

change planning

We first adopted a conceptual framework of strategic planning to guide the project. Strategic planning finds its roots in the work of Lewin (1943) on organizational change (Burnes 2004). Lewin described three stages of organizational change claiming that, in order to solidify meaningful change within an organization, organizational members must first unfreeze or become aware that the current

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mindset within the organization must change in order to meet new demands from the external environment. Next, organizational members, now aware of the need for change, actually experience a state of confusion or become unsettled as they recreate and redefine the new norms for the organization. Finally, once new norms and expectations have been defined, the organization experiences a state of freezing in which they establish, commit to, and become comfortable again with the new set of organizational norms, goals, and expectations (Lewin 1943).

Based upon an extensive knowledge of historical literature on planning in American and European corporations, Mintzberg (1994) sought to define the elusive construct of strategic planning. Mintzberg asserted that planning has been conceived

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discussion of the complexity of the change process in school improvement. Fullan observed that schools are not only complex organizations, but operate in constantly changing, fluid contexts. School improvement leaders are challenged, at best, to introduce and support change efforts within organizations that experience ongoing, dynamic external and internal change forces, most of which may be hidden and unexpected.

Fullan (1993) explained that, while developing a shared vision among school personnel is essential, it is important that this vision remain fluid, especially at the point of introduction of substantial change in a school. Fullan recommended that school improvement leaders remain open to reflection within and about the organization in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the context before establishing an organizational vision. Fullan wrote, "Under conditions of dynamic complexity, one needs a good deal of reflective experience before one can form a plausible vision" (p. 28).

Many other authors have contributed to the school improvement knowledge base over the last two decades, offering a wealth of research-based practices in school leadership, change processes, instructional innovations, development and organizational

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is, most simply, a statement of why an organization exists, a statement of its fundamental purpose. In the context of continuous school improvement, DuFour and Eaker (1998) described a mission statement as "stating the business of our business" and answering the question, "Why do we exist?" (p. 58). Lunenberg (2010) argued that leading an ongoing, community-wide discussion about the purpose of the organization's existence is essential to the function of school leadership and to the process of building unity and shared commitment to the work to be done in an educational organization.

Stemler et al. (2011) conducted a comprehensive content analysis of high school mission statements from a sample of schools from ten states across the United States. The authors argued that identifying the purpose of an educational organization is

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shared effort toward a common set of objectives. This lack of unity in defining a shared mission may result in a breakdown of mutual understanding of the primary purpose for the school's existence and eventually lead to fragmentation of effort among organizational actors. The purpose of developing a widely shared organizational mission, therefore, is not conducted to limit other, important functions of schools, but rather to focus members' efforts in order to reach clearly articulated and specific goals (Bryson 2004; DuFour et al. 2008; Kaufman 1992; Mintzberg 1994; Stemler et al. 2011).

According to Boerema (2006), the mission statement of a school actually articulates a set of values that answer fundamental questions about the purpose of education and how the educational program should be carried out. Boerema pointed

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Defining a vision statement

A vision statement is qualitatively different from a mission statement. A vision statement is an articulation not of purpose, but of a preferred future for the

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organization. According to DuFour and Eaker (1998), a vision statement answers the question, "What do we hope to become?" (p. 62).

A vision statement provides stakeholders with a picture of what their ideal school and students will look like if educators are successful in working together to achieve that vision. Though a vision statement should be clear and meaningful to all stakeholders, effective vision statements are concise and provide lofty, yet measurable, language so that school personnel know when the vision has been achieved or when it should be adjusted to better meet the needs of the organization (Pekarsky 2007).

Pekarsky (2007) stated that a vision statement is far more than a mere slogan. A vision statement enables school community members to assume a desired state of heart and mind with which to carry out their daily functions in the school. Stakeholders in a vision-guided organization, through the function of a clearly articulated and supported vision statement, are explicit about where they are headed,

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Defining values statements

Perhaps the least understood and under-implemented of the four foundational statements is the statement of core values. As the name suggests, core values statements articulate the shared beliefs of an organization. Again, DuFour and Eaker (1998) claimed that core values statements answer the question, "How must we behave in order to make our shared vision a reality?" (p. 88).

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purpose, ordinary people accomplish extraordinary results and give their organization a competitive edge" (p. 144). Though their work and research was conducted in a profit-driven context, key concepts may arguably be applied to non-profit organizations, as well. Blanchard and O'Connor wrote of the importance for contemporary organizations to adopt key values, such as honesty, fairness, and integrity, in order to survive in the current economy.

Blanchard and O'Connor (1997) further contended that organizations, centered on powerful, shared values, report better service to their clientele, higher profits, and a higher quality of working environments for their employees. The authors stated that it is these shared values that act as the primary authority within an organization, the authority to which all organizational members answer.

In order for statements of organizational values or belief statements to be effective and meaningful to a school community, however, they must be translated

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answer the question, "What do we believe?" but also address the question, "Based upon our core beliefs, how will we behave within our organization in order to achieve our vision?"

For example, if a school community identifies a core value of safety for its school, it is not enough merely to state, "We believe our school should be safe."

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core values statements come alive within the organization and allow leaders to observe when and if the espoused core values are actually at work or if they are, rather, mere words on a document.

Calder (2011) extended the understanding of the importance of values statements by claiming that values statements provide an important foundational pillar for how business is to be conducted. Calder wrote, "Values shape much of the work processes and, as such, influence how an institution moves forward in a positive way" (p. 24).

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and what steps are to be taken, by whom, in order to achieve the goal. Clearly, in this era of increased accountability for student learning and professional practice, setting clear, measurable performance goals has become common practice for school leaders and other school personnel. DuFour and Eaker (1998) stated that statements of learning goals address the question, "Which steps will we take first, and when?" (p. 100).

A widespread trend across the United States in school improvement efforts, especially in light of increased accountability, is the development of organizational

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and when?" (p. 100).

A widespread trend across the United States in school improvement efforts, especially in light of increased accountability, is the development of organizational goals that are Strategic, Measurable, Attainable, Results-oriented, and Time-bound or SMART goals (O'Neill 2000). The connection between effective goal setting and student achievement has been clearly established among researchers (Moeller et al. 2012).

Summary of literature review

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especially leaders, to understand the purpose of statement development. Furthermore, a deep understanding of the value of each type of statement, not merely the development of the statement, but the organization-wide ownership and investment in the principles asserted in the statement, is also imperative if school leaders are to

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make important and significant progress toward school improvement. In other words, the purpose and value of developing foundational mission, vision, values, and goals with stakeholders within an organization is not merely to have done so, and to check these tasks off of the "to do" lists. Rather, the purpose of developing these statements is to bring organizational stakeholders together to share in a common understanding of and commitment to the school's purpose, preferred future, behavioral expectations, and next steps toward school improvement and increased levels of student learning.

Methodology

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working in schools and because they would likely be knowledgeable about such foundational, organizational statements as mission, vision, values, and goals.

The authors designed the study to follow-up and extend the research conducted by Watkins and McCaw (2007) who discovered that, among their own graduate-level, educational leadership students, the ability to recall any or all of their schools' statements of mission, vision, and core values was limited, that alignment between such statements between the school and district levels was limited, and that a large majority of the recalled statements did not meet criteria for how such statements are defined in the literature on organizational improvement. The results from the current study confirm these findings and combine to suggest a disturbing lack of understanding of the purpose and value of developing and stewarding mission,

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among all school personnel (CCSSO 2008). Kouzes and Posner (2006) stated, "You can leave a lasting legacy only if you can imagine a brighter future, and the capacity to imagine exciting future possibilities is the defining competence of leaders" (p. 99).

