

All Means All.

By Ann Duchscher

January 2022

Try this – do a quick search of the mission statements of public schools across your state or the country. The purpose of a mission statement is to share an organization’s values and purpose. What does it aim to do? Whom is it doing for? A mission statement is lofty in nature; it is what the organization is aspiring to accomplish. A good mission statement should be moving.

In examining public school mission statements, there are commonalities. One is likely to find language that is inclusive such as *all students* or *all learners*. A few examples –

- Empowering all students to succeed
- Empowering all students to realize their full potential
- Engaging all learners to maximize their full potential
- Educating all students to the highest levels of academic achievement
- Enabling all students to reach and expand their full potential

A closer look at public school visions, values, and even strategic plans will likely reveal language that shares the school systems’ desire to do their very best to educate each student within its system to their full potential. Or in one case, a mission statement read *their maximum full potential*. The idea is that schools are in business to take our learners where they are and develop their abilities and character as fully as possible so that they become assets to society and culture – each individual contributing their gifts and talents to the community.

The purpose in bringing these powerful statements to light is just to gently remind us that – all means *all*. All means all students of every race, gender, social and economic background deserve to learn and be challenged. This means taking them from where they are and moving them forward. All also means all students at every level of academic readiness.

It is complicated, though. There are so many individual differences among students even within a single grade level. There are students who have already mastered the content or much of it, and that which they haven’t mastered they could pick up in a nano-second. There are students ready to learn what is coming next at the grade level because they have solid prerequisite skills in place. Then there are students that are not ready to learn what comes next at the grade level because they are struggling. For example, “today a ‘typical’ American 5th-grade classroom includes students whose instructional needs span at least seven grade levels” (Dixon, 2020).

Recently, Scott Peters, Professor of Assessment and Research Methodology at the University of Wisconsin, Whitewater, and colleagues conducted a national research study to answer the question: How many students perform above grade level? The answer is a bit stunning. Peters and his research team found anywhere from 20-49% of students were performing ahead of grade level at the start of the school year in reading, and 14-37% above grade level in math

(2017). At the very least this is a call to pay close attention to the instructional diversity within the classroom that includes those students performing above grade level. We simply cannot take credit for teaching them something they already mastered before they ever entered the classroom.

A typical data analysis process in schools occurs when educators examine data charts similar to the figure below. This small example happens to be of 6th grade math students' performance. It is quite common to zero in on the students in red and stay there further disaggregating the data and layering in support mechanisms for those students who are struggling. Truly, this analysis is critically important to provide students with needed instructional support.

Figure 1.

But remember our mission statement. We said all students have the right to learn and maximize their potential. All means *all*. In this case, 29% of students (more than 1 in 4, and frankly approaching 1 in 3) were performing above the math benchmark in the fall. It is a bit rarer to see the same data-driven focus, analysis, and conversation on this group of students. Just as we examine the students' needs in the red, we should be drilling in deeper, trying to determine the instructional levels of readiness and needs of those students in the green, too.



What plans are put in place to bring them to even higher levels of performance?

And remember, this is fall, September in fact, before much instruction has occurred. If they are coming to us at or above the grade level expectation, then they should have a daily instructional experience that engages and challenges them with new learning so that a summative measurement of their growth would be equitable. Or put another way, if we strive to provide all students with at least one year's academic growth over the course of an academic year, a student who is above grade level should leave the grade level one year higher than that.

Yes, it is a tall order but it is only equitable. To not plan for these students' needs is neither fair or equitable. It is inequitable.. We did say *all* students. "If all students are not learning and developing, then school has failed its mission" (Dixon, 2020).

Within the green group would likely be found gifted students or to further define, neurologically atypical students whose cognitive structures are wired to learn the content deeper and faster than would otherwise be typical. It is important to consider, too, that there are very likely gifted

students in the red group who are simply not performing in the green group for a variety of reasons. In other words they are underperforming and may even be unidentified gifted students who have latent gifted characteristics that simply are not manifesting. There can be lots of reasons for this - twice exceptionalities, language barriers, impoverished environments, to name a few.

Gifted education programs have an important role in this process of supporting the growth of gifted and academically talented students. Across the country and within our local school systems, there is much work to do to reframe our program models so they reflect and serve our students' needs. Let us not fail to consider the instructional needs of those students performing or who have the potential to perform beyond the grade level standards. Educators need to spend time analyzing and planning for students in the green group, as well, and commit to planning for their daily academic growth and challenge.

References

Dixon, D., Peters, S.J., Makel, M.C., Jolly, J.L., Matthews, M.S., Miller, E.M., Rambo-Hernandez, K., Rinn, A.N., Robins,, J.H., & Wilson, H.E. (2020). A call to reframe gifted education as maximizing learning. *Phi Delta Kappan*, Volume 102 (issue 4), 22-25.

Peters, S.J., Rambo-Hernandez, K., Makel, M.C., Matthews, M.S., & Plucker, J.A. (2017). Should millions of students take a gap year? Large numbers of students start the school year above grade level. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 61 (3), 229-238.