

## What is your core mission?\*

In my work over the years with hundreds, perhaps thousands of teachers at all levels, one of my greatest surprises is how often I come across teachers who have difficulty articulating their primary, key, essential, core goals/outcomes for their students to achieve. I have also often found that principals and superintendents have trouble articulating the core outcomes for students at their school or in their district. This is surprising in light of the obvious need for teachers, schools and districts to be clear about what they want to accomplish with their students, why the outcomes are important, and how they will go about insuring that the expected learnings are met and measured. In some districts, due to No Child Left Behind, core outcomes are stated as having students do well on standardized tests, as opposed to core learning goals reflecting the needs of students in the new 21<sup>st</sup> century culture and environment!

It is my belief that, without a clear purpose for teaching and outcomes for learning, teaching is likely to drift, become diffuse, be difficult to assess, and even become ineffective. The strongest teachers often are passionate about their goals for students. They see themselves on a mission - to create a love of history, mathematics, or science; to help their students become the best mathematical problem solvers; to foster critical thinking; to open students' minds to different perspectives; to build artistic talent; to create effective readers and writers; to spark creativity, and the like. These teachers not only have a core mission, but spend much of their time figuring out how to put their core teaching goals into practice and assure student learning and growth.

So, here's the obvious implication - every teacher should have a core mission that drives his or her teaching and learning. Teachers at all levels, in all grades, and in all subjects, should be clear about their outcomes and expectancies for ALL their students. If you are a teacher reading this commentary, here's your chance to consider this important question -- ***What is your core mission?*** While you may have many goals for your students, we start by asking you to identify ONE really important outcome that you expect all your students to grow towards and/or achieve while they are your students. Perhaps it is one major understanding that all your students should learn and be able to

express. Or maybe it's an important skill or skill set that every student in your class should improve. Or it might be a "habit of mind", a "soft skill" that you would like all of your students to improve on and grow. Or it might be some combination of these. So -- what is one core outcome that is at the heart of your teaching and your student's learning? Take a minute to jot it down somewhere. You might even consider doing this in a small group so that you can share the results!

Once you have identified this one core outcome, here are some sub-questions to examine and help you to make sure that you want to stick with it:

- ***Significance*** - What is the outcome's significance? Is it a powerful goal, one that will make a significant difference in the lives of your students? Does the outcome help students to live in a rapidly changing 21<sup>st</sup> century world? Is it too specific? Too broad? If you can't really justify it, go back and rethink it.
- ***Impact*** - If your students accomplished or made progress on this outcome, what would be its impact? On the student? On his or her future? On the world outside of school?
- ***Outcome in Practice*** - Can you operationalize it? Define it? Describe it in detail? Describe it in practice? Describe what it looks like when students make progress towards it? "Get there"?
- ***Measures of Success*** - How would you know if your students accomplished it? What would you look for? What kind of work would students produce? What observations of your students would suggest progress and success? Consider many sources of assessment – tests and quizzes, performances, checks for understanding, inquiry tasks, scientific investigations, observations of discussions, writing results, student self-reflections, results of projects, general student observations, or others.
- ***Making Progress*** - How will you know if students are making progress towards the outcome? What would you look for? What kinds of feedback would you give students to help them improve?

- ***Engagement and motivation*** –What are the key strategic actions you might take (or currently take) to foster success? How would you engage students in accomplishing your core mission? Motivate students to achieve it? How would students be involved? What types of activities are best used to help students make progress and succeed?
- ***Unique or Collaborative*** - Is this core mission unique to you, or is it also part of your school’s explicit mission? Your district’s explicit mission? Is it something that others in your school can help you to accomplish? Do you and others work together to make this happen? Does it make sense for you to work together with others in your school or district so that all of you contribute to insuring that the core mission is met?
- ***New Approaches*** - What might you do differently to make sure that your core outcome is accomplished? What could you do to work with others to insure success? To share your core outcome with others? To learn how to better help your students make progress towards your mission?

Once you have completed this analysis, and thought carefully about this one core outcome and its implications for teaching and learning, you might want to identify several additional outcomes. While you don’t want to have too many core outcomes that make it impossible to be successful, many good teachers might have two or three that they work on all year with all their students. Or you might decide that you need different core outcomes for different classes. If you are moving from first grade to third grade, your core mission might change.

If you decide that you have additional outcomes as part of your core mission, go through the same process with them as you did with the first outcome, determining significance, impact, outcome in practice, etc. Another useful activity is to try to distinguish between core and ancillary outcomes. You might want to distinguish between the “must” outcomes that you work on throughout the year for all students, versus “nice to accomplish” outcomes that are secondary, not as important to accomplish, or not appropriate for every student.

And, finally, with a clear core mission and an understanding of its significance, impact, measures of success, and other factors, you will have a chance to concentrate on improving your ability to influence your students and put your mission into practice.

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In the best of all possible worlds, a teacher's core outcomes coincide with the core mission of a school or district, so everyone is working together towards a common set of goals. Therefore it is important for a school or district to explicitly determine, share and work towards the implementation of its core mission. I work with a number of schools that are powerful because they have a strong core mission and teachers that work together to implement the core student outcomes.

So, if you an educational leader - a principal or superintendent, curriculum director – it is important for you to also go through the same set of questions. What is the school or district's core mission for all its students, what is its significance, impact, outcomes in practice, and so on. Do all the various school and district constituencies know about and understand the core mission? Agree that the core mission is important and should guide teaching and learning? How should the core mission influence the policies and practices of the school or district? And how can you improve upon the implementation of the core mission and the assessment of the core mission's success?

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In sum, a clear core mission focus can help you as a teacher or educational leader in many ways. It helps teachers to focus teaching and student learning on what you think is really important. It helps each teacher work on improving their skills over time to better assure that students are engaged, motivated, and assessed on core outcomes. It helps schools and districts make explicit what is important about teaching, learning, and education, and to build collaborative networks so that many teachers can work together on the same important outcomes. And, in general, it makes teachers more passionate about their work and teaching much more meaningful, and promotes the type

of learning that students need in order to be successful in a 21<sup>st</sup> century world.

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