Data from the current study suggest yet another disturbing disconnect between best practice and reality, insofar as a mere 14 % of educational leadership students

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indicate that there is no adopted vision statement in the school. What it does indicate, however, is that, even if a vision statement is clearly articulated, and even perhaps framed and hanging in the front hall, the vision itself has not been internalized by key formal and informal leaders. A statement, made by DuFour et al. (2008), springs to life in light of these data when they claimed that "there is an enormous difference between merely writing a mission [or vision] statement and actually living it" (p. 114).

No articulated organizational values

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established reality among those who have studied organizational and educational change; there exists a wide gap between theory and practice, or between what we know as educators, and what we do in schools (Dewey 1938; Fullan 1998, 1999; Pfeffer and Sutton 2000; Sarason 1971). Returning to the arguments made by leading scholars in educational change, effecting systemic change within organizations is, at best, a rare occurrence, due in part to the complexity of the organization, to the multiplicity of purposes and values espoused by organizational members, and to the fluid contexts in which they operate (Fullan 1993, 1998, 1999; Hargreaves et al. 2001; Sarason 1971). These experts argued that change agents, committed to the process of school improvement, may be unsuccessful due to a lack of understanding of the nature of this complexity. Reflecting on the work of Sarason, Fried (2003) re-emphasized the complexity of schools and the problem of change by restating Sarason's words, "It could be argued that schools and school personnel have, functionally, on so many different levels that attempt to realize it

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purpose among school personnel. Based on a multi-national study of successful school leadership, Mulford (2010) concluded:

The principal's core values and beliefs, together with the values and capacities of other members of the school community, feed directly into the development of a shared school vision, which shapes the teaching and learning—student and social capital outcomes of schooling (p. 201)

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The power of shared mission, vision, values, and goals among school personnel to shape teaching and learning, i.e., the core technology of schools, is difficult to overstate and certainly worthy of continued focus and reflection.

Though the findings from the current study may be interpreted by some as an indictment of school leaders in general, and of our own students specifically, that is certainly not the intent of this research project. On the contrary, the current research project was designed to explore findings from previous research (Watkins and McCaw 2007) in order to compare results and to give further consideration to what may be interpreted as some rather disturbing disconnects between best practice and the realities of daily practice of school leaders. Indeed, such widespread inability of educational leadership students, all of whom work actively and daily in their respective schools should raise red flags, not just in our own university setting, but

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should and do raise more questions than they answer.

Careful consideration of these findings may benefit school leadership professionals, and professionals who work to prepare school leaders, as well, in the effort to have a powerful and effective impact on the school improvement process. Despite decades of evidence and admonishment by organizational and school improvement experts, school leaders may simply continue to misunderstand the purpose and power of developing school mission, vision, values, and goals statements at best. And, at worst, the evidence may suggest that school leaders, in many places, may simply be ignoring the evidence of the essential nature of the development of key organizational statements to the detriment of the improvement processes in the schools to which they are, undoubtedly, deeply committed.

Implications for school leadership preparation programs

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Mission, vision, values, and goals: An exploration of key organizational statements and daily practice in schools

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Abstract This article reports findings from a study of graduate level, educational leadership students' familiarity with shared mission, vision, values, and goals statements and the perceived impact these concepts have on their practice as leaders and teachers in schools. The study is primarily qualitative and uses content analysis of responses to open-ended questions. Researchers adopted a limited quantitative analysis technique, however, in order to report frequency of responses to survey questions. We used the literature base regarding strategic planning and school improvement as conceptual frameworks to guide the analysis. Findings revealed that educational leadership students had limited ability to recall the content of key organizational statements. Further, respondents reported that these key organizational statements had only minimal impact on their daily practice. Implications are presented for university preparation programs designed to equip school leaders to effect meaningful school improvement and organizational change centered on

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development of shared mission and vision for improvement. This research confirms similar findings reported by Watkins and McCaw (*Natl Forum Educ Adm Superv J* 24(3):71–91, 2007) and adds to the research by exploring respondents' reports of the impact of mission, vision, values, and goals statements on their daily practice. It further extends the discussion by presenting a content analysis of key organizational statements, comparing mission, vision, values, and goals statements to models of strategic planning and planning for continuous school improvement from the organizational improvement literature.

Keywords Goal-setting · Organizational change · Organizational values · School culture · School improvement · Shared mission · Shared vision

Introduction

Articulating and nurturing widely shared ownership and commitment to purpose in organizations (i.e., mission, vision, values, and goals) has long been identified as essential to effective, strategic planning for organizational improvement (Bryson 2004; Kaufman 1992; Mintzberg 1994). Bryson (2004) stated, “Clarifying purpose can eliminate a great deal of unnecessary conflict in an organization and can channel discussion and activity productively” (p. 38). Unity of purpose, or mission, within an organization provides a means by which organizational members can work together toward a common set of objectives.

The purpose of the research presented in this article was to explore how familiar graduate students, enrolled in educational leadership programs at a southeastern US university, were with the mission, vision, values, and goals statements in their schools. We also explored the perceived level of impact that these statements had on educational leadership students' daily, professional practice. The article concludes with a discussion of the findings as well as some implications for university preparation programs designed to equip future school leaders to effect meaningful, organizational change in their schools.

Background

While discussion of strategic planning finds its roots in business management contexts, much of what has been presented within this literature has migrated into the research and discussion regarding school improvement models over the last two decades (Quong et al. 1998). Development of a clear school mission, shared vision, articulated values, and specific goal statements has also been applied more specifically to the fundamental processes of school improvement focused on increased levels of learning for all students (DuFour and Eaker 1998; DuFour et al. 2008; Perkins 1992; Renchler 1991; Teddlie and Reynolds 2000; Wiggins and McTighe 2007). Yet, despite a longstanding and consistent admonition in the literature regarding the purpose and power in developing these foundational

statements, the practice of clearly articulating such statements continues to be effectively ignored by many school leaders (DuFour et al. 2008; Watkins and McCaw 2007). In an insightful piece on vision-guided schools, Pekarsky (2007) stated, "... thoughtful, systematic attention to larger questions of purpose is rarely at the heart of American social and educational discourse" (p. 424).

The current authors contend that, among school leaders, there exists a lack of understanding of exactly what mission, vision, values, and goals statements are and the value such foundational statements offer to the development of shared commitment among stakeholders to the process of school improvement. Citing evidence from a recent survey of our graduate-level educational leadership students, we point to the presence of an implied disconnect between the widely established, best practice in the first steps of school improvement (i.e., development of key organizational mission, vision, values, and goals statements) and the daily, professional practice of educational leaders charged with demonstrating continuous improvement in school achievement and student learning.

In the first section of the article, we provide clear definitions of the terms and then research-based evidence for the value of school mission, vision, values, and goals statements. Next, we describe findings from the research conducted in an educational leadership program at a university in the southeastern United States. We conclude the article by presenting a discussion of the findings as well as some implications for further research into the topic. The article begins with a description of the two key conceptual frameworks adopted to guide the research, i.e., strategic planning and continuous school improvement. We based the content analysis of mission, vision, values, and goals statements recalled by our students on the models of strategic planning and continuous school improvement.

Conceptual frameworks

The research project was guided by two frames of thought regarding organizational and school change. The first of these frameworks is strategic planning, developed by authors and researchers primarily outside the field of education. The second framework, that is continuous school improvement, stems from the strategic planning literature, but applies its concepts specifically to the process of increasing the capacity of schools to effect high levels of learning for students and adults in a school context. Discussion of continuous school improvement comprises a broad framework developed by a wide variety of school improvement experts. Strategic planning and continuous school improvement frameworks are described in more detail in the section that follows.

