

**Vision Statement Analysis:
Hunterdon Central Regional High School**

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Hunterdon Central Regional High School [HCRHS] is a suburban high school located in Flemington, NJ, that serves students from five surrounding communities. It is a district unto itself, and the school/district vision statement is “Performance Excellence for Everyone.” At first glance it seems short, vague, and non-specific, but a deeper analysis of the statement's connection to the school community demonstrates a vision that is well-supported in daily practice. Before exploring these connections, however, an understanding of the Hunterdon Central community is vital to appreciating the depth and significance of such a statement.

Hunterdon Central is located on a 72-acre campus, and is comprised of four main academic buildings, as well as an on-site alternative school, an all-purpose “field house” used primarily for large assemblies and sporting events, an artificial turf football field, and several smaller fields specifically designated for soccer, lacrosse, baseball, and softball. Enrollment in 2006-2007 was approximately 3,020; the average class size at HCRHS is 18.4, and there is a student to faculty ratio of 10.5:1 and a student to computer ratio of 2:1. All of the over 300 teachers at HCRHS are supplied with (and trained in the use of) tablet laptop computers and wireless overhead projectors, which are used by many teachers in their daily lessons. Hunterdon Central has earned the Star School Award three times, and was the first high school in New Jersey to receive the award. HCRHS is also the only New Jersey school to have received the national Blue Ribbon School of Excellence award twice, in 1997 and 2002. Approximately 58% of the faculty hold advanced degrees, and these educators have helped HCRHS win numerous state and national awards, including fourteen NJ Best Practice Awards. Our students are also high achievers, with 87% of the graduating class of 2006 going on to two- or four-year colleges. Our mean SAT and PSAT scores are well above both the New Jersey and national averages. Hunterdon Central also has a wide array of curricular (our Program of Studies looks more like a university's than a high school's) and extra-curricular offerings, with 33 interscholastic sports teams and over 90 activities, clubs, and artistic endeavors to choose from (Hunterdon Central Regional High School, 2006).

Process: Creating the Vision

Clearly, at such an institution as this, “performance excellence” is not a term to be taken lightly. I did some investigation into the origins of this vision statement, but I was not able to turn up much other than a vague sense of how long we have had it (“a *very* long time”, according to my learned source). Further investigation found that the statement probably originated some time in the late 1980s under the direction of our superintendent at the time, Raymond Farley. I was unable to determine anything regarding the origins of the school vision statement; however, some research on Mr. Farley turned up some sound bites that may provide some insight into his frame of mind regarding process, if not his actual approach.

In *Executive Leadership for Effective Administration*, Norton (2005) suggests that the development of any organization's vision statement should begin with a consideration of the philosophies, beliefs, values, and traditions of the organization, as well as thought to what the system has been in the past. The current status of the

organization must also be considered, and finally, an assessment of strengths and needs, resources, desired outcomes, and strategic planning of how to utilize those strengths and resources in order to meet the needs and create those outcomes. In 1997, Superintendent Farley saw a need for a greater technological presence in the classroom. His vision was to implement technology in the classroom, specifically communication and collaboration via the Internet, on a scale that was very rarely, if ever, seen in New Jersey prior to that time. In an interview with *Fast Company* magazine, Mr. Farley stated that his desire to create a significant technological presence was only a smaller part of what he saw as a paradigm shift in the world of education. According to Mr. Farley, “[k]ids today live in a nanosecond world...[w]e have to change our educational models to prepare them for that world” (Morgan, 1998, p. 42). This shift led to the installation of PCs, video facilities, ISDN lines, early “web-cams”, and fiber optic cables at the school – all top-shelf equipment in 1997 – as well as the new policy of providing e-mail addresses to all students and teachers. Although I did not work at Hunterdon Central when Mr. Farley was superintendent, I can draw a very clear, straight line from these innovations to the technological presence in the school today.

