee (e.g., PTA, school-community council, etc) that can represent the population of parents. Use the same presentation you did with the faculty.
- Students – Use the student council for this purpose. A less formal presentation can be employed. Adult audiences are more likely to provide critical comment, but students need prodding. Make sure they understand the role a Mission Statement plays in their

school and in the accreditation process, and ask them if the Mission Statement is one they can actively promote to their peers. If they say no, then ask why.

- District Office – This is another audience that should be given the opportunity to edit both the Mission Statement as well as the indicators. Given the size of the school district, this audience could be the superintendent alone, or any group of administrators responsible for supporting services at the school.
- School Staff – We are referring to all non-certified adult employees at the school. This group is always a mixed bag. Some are professionals (e.g., counselors, psychologists, law enforcement, etc) while others are classified employees that can work around kids or in the middle of the night with little direct connection to instruction. These individuals can be invited to one of the other meetings or a meeting can be set up for them as a whole or in pieces. These individuals are often overlooked by the other stakeholders, but they have a large investment in the school, and many of them are parents as well. Their opinions count.
- External – It is not a bad idea to get some feedback from an outsider. This may include the state office of education, representatives from the state accreditation team, or other schools' administrators that have experienced the process recently. Don't save this for last, it may even be best to have someone in mind early in the process. You are much better off if consensus is sought for what you believe to be a final product.

Resources

The Mission Primer: Four Steps to an Effective Mission Statement, by Richard and David O'Hallaron. Mission Incorporated (1999), ISBN – 978-0967663500.

101 Mission Statements from Top Companies: Plus Guidelines for Writing Your Own Mission Statement, by Jeffrey Abrahams. Ten Speed Press (2007), ISBN – 978-1580087612.

The Wilder Nonprofit Field Guide to Crafting Effective Mission and Vision Statements, by Emil Angelica. Amherst H. Wilder Foundation (2001), ISBN – 978-0940069275.

Crisp: Organizational Vision, Values, and Mission: Building the Organization of Tomorrow (A Fifty-Minute Series Book), by Cynthia Scott. Crisp Learning (1993), ISBN – 978-1560522102.