Strategic planning

We first adopted a conceptual framework of strategic planning to guide the project. Strategic planning finds its roots in the work of Lewin (1943) on organizational change (Burnes 2004). Lewin described three stages of organizational change claiming that, in order to solidify meaningful change within an organization, organizational members must first *unfreeze* or become aware that the current

mindset within the organization must change in order to meet new demands from the external environment. Next, organizational members, now aware of the need for change, actually experience a state of *confusion* or become unsettled as they recreate and redefine the new norms for the organization. Finally, once new norms and expectations have been defined, the organization experiences a state of *freezing* in which they establish, commit to, and become comfortable again with the new set of organizational norms, goals, and expectations (Lewin 1943).

Based upon an extensive knowledge of historical literature on planning in American and European corporations, Mintzberg (1994) sought to define the elusive construct of strategic planning. Mintzberg asserted that planning has been conceived of historically as merely “future thinking” by many planning experts, while others define planning as actually “controlling the future” (p. 7). Finally, Mintzberg asserted the possibility that planning is simply a process of “decision making” (p. 9). In an effort to define strategic planning, Mintzberg clearly pointed to the complex nature of the process and the need for organizational actors to define what it is they mean by “strategic planning” and how that process will be fleshed out in the organization. Other strategic planning experts have focused specifically on aspects of organizational change in the nonprofit sector, including the second phase described by Lewin (1943), wherein organizational leaders and members focus on developing a new set of organizational norms and commitments in order to enable the change process (Bardwell 2008; Crittenden and Crittenden 1997; Moore 2000). Describing a successful strategic planning process in their nonprofit organization, McHatton et al. (2011) stated, “...strategic planning has been shown to be beneficial in gaining stakeholder consensus for organizational objectives and future action” (p. 235).

In this second stage of strategic planning described by Lewin (1943), *confusion*, members engage in a process of developing organizational purpose statements intended to guide the change process. Purpose statements include statements of mission, vision, values, and goals, and become the cornerstones upon which organizational change is built (Bardwell 2008; Crittenden and Crittenden 1997; Moore 2000). McHatton et al. (2011) identified common elements of effective strategic planning emergent from the literature and from their own experience, including the development of clear mission and vision statements, a commitment to organizational values (e.g., leadership, collaboration), and development of a systematic way to monitor progress toward organizational goals.

School improvement

Out of this dialogue of strategic planning for organizations in general stems the discussion of organizational improvement specifically for schools. Researchers for the current study adopted this conceptual framework of school improvement to further guide data analysis and reflection.

In the seminal work on the problem of change in US schools, Sarason (1971) clearly explicated many problems that school leaders often encounter in their efforts to effect meaningful, *modal* change in educational settings. Among these problems was an insufficient understanding of the context of schools and the *regularities*, or

common practices of school personnel. Without a thorough understanding of these regularities, change agents have traditionally found it difficult, if not impossible, to implement and sustain desired changes in schools.

Rooted in the work of Sarason (1971); Fullan (1993, 1998, 1999) extended the discussion of the complexity of the change process in school improvement. Fullan observed that schools are not only complex organizations, but operate in constantly changing, fluid contexts. School improvement leaders are challenged, at best, to introduce and support change efforts within organizations that experience ongoing, dynamic external and internal change forces, most of which may be hidden and unexpected.

Fullan (1993) explained that, while developing a shared vision among school personnel is essential, it is important that this vision remain fluid, especially at the point of introduction of substantial change in a school. Fullan recommended that school improvement leaders remain open to reflection within and about the organization in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the context before establishing an organizational vision. Fullan wrote, “Under conditions of dynamic complexity, one needs a good deal of reflective experience before one can form a plausible vision” (p. 28).

Many other authors have contributed to the school improvement knowledge base over the last two decades, offering a wealth of research-based practices in school leadership, change agency, instruction, curriculum development, and organizational planning (Danielson 2007; DuFour et al. 2008; Marzano et al. 2005; Reeves 2000). In presenting an increasingly popular model of school improvement, professional learning communities (PLC), DuFour and Eaker (1998) identified the articulation, implementation, and stewardship of mission, vision, values, and goals statements as fundamental building blocks to effective school improvement. For the current study, researchers adopted the PLC guiding framework due to the more extensive articulation of the definitions of these foundational, organizational statements. These definitions are explained more clearly in the following section.

Review of literature

Although strategic planning and school improvement literature bases are replete, even saturated, with discussion about organizational mission, vision, values, and goals, there remains a widespread misunderstanding of exactly what each of these terms means, as well as an apparent lack of understanding of the value of establishing such statements to the process of school improvement (DuFour et al. 2008; Watkins and McCaw 2007). It is imperative, then, that we carefully define each term and provide background regarding how well-articulated, foundational terms can contribute to the evolution and improvement of organizations and schools.

Defining a mission statement

Often in leadership discourse, a mission statement is used synonymously and interchangeably with the vision statement of an organization. However, the two statements are distinct from one another (DuFour et al. 2008). A mission statement

is, most simply, a statement of why an organization exists, a statement of its fundamental purpose. In the context of continuous school improvement, DuFour and Eaker (1998) described a mission statement as “stating the business of our business” and answering the question, “Why do we exist?” (p. 58). Lunenberg (2010) argued that leading an ongoing, community-wide discussion about the purpose of the organization’s existence is essential to the function of school leadership and to the process of building unity and shared commitment to the work to be done in an educational organization.

Stemler et al. (2011) conducted a comprehensive content analysis of high school mission statements from a sample of schools from ten states across the United States. These authors noted that, despite the presence of an allegedly unifying school mission statement, the reasons that stakeholders assign for a school’s existence may vary widely from school to school, and even among stakeholders within the same school. For example, faculty and other community members may perceive the mission of a school as ranging from preparing students to function as mature civic, emotional, cognitive, and social adults to preparing students to assume vocational functions, physically healthy habits, and even local and global integration (Stemler et al. 2011).

Stemler et al. (2011) argued that, while each of the perceived missions or purposes of schooling are indeed important and laudable, the fact that such a wide variety of individually held or perceived purposes for schooling exists, even among faculty members operating within the same school unit, results in a lack of unity of mission and shared effort toward a common set of objectives. This lack of unity in defining a shared mission may result in a breakdown of mutual understanding of the primary purpose for the school’s existence and eventually lead to fragmentation of effort among organizational actors. The purpose of developing a widely shared organizational mission, therefore, is not conducted to limit other, important functions of schools, but rather to focus members’ efforts in order to reach clearly articulated and specific goals (Bryson 2004; DuFour et al. 2008; Kaufman 1992; Mintzberg 1994, Stemler et al. 2011).

According to Boerema (2006), the mission statement of a school actually articulates a set of values that answer fundamental questions about the purpose of education and how the educational program should be carried out. Boerema pointed out that, “The school mission provides the context for governance, decision making, and the way the school is managed” (p. 182). Boerema further explained that a school mission statement provides key direction to those individuals performing the core technology of a school, namely teaching and learning.

The process of articulating a clear and concise mission statement is imperative in order to solidify a shared understanding of what the primary work of the school actually is. Without careful examination, discussion, articulation, and clarification of the school mission, educational professionals who work together closely on a daily basis may interpret their purpose very differently, each assuming a different reason for why they do the work that they do.

Defining a vision statement

A vision statement is qualitatively different from a mission statement. A vision statement is an articulation not of purpose, but of a preferred future for the

organization. According to DuFour and Eaker (1998), a vision statement answers the question, “What do we hope to become?” (p. 62).

A vision statement provides stakeholders with a picture of what their ideal school and students will look like if educators are successful in working together to achieve that vision. Though a vision statement should be clear and meaningful to all stakeholders, effective vision statements are concise and provide lofty, yet measurable, language so that school personnel know when the vision has been achieved or when it should be adjusted to better meet the needs of the organization (Pekarsky 2007).

Pekarsky (2007) stated that a vision statement is far more than a mere slogan. A vision statement enables school community members to assume a desired state of heart and mind with which to carry out their daily functions in the school. Stakeholders in a vision-guided organization, through the function of a clearly articulated and supported vision statement, are explicit about where they are headed, what they are about, and how they will know when they have arrived.

Kose (2011) stated that a shared, articulated vision is characteristic of effective schools, is a vehicle for building more inclusive and equitable schools, and can influence positive change in school improvement efforts, hiring, evaluation, professional development, and other key school functions. According to Kose, principals can use a well-crafted and supported vision statement to effect powerful change in the school on many different levels.

Defining values statements

Perhaps the least understood and under-implemented of the four foundational statements is the statement of core values. As the name suggests, core values statements articulate the shared beliefs of an organization. Again, DuFour and Eaker (1998) claimed that core values statements answer the question, “How must we behave in order to make our shared vision a reality?” (p. 88).

In describing their work with business organizations, Blanchard and O’Connor (1997) argued that, “When aligned around shared values and united in a common purpose, ordinary people accomplish extraordinary results and give their organization a competitive edge” (p. 144). Though their work and research was conducted in a profit-driven context, key concepts may arguably be applied to non-profit organizations, as well. Blanchard and O’Connor wrote of the importance for contemporary organizations to adopt key values, such as honesty, fairness, and integrity, in order to survive in the current economy.

Blanchard and O’Connor (1997) further contended that organizations, centered on powerful, shared values, report better service to their clientele, higher profits, and a higher quality of working environments for their employees. The authors stated that it is these shared values that act as the primary authority within an organization, the authority to which all organizational members answer.

In order for statements of organizational values or belief statements to be effective and meaningful to a school community, however, they must be translated from esoteric statements of stakeholder beliefs into clear and succinct statements of observable behaviors. In other words, statements of core values do not merely

answer the question, “What do we believe?” but also address the question, “Based upon our core beliefs, how will we behave within our organization in order to achieve our vision?”

For example, if a school community identifies a core value of safety for its school, it is not enough merely to state, “We believe our school should be safe.” Instead, the value becomes much more realistic and observable when a statement of safety as a value is translated into behavioral statements such as, “Because we value keeping our community safe, we will each assume responsibility to keep school doors locked at all times.” Or, “Because we value safety for all staff and students, we will each approach and greet strangers to our building and offer our assistance.” Such behavioral statements, added to a stem statement of a basic value, makes the core values statements come alive within the organization and allows leaders to observe when and if the espoused core values are actually at work or if they are, rather, mere words on a document.

Calder (2011) extended the understanding of the importance of values statements by claiming that values statements provide an important *foundational pillar* for how business is to be conducted. Calder wrote, “Values shape much of the work processes and, as such, influence how an institution moves forward in a positive way” (p. 24).

Defining goals statements

Perhaps the most clearly understood of the four terms is the statement of goals. In a goal statement, educators spell out precisely what level of performance is to be achieved in the selected domain (e.g., student learning, professional development) and what steps are to be taken, by whom, in order to achieve the goal. Clearly, in this era of increased accountability for student learning and professional practice, setting clear, measurable performance goals has become common practice for school leaders and other school personnel. DuFour and Eaker (1998) stated that statements of learning goals address the question, “Which steps will we take first, and when?” (p. 100).

A widespread trend across the United States in school improvement efforts, especially in light of increased accountability, is the development of organizational goals that are Strategic, Measurable, Attainable, Results-oriented, and Time-bound or SMART goals (O’Neill 2000). The connection between effective goal setting and student achievement has been clearly established among researchers (Moeller et al. 2012).

Summary of literature review

A clear definition of the meaning of each of the four foundational statements (mission, vision, values, goals) is imperative for members of the organization, especially leaders, to understand the purpose of statement development. Furthermore, a deep understanding of the value of each type of statement, not merely the development of the statement, but the organization-wide ownership and investment in the principles asserted in the statement, is also imperative if school leaders are to

make important and significant progress toward school improvement. In other words, the purpose and value of developing foundational mission, vision, values, and goals with stakeholders within an organization is not merely to have done so, and to check these tasks off of the “to do” lists. Rather, the purpose of developing these statements is to bring organizational stakeholders together to share in a common understanding of and commitment to the school’s purpose, preferred future, behavioral expectations, and next steps toward school improvement and increased levels of student learning.

Methodology

We used a primarily qualitative methodology (i.e., content analysis) in order to explore the level of familiarity educational leadership students had with their school’s mission, vision, values, and goals statements and the level to which the statements impacted their daily practice. We also, however, employed the use of a quantitative technique in reporting the frequency of responses to survey questions. While not strictly a replication of research, the project described here follows-up on and extends research conducted by Watkins and McCaw (2007).

Reporting findings from a similarly designed study, Watkins and McCaw (2007) discovered a lack of ability by their educational leadership students to articulate their own school or district mission, vision, and values statements. These authors discovered that the mission, vision, and values statements that their students recalled were largely not aligned between school and district levels and that only a small percentage of recalled statements (8–15 %) were reflective of identified criteria for what the content of vision, mission, and values statements should reflect.

We patterned the current investigation after the Watkins and McCaw (2007) study by surveying our current educational leadership students, asking them to recall key organizational statements. We also followed the Watkins and McCaw design by conducting a content analysis of the actual statements that respondents could recall. Our study departs from the Watkins and McCaw study in that we added students’ ability to recall school goals statements to the survey. Further, at the suggestion of Watkins and McCaw, we explored our students’ perception of impact that school mission, vision, values, and goals statements had on their daily practice as professional educators.

Study sample

The individuals who comprised the convenience sample for this study were enrolled in one of three graduate-level, educational leadership preparation programs at a university in the southeastern part of the United States during the fall of 2012. All participants were employed as teachers, principals, or central office administrators in schools within the university service area and were enrolled in either an educational master’s, educational specialist, or doctoral program at the university. Educational leadership students were selected to participate in the research based on their experience working in schools and on their demonstrated interest in the study

of school leadership evidenced by their enrollment in an educational leadership program. Based on students' professional pursuits, we assumed that educational leadership students would be familiar with any guiding mission, vision, values, and goals statements in their schools.

Survey development and administration

The survey, developed by the researchers, was quite simple and straightforward. Using a web-based, electronic survey administered after a class session, participants were asked to report whether or not their school had a mission statement, a vision statement, a values statement, and a statement of school goals. Participants were further asked to recall any or all of the words included in each of the statements and to rate the level to which each of the statements impacted their daily practice as teachers or school leaders (6-point, Likert-type scale).

Of the 98 students enrolled in one of the three educational leadership degree programs, 80 students completed the survey, yielding a survey return rate of just over 81 %. Because the survey was administered after class activities had concluded, some potential respondents chose not to participate. The research team did not inquire as to the reasons these individuals chose not to complete the survey.

Before administering the survey, we explained the project and provided potential survey respondents the opportunity to either complete the survey or to opt out without penalty. Participants were provided the opportunity to complete the survey online or via paper-and-pencil, submitting the completed questionnaires to one of the researchers who later entered responses, verbatim, into the survey website. Although we asked participants to provide only a limited amount of identifying demographic information (e.g., educational level, school level where employed, subject taught, job title, school and district where employed) all study participants were assured of confidentiality in data analysis and anonymity in future reporting of the data.

Analysis of survey data

We performed simple, statistical analyses on demographic and quantitative responses to the survey. For open-ended questions, however, we conducted a two-phase content analysis of the response texts (Rosengren 1981). Because mission, vision, values, and goals statements are clearly defined in strategic planning literature, we first scanned the text of responses to collect all statements that were related to the more general, strategic planning definitions. For example, because mission statements are clearly identified as purpose-related statements in general, we first analyzed the content of mission statement responses against this standard. This part of the analysis provided insight into the scope of the statements recalled by educational leadership students relative to their schools' mission, vision, values, and goals statements.

In the second phase of content analysis of open-ended responses, we used more specific, school improvement-related definitions of mission, vision, values, and goals statements to guide the analysis. For example, while school improvement

literature reiterates that mission statements are organizational purpose statements, school improvement experts also assert that the primary mission of schools is to effect high levels of learning for all students (DuFour et al. 2008). Therefore, in the second phase of content analysis of the mission-related text responses, we took note of the student learning-related content recalled by survey respondents. This two-phased, content analysis approach was applied to all four sets of statement-related responses recalled by study participants.

The research team first summarized the demographic characteristics of the survey respondents, the reported presence (or lack thereof) of the specific statements in their schools, and the perceived effect that the statements had of their daily work. Next, we analyzed the content of open-ended responses asking respondents to recall any or all of their schools' mission, vision, values, and goals statements. We searched for and identified themes emergent from the data from each of the sets of statement-related responses (Creswell 2013). These themes, related first to general, strategic planning-based definitions of the term, and then to school-improvement related definitions are reported in the next section.

Findings

Findings from the study indicated that survey respondents reported a disparity in whether or not their school had mission, vision, values, and goals statements. Reports of the presence of school mission statements were clearly most prevalent. However, reported presence of school vision and values statements is substantially less prevalent. School goals statements are slightly more common, as might be expected given the current environment of increased accountability resultant from the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation (United States Department of Education 2002). Next, we present demographic characteristics of the sample as well as the reported presence of each type of statement and the perceived effect that each statement has on the daily practice of educational leadership students in their school contexts. The section concludes with a presentation of the two-phased analysis of the content that educational leadership students were able to recall on demand, through the open-ended survey questions.

Study participants' demographics

Study participants were fairly evenly divided among all demographic categories, suggesting a balanced distribution of input. Regarding educational level, 37 % of respondents were at the master's level, 39 % at the educational specialist level, and 24 % of respondents were doctoral students. Participants were also evenly distributed regarding the level at which they work within a K-12 educational setting (Elementary 29 %; Middle School 23 %; and High School 29 %). Thirteen percent of respondents were district-level school leaders. Teachers comprised 47 % of the sample, school-level principals, assistant principals, and curriculum specialists comprised 38 % of the sample, and district-level administrators comprised 14 % of the sample. Among respondents who reported serving in a formal school leadership

role (i.e., school- and district-level leaders), 13 % were relatively new, having served only a year or two in the role of principal or assistant principal. Thirty-six percent had served in a formal school leadership role between 3 and 10 years, while 14 % had served in formal school leadership roles for more than 10 years. Although we know a large majority of the respondents to be employed in the K-12 public school environment, we did not inquire as to the public or private status of respondents' school contexts. The demographic characteristics of study participants we surveyed are represented in Table 1 below.

Presence of mission, vision, values, and goals statements

The survey asked participants to indicate, “Yes” or “No,” whether or not their school had each of the four types of organizational statements. As expected, a vast majority of students (94 %) reported having a mission statement in place. Only 62 % of schools, however, reported having adopted a separate vision statement. Only 18 % of study respondents reported that their school had a statement of organizational values. Finally, respondents reported that 42 % of schools had written goals statements. These findings are reported in Table 2.

Perceived impact of statement on daily professional practice

Educational leadership students were asked to rate the perceived level to which each type of statement affected their daily professional practice. For the study, impact on professional practice was defined as the level to which respondents thought about, referred to, and were guided by the foundational statements on a daily basis in their individual school roles and responsibilities. Respondents indicated the perceived

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of educational leadership student sample

Demographic characteristic	<i>N</i>	(%)
Level of participation in educational leadership program		
Master's	29	37
Educational specialist	31	39
Doctoral	19	24
Level of K-12 professional practice		
Elementary	23	29
Middle school	18	23
High school	23	29
District level	10	13
Role in K-12 practice		
Teacher	37	47
Building-level leader	30	38
District-level leader	11	14
Years in formal leadership role		
1–2 Years	10	13
3–10 Years	29	36
More than 10 Years	11	14

For brevity, the category of “*other*” has been eliminated, resulting in some categories totaling <100 %

Table 2 Reported presence of mission, vision, values, and goals statements

Statement type present	(%)
Does your school have a written <i>mission</i> statement?	94
Does your school have a written <i>vision</i> statement?	62
Does your school have a written <i>values</i> statement?	18
Does your school have a written <i>goals</i> statement?	42

Table 3 Perceived effect of statement on daily professional practice, percent by level

Type of statement	Effect			
	Little to none	Some	Large to maximum	Does not apply
Impact of mission statement	21	29	45	6
Impact of vision statement	28	20	25	28
Impact of values statement	25	10	7	60
Impact of goals statement	26	14	23	38

For brevity, categories 1 and 2 (i.e., *little to no effect*) and categories 4 and 5 (i.e., *large to maximum effect*) have been collapsed

level of impact through the use of a six-point, Likert-type scale, ranging from “1” *No Effect*, to “5” *Maximum Effect*. An option of “6” *Does not Apply* was provided for respondents reporting an absence of that type of statement in their schools. Findings from these questions are represented in Table 3.

Content of mission statements

In open-ended question format, educational leadership students were asked to recall any or all of their school’s mission, vision, values, and goals statements. Clearly, recalling the content of any organization’s mission, vision, values, and goals statements, on demand, is a formidable task for any employee. We chose to include this on-demand task within the survey, however, for two reasons. First, this was the task that Watkins and McCaw (2007) assigned their own educational leadership students in their exploration of the issue within their own university setting. We desired to create a survey that was somewhat parallel to the Watkins and McCaw study for purposes of comparison of results.

Second, since the survey was administered to educational leadership students, our team sought to determine the level to which these school personnel had internalized the mission, vision, values, and goals statements of their schools. We assumed that, of all school employees, educational leadership students were perhaps more likely to have internalized, and possibly even memorized, key organizational statements to a higher level than most school personnel. In the following sections, we report findings from a two-phased content analysis of the text from educational leadership student responses to the open-ended questions asking them to recall any or all of the designated statement.

In the first phase of analysis of mission statement text provided by 80 survey participants, researchers examined respondent comments, collapsed similar comments into a single category, and tallied the frequency of each comment or category of comment. The goal of this phase of analysis was to compare the overall content of mission statements provided by respondents to determine if the comments represented the broad definition of mission statements provided in the strategic planning literature as statements of organizational purpose.

While nearly all of the content of mission statements recalled pertained to organizational purpose, the variety of stated purposes was very broad in scope. During this phase of the analysis, researchers gained insight into the wide variety of stated purposes for schools represented by educational leadership students' responses. To that end, 144 different statements of purpose were provided by survey respondents. These 144 individual statements collapsed into 56 different statement categories. Statement categories ranged in frequency from 11 (7 %) of the total number of comments down to a single, unique statement. For example, the two most frequently mentioned statement categories of school purpose included *inclusivity of all students* (11 of 144) and *preparation of students for productive citizenry* (11 of 144). Our team cataloged 26 of the 144 total comments as unique statements of purpose (i.e., only mentioned by one respondent), some of which included such purposes as (a) *meeting unique needs of students*, (b) *expanding opportunities and horizons for students*, (c) *producing responsible students*, (d) *producing respectful students*, and (e) *transforming students*.

In the second phase of content analysis, researchers sorted the comments and comment categories into themes in order to determine the frequency to which student learning, high levels of learning, or student academic achievement was mentioned as a school purpose. Researchers included this phase of the analysis for each type of statement in an effort to compare survey results to the commonly defined purpose of schools as producing high levels of student learning (DuFour et al. 2008). Nine separate categories or themes emerged from the analysis of mission statement content recalled. In Table 4, each category or theme of school purpose is presented along with several of the most frequently mentioned examples from respondents. The frequency that the theme was mentioned by survey respondents is also provided.

While all themes identified in Table 4 represent laudable purposes for schools to exist, the variety and scope of the themes mentioned is broad, ranging from producing students who possess desirable social characteristics, to the provision of highly qualified personnel. Only a minimal number of statements (14 of 144 or 10 %) of the content included in school mission statements mentioned were specifically related to high levels of student learning.

Content of vision statements

Content provided by participants recalling any or all of their school's vision statement represented a large discrepancy in the data. While 62 % of survey respondents indicated that their school had a vision statement, only 16 of 80

Table 4 Thematic statement of school purpose, examples, frequency, and percent

Theme and examples of school purpose statements	<i>f</i>	(%)
Development of student personal characteristics	48	33
Examples: productive citizens, life-long learners, realized potential, empowered students, successful students		
Preparation of students for future	25	17
Examples: preparing students for: global society, every facet of life, college and career, technological world		
Provision of safe, orderly environment	15	11
Examples: physically safe, emotionally nurturing, orderly		
Student learning/academic achievement	14	10
Examples: helping students achieve or excel in academics, educating/training students, learning at high levels		
High quality curriculum and instruction	12	8
Examples: providing: relevant, challenging curriculum; opportunity to learn; excellent teaching strategies		
Provision of inclusive environment	12	8
Examples: inclusive of all students, educating diverse populations		
Student achievement, non-academic	9	6
Examples: helping students achieve in creativity, athletics, innovation, leadership, decision-making		
High quality environment	8	6
Examples: providing a quality education, world-class education, providing atmosphere of excellence		
Provision of high quality staff	3	2
Examples: committed staff, dedicated staff; role models, qualified		

respondents (20 %) were able to recall any portion of that vision statement on demand.

Similar to the analysis of mission statement responses, researchers first analyzed vision statement content against the widely accepted definition of vision statements from the strategic planning literature, specifically, that a vision statement is a future-oriented statement or describes a preferred future state of the organization. Researchers scanned survey responses for future-oriented language embedded in the vision statements. Of the 16 responses provided, 11 (14 % of total possible responses) included language that was future-oriented.

In the second phase of analysis, researchers used a model for vision statement evaluation proposed by Kotter (1996). Kotter suggested that, in order to be effective, the content of vision statements must clarify a general direction for the school, must be motivational, and must help to coordinate the actions of individuals within the organization. More specifically, Kotter (1996) explained that, in evaluating for effectiveness, vision statements should be (a) imaginable, (b) desirable, (c) feasible, (d) focused, (e) flexible, and (f) communicable (p. 72). Researchers analyzed content recalled by educational leadership students with these criteria in mind. Of the 11 future-oriented vision statements (or portions thereof) provided by survey respondents, researchers found that only two statements actually appeared to meet all six criteria. For example, one of the statements that seemed to meet or at least approach all six criteria stated:

[Our school] will develop curriculum and instructional strategies that utilize various resources which will promote active involvement of students, provide for their varied experiences, as well as individual abilities and talents. We will provide monitoring of our students' progress and offer guidance and support services tailored to individual student needs.

We acknowledge that, while this example vision statement meets or addresses all of Kotter's six criteria, it may be lacking some in the second criterion, that is, desirability. In other words, according to strategic planning and school improvement experts, one important quality of vision statements is that they should be inspiring or motivational to organizational members (Bryson 2004; DuFour et al. 2008; Kose 2011; Kotter 1996). Though the vision statement quoted here may not be particularly inspiring to organizational members, it does represent the most thorough vision statement recalled by study respondents.

Other vision statements offered by survey respondents offered what might be perceived to be organizational slogans, including such statements as, "A tradition of excellence," and "A small system that dreams big." Such slogan-like statements are not future-oriented, nor do they include criteria for effective vision statements (Kotter 1996).

Content of values statements

Of the 80 survey respondents, 6 (7.5 %) provided any type of values statements. In the first phase of analysis, a number of values were identified, including statements of commitment to: (a) diversity; (b) service to students; (c) student learning;

(d) creativity and innovation; and (e) various stakeholder groups, including parents, students, and the community at large. One values statement was particularly complete and included commitment statements to ten different organizational values. This statement included all of the following values: (1) All students matter; (2) Partnerships with parents are important; (3) Manage with data; (4) Teacher collaboration is important to improve; (5) We must continually improve; (6) Strong leadership is important; (7) Students must be engaged in authentic, real-world learning; (8) Teachers must be life-long learners; (9) Students must be safe and secure; and (10) Students must be provided extra help when needed. With the exception of this single, yet fairly comprehensive statement, none of the values statements recalled by educational leadership students approached the criteria for powerful organizational values statements provided in the strategic planning literature (Blanchard and O'Connor 1997; Calder 2011). For example, one statement read simply, "We value creativity, diversity, and innovation." Another stated, "[Our school] values its constituents and seeks to place education for all as its vision." While these statements represent laudable values, they do not meet the standards for specific, behavior-based values statements powerful enough to drive an organization firmly toward its mission as described in the strategic planning literature (Blanchard and O'Connor 1997; Bryson 2004; Kotter 1996; Moore 2000).

In the second phase of content analysis, researchers compared the values statements to the standards of values statements presented in the school improvement literature (DuFour et al. 2008). These authors state that values statements should clearly indicate the "actions, behaviors, and commitments necessary to bring mission and vision to life" (p. 148). None of the values statements met these criteria, with the possible, partial exception of the single, most complete values statement included above. For example, one of the other, more typical values statement reads, "[Our school system] is a system that is unique and values diversity, commitment, service, and learning". Again, while these are all certainly admirable values, none of the statements clearly outlines actions, behaviors, and commitments to guide the implementation of these values in every day, professional practice in a school setting.

Content of goals statements

Twelve of the 80 (15 %) educational leadership students responding to the survey were able to recall some sort of goals statements developed and adopted by their schools. However, as mentioned earlier, in a goal statement, organizational members spell out precisely what level of performance is to be achieved in the selected domain and what steps are to be taken, by whom, in order to achieve the goal. The goals statements recalled were somewhat vague and non-specific and included such statements as, "Our goal is to prepare students to enter college or work force," or "[Our goal] is to model the importance of life-long learning activities daily in the curriculum". Eight of the 12 goals statements recalled by respondents were of this nature.

In the second phase of analysis, researchers compared the statements of survey respondents to the SMART goal standard. Four (5 %) of the recalled statements

gave some indication that SMART goals had indeed been developed and adopted. Example statements that gave evidence of SMART goal development included:

Each year we develop academic goals based on the previous year's test data. For example, one goal would be: Math test scores will increase from 84 to 90 % in 3rd grade. Then we set numeric goals per grade level for reading and math.

Another stated simply, "... to increase the number of students scoring Level 4 on [the state assessment], each grade level will focus on reading comprehension and writing". In the first example, strong evidence is provided indicating that a SMART goal had been developed. The second example suggests that such a process had been followed in developing goals statements for the school.

Discussion

Based upon strategic planning and school improvement conceptual frameworks (Bryson 2004; DuFour et al. 2008; Kaufman 1992; Mintzberg 1994) we conducted a study designed to explore the extent to which graduate-level, educational leadership students were able to recall, on demand, any part of the mission, vision, values, and goals statements adopted by the schools in which they were currently serving as professional educators. Further, we asked survey respondents to report the level to which these organizational statements impacted their daily practice in the school context. We identified a convenience sample of students enrolled in university educational leadership graduate degree programs because of their experience working in schools and because they would likely be knowledgeable about such foundational, organizational statements as mission, vision, values, and goals.

The authors designed the study to follow-up and extend the research conducted by Watkins and McCaw (2007) who discovered that, among their own graduate-level, educational leadership students, the ability to recall any or all of their schools' statements of mission, vision, and core values was limited, that alignment between such statements between the school and district levels was limited, and that a large majority of the recalled statements did not meet criteria for how such statements are defined in the literature on organizational improvement. The results from the current study confirm these findings and combine to suggest a disturbing lack of understanding of the purpose and value of developing and stewarding mission, vision, values, and goals statements among graduate-level, educational leadership students.

Lack of focus on student learning as school mission

Leadership students in the current study were nearly unanimous (94 %) in claiming that their schools had adopted a mission statement. This is good news!

However, upon close analysis of the content recalled by leadership students of their school mission statements, researchers determined that the school mission statements, while overwhelmingly inclusive of purpose statements, failed to identify

high levels of student learning or supporting academic achievement as a primary purpose of their schools (DuFour et al. 2008). In fact, only about 14 % of the content of mission statements recalled included any statement of student learning as a primary focus of schools. This is disturbing!

Strategic planning and school improvement experts have consistently and, over a long period of time, identified the value of mission statements as a key element in defining organizational purpose. While mission statements in our sample did identify key organizational purposes, many of those purposes were unrelated or only loosely related to student learning. The largest amount of recalled content of their schools' mission statements, in fact, focused on the inclusion of all students and on developing character traits in students such as reaching their potential, developing productive citizenship, preparing for their future in a global society, and developing life-long learning skills.

If a mission statement is intended to clarify a singular and compelling purpose, or *raison d'être* for a school's existence, one might hope or even expect that student learning would be at the top of the list of possible purposes for schools. Clearly these data suggest a lack of focus by school leaders, in the contexts represented, on the obvious reason that schools exist, that is, effecting high levels of learning for all (DuFour et al. 2008).

We acknowledge that there exists some level of disagreement among school personnel and educational experts regarding the primary purpose of schools. Schools, indeed, can and do fulfill many important purposes for students, only one of which is increased levels of learning and achievement. Clearly, however, the preponderance of literature on strategic planning exhorts leaders to work toward defining a singular, organizational purpose in order to focus the efforts of organizational members toward a set of common goals (Bardwell 2008; Bryson 2004; Crittenden and Crittenden 1997; Moore 2000). Further, among school improvement experts specifically, this singular mission for schools has coalesced around the issue of increasing levels of student learning (DuFour et al. 2008; Lunenberg 2010; Stemler et al. 2011). We further acknowledge that defining such a singular purpose or mission for schools may be perceived by some as limiting educators' perceptions of why schools exist. Nevertheless, we contend that the process of defining and focusing organizational members' shared understanding of student learning as the primary function of schools serves to focus organizational effort. Such a process does not preclude schools from addressing a multitude of purposes and student needs. Rather, the process serves to direct and focus the school improvement efforts of individuals and of the group toward common ends.

Lack of shared vision

Another clear direction from the literature calls for school leaders to develop, articulate, implement, and steward a clear, shared vision among school personnel. The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC), in 1996, identified six standards for school leaders, widely adopted by licensing agencies across the United States (Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO] 2008). The first of these standards charges school leaders with the development of a shared vision

among all school personnel (CCSSO 2008). Kouzes and Posner (2006) stated, “You can leave a lasting legacy only if you can imagine a brighter future, and the capacity to imagine exciting future possibilities is the defining competence of leaders” (p. 99).

Data from the current study suggest yet another disturbing disconnect between best practice and reality, insofar as a mere 14 % of educational leadership students were able to recall any part of a future-oriented vision statement adopted by their school. We acknowledge that, just because a school leader may not be able to recall specific language from their school’s vision statement, this does not necessarily indicate that there is no adopted vision statement in the school. What it does indicate, however, is that, even if a vision statement is clearly articulated, and even perhaps framed and hanging in the front hall, the vision itself has not been internalized by key formal and informal leaders. A statement made by DuFour et al. (2008), springs to life in light of these data when they claimed that “there is an enormous difference between merely writing a mission [or vision] statement and actually living it” (p. 114).

No articulated organizational values

Data from this study indicated a nearly universal absence of articulated values or organizational commitments in schools represented by study participants. Only six of 80 respondents (7.5 %) could recall any part of a set of values articulated and adopted by their schools. The reverse of this statistic implies that well over 90 % of formal and informal leaders in the schools represented had no knowledge of any shared values articulated by their school personnel. As with the data for mission and vision statements, the overwhelming lack of ability of school leaders to recall values statements suggests, simply put, that a set of shared commitments has not been articulated in the schools represented. One wonders, then, exactly what are the values demonstrated in the daily practice of organizational and school personnel.

Organizational and educational experts agree that articulated values, or shared commitments, are fundamental to the process of organizational improvement. These statements are not merely a set of words or platitudes. When commonly developed, adopted, and lived, organizational values actually drive the daily practice of individuals within the organization (Blanchard 2007; Blanchard and O’Connor 1997).

Lack of focused goal statements

Educational leadership students who responded to the survey were similarly unable to recall key organizational goal statements relative to student learning, specifically, or to school improvement in general. Again, this does not automatically imply that goal statements have not been developed or identified in their schools. What it does imply is that school leaders surveyed have not internalized these goals to a level where they are conscious of them and are able to recall even any part of those goals on demand. The fact that only 12 of 80 (15 %) students could recall any part of the goal statements of their schools, and, of those, only 4 (5 %) could recall their

organizational goals with any specificity, suggests a fourth looming disconnect in the practice of school leaders. As Schmoker (2003) stated, “Abundant research and school evidence suggest that setting goals may be the most significant act in the entire school improvement process, greatly increasing the odds of success” (p. 23).

The problem of impact

As mentioned above, the current research project was designed to follow up on and extend research conducted by Watkins and McCaw (2007). While the results from the current study confirm Watkins’ and McCaw’s findings in terms of a lack of educational leadership students’ ability to recall key organizational statements, the questions regarding survey respondents’ perceived effect that mission, vision, values, and goals statements had on their daily work offers an extension of Watkins and McCaw’s research.

Considering the lack of ability of our own students to recall any part of their schools’ mission, vision, values, and goals statements, it is not surprising that survey respondents also reported low levels of impact these statements had on their daily, professional practice. Revisiting the data presented in Table 3, we suggest that such low levels of impact that these key organizational statements reportedly had on professional practice of school leadership students is very likely mirrored by personnel throughout their schools.

To be explicit, let us consider the following statements derived from our data on perceived impact of the mission, vision, values and goals in the schools represented:

1. Well over half of school leaders surveyed reported that the mission statement in their school had only some to no effect on their daily practice as educators.
2. Fifty-six percent of school leaders reported either that their school had no articulated vision statement or that the vision statement that was present had little to no effect on their daily work as school leaders.
3. Sixty percent of school leaders surveyed reported no articulated values statements (i.e., common commitments) in their schools.
4. Only 23 % of school leaders surveyed reported that the articulated goals statements in their schools had a large to maximum effect on what they did every day at work!

Concluding remarks

Findings from the current study may be provocative inasmuch as they imply that school leaders continue to ignore the call from educational change experts to establish, and especially to steward, a shared purpose in the context of school improvement efforts. This is evidenced by the fact that school leadership students surveyed were either unable to recall the content of such statements or recalled statements that were so widely varied as to suggest a lack of shared understanding and focus that is centered around the purpose and future of their schools. Furthermore, our respondents reported that the statements they could recall had only

a minimal impact on their daily practice. We also note that, even among the mission, vision, values, and goals statements that have been articulated, such foundational statements, intended to focus and drive organizational change in the schools represented, are imprecise, and are not expressly focused on student learning.

From a broader perspective, the findings from this study point to a long-established reality among those who have studied organizational and educational change; there exists a wide gap between theory and practice, or between what we know as educators, and what we do in schools (Dewey 1938; Fullan 1998, 1999; Pfeffer and Sutton 2000; Sarason 1971). Returning to the arguments made by leading scholars in educational change, effecting systemic change within organizations is, at best, a rare occurrence, due in part to the complexity of the organization, to the multiplicity of purposes and values espoused by organizational members, and to the fluid contexts in which they operate (Fullan 1993, 1998, 1999; Hargreaves et al. 2001; Sarason 1971). These experts argued that change agents, committed to the process of school improvement, may be unsuccessful due to a lack of understanding of the nature of this complexity. Reflecting on the work of Sarason, Fried (2003) re-emphasized the complexity of schools and the problem of change by restating Sarason's words, "It could be argued that schools and school personnel vary so fantastically on so many different levels that attempts to arrive at communalities or distinctive patterns of behavior and attitudes are rendered meaningless or fruitless" (p. 80).

Our study confirms these authors' theory of complexity of the change process. Certainly, the process of school improvement is a formidable task. However, rather than resigning ourselves to the "fruitless" nature of school change, we hope that these findings may contribute to uncovering and more fully understanding the nature of this complexity by recognizing that, at least among our respondents, the guiding principles and specific goals of their organizations appear to be unclear, at best, and have not been internalized by organizational players. Perhaps school personnel who fail to achieve desired success in effecting change may be informed by reflecting on the possibility that school leaders, and the people they lead, suffer from a lack of understanding, articulation, unity, and shared commitment to the mission, vision, values, and goals of their organization. We believe that school change agents and their communities would be well-served to recognize and address the fact that school personnel vary widely in their "beliefs, norms, and practices across diverse schools," and to work toward a unification of purpose to support effective, school- and system-wide change (Talbert 2010, p. 569).

We further contend that leaders who work toward meaningful and substantial change in schools would benefit from reflecting on the source and power of a shared purpose among school personnel. Based on a multi-national study of successful school leadership, Mulford (2010) concluded:

The principal's core values and beliefs, together with the values and capacities of other members of the school community, feed directly into the development of a shared school vision, which shapes the teaching and learning—student and social capital outcomes of schooling (p. 201)

The power of shared mission, vision, values, and goals among school personnel to shape teaching and learning, i.e., the core technology of schools, is difficult to overstate and certainly worthy of continued focus and reflection.

Though the findings from the current study may be interpreted by some as an indictment of school leaders in general, and of our own students specifically, that is certainly not the intent of this research project. On the contrary, the current research project was designed to explore findings from previous research (Watkins and McCaw 2007) in order to compare results and to give further consideration to what may be interpreted as some rather disturbing disconnects between best practice and the realities of daily practice of school leaders. Indeed, such widespread inability of educational leadership students, all of whom work actively and daily in their respective schools should raise red flags, not just in our own university setting, but among personnel in school leadership preparation programs across the nation. Of course, the findings of our study may not be generalized beyond the context in which the research was conducted. Other researchers may find very dissimilar results to our own within the contexts of their own settings. However, the findings should and do raise more questions than they answer.

Careful consideration of these findings may benefit school leadership professionals, and professionals who work to prepare school leaders, as well, in the effort to have a powerful and effective impact on the school improvement process. Despite decades of evidence and admonishment by organizational and school improvement experts, school leaders may simply continue to misunderstand the purpose and power of developing school mission, vision, values, and goals statements at best. And, at worst, the evidence may suggest that school leaders, in many places, may simply be ignoring the evidence of the essential nature of the development of key organizational statements to the detriment of the improvement processes in the schools to which they are, undoubtedly, deeply committed.

Implications for school leadership preparation programs

This study was conducted by educational leadership faculty in an effort to understand and explore what appeared in previous studies to be a lack of understanding and implementation among school leaders of the four key organizational statements. Findings from this study suggest that faculty involved in university school leadership programs would do well to clarify for students the meaning of organizational mission, vision, values, and goals statements, as well as explore the powerful impact that the articulation, widespread adoption, and alignment to such statements can have on the process of school improvement. What is clear from the results of this analysis is that educational leadership students had little to no knowledge of the content of these statements in their schools. Clearly, it follows then, that such statements will have little to no effect on their practice.

Leadership preparation programs would also do well to emphasize the *how* and the *why* of articulating, adopting, implementing, and stewarding shared mission, vision, values, and goals to serve as a vehicle for unifying school stakeholders around a common purpose and direction for the future, that is, toward increased levels of learning for all students.

Implications for further research

Researchers continue to study the school improvement process on many levels and examine best practice from many different angles. The continued study of the purpose and power of clearly developed and shared school mission, vision, values, and goals statements is definitely in order. Findings from this study and others add evidence to the knowing-doing gap (DuFour et al. 2010; Schmoker 2006) in educators' efforts to improve schools and to effect high levels of learning for all students. Surprisingly, little research exists that contributes to the unveiling of how prevalent the gap is between what school leaders know and what school leaders actually do on a daily basis.

Research analyzing the actual (as opposed to recalled) content of school mission, vision, values, and goals statements is only recently beginning to emerge (Stemler et al. 2011). Further study in this area (e.g., rural, suburban, and urban schools) is indicated, as well.

Finally, the findings from this study have led us to pose the following two key questions to researchers, school leaders, and to those who prepare individuals to assume school leadership roles. The first question is, When school leaders know what to do to improve schools (i.e., begin by developing, articulating, and stewarding clear school mission, vision, values, and goals statements), and how to accomplish these beginning steps, why do school leaders continue to ignore these foundational practices? The second, and perhaps more profound question is, In the absence of such guiding statements, what statements or belief systems, perhaps unwritten and unexamined, are serving as de facto school missions, visions, values, and goals for school personnel? While addressing these questions was beyond the scope of the current study, we believe that the findings of the study, and others, are a clear implication of the need for further investigation and discussion into these important matters.

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