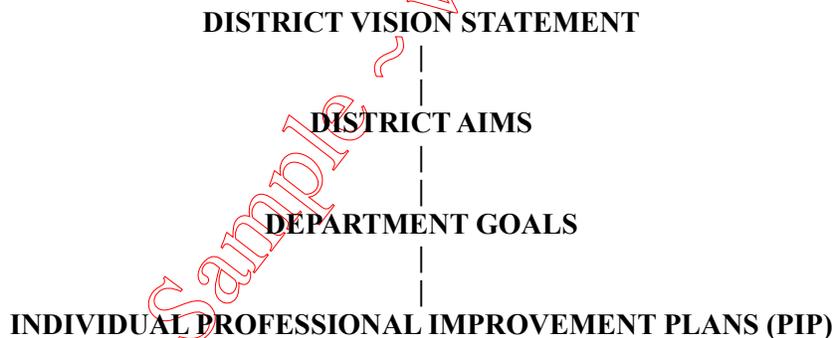
A vision statement for an organization cannot come from one person alone, of course, and so many stakeholders must provide input into its development. The Grainville (WA) School District is a prime example of movement away from top-down management. Prior to 1992, district direction was set by the school board, and there was a linear chain of administration: individual building principals reported to the associate superintendent, who reported to the district superintendent, who reported directly to the school board. In an effort to break away from this traditional system in favor of a more inclusive approach to planning and more responsive and creative leadership, the school district enlisted 29 teachers, administrators, and community stakeholders to engage in long-term strategic planning. This process of shifting the strategy-making paradigm lasted from 1992 to 1997, and began with a one-day retreat for the 29 committee members, during which they arrived at their new district mission statement (“to teach all students [certain] essential skills and to value learning”). They also devised four guiding objectives to help the district meet this goal, and separated into smaller groups, each one focusing on a different strategy to move the district toward fulfillment of these objectives. The value in this approach lies in the implicit message that the district sent by agreeing to try this new form of strategic planning: district personnel must ultimately control strategy in terms of district structure and district systems, and to do so without the input of these stakeholders is an exercise in futility (Wolverton & Gmelch, 1998).

The collaborative, time-intensive process followed by the Grainville School District is supported by the literature (Chance, Copeland, Farris, & Allen, 1994; Lashway, 1997; Allen, 2001); in short, the people responsible for bringing the vision to reality must feel that they have some stake or investment in it in order for the vision to have the best possible chance of being realized. I have no data on the process that Mr. Farley may have used to arrive at his mission statement, but his *Fast Company* interview yields this interesting comment from him: “I gave up some of the traditional power of a superintendent...and turned it over to teams of students,

teachers, and parents...Once you put people in charge of their own destiny and say, 'Here's where you need to go if you want to be ready for the future,' the rest just happens." (Morgan, 1998, p. 42). The article continues to describe the positive impact of this philosophy on HCRHS at the time: "student attendance is up, teacher attendance is up, and so are the number of students making it onto the honor roll and the number of graduates going on to college" (Morgan, 1998, p. 42). Mr. Farley seems to appreciate the importance of community input into the progress of an organization, at least based on his statements here. It is my hope that the vision statement "Performance Excellence for Everyone" was created not only by him, but by the other stakeholders in the HCRHS community.

"Performance Excellence" in Practice

I have always held both my students and myself to a high standard of excellence, so thinking about how this vision statement is put into daily practice seemed almost a given: I just do it. Not only me, but also my colleagues: the Social Studies and English departments (the latter of which I am a member) are frequently singled out as being two exemplary departments, even among all the excellent departments at HCRHS, so I am constantly surrounded by like-minded educators for whom performance excellence is a professional way of life, regardless of what the vision statement says. There exists, however, a "hierarchy of excellence" that drives what we do everyday in ways I had not considered until examining it for this paper. In overview, the hierarchy looks like this:



In this hierarchy, the statement "Performance Excellence For Everyone" is at the top and acts as an overall guiding principle to any professional action we take. Just below it are the District Aims, six methods by which HCRHS can achieve performance excellence for everyone. These are:

1. Highest Student Achievement
2. Safe Learning Environment
3. Partnerships
4. Highest Performing Workforce
5. Integrated Management Systems
6. Special Projects

As we progress down the hierarchy, the statements, goals, and methods get a little more specific at the departmental level. Each year, each individual department is required to develop its own yearly goals. These

goals may change slightly or drastically from year to year, are usually discipline specific, and must somehow align to at least one of the six District Aims. For the 2006-2007 school year, the English department goals were as follows:

1. Continue to look for new teaching strategies that increase student motivation, creativity, and accountability.
2. Continue to evaluate and refine our use of literature to promote empathy, tolerance, and appreciation of diversity.
3. Improve the effectiveness of writing instruction, with particular focus on strategies that encourage increased accountability for conscientious revision in developing rough drafts.
4. Employ English Vertical Team strategies to improve instructional articulation throughout the English program.
5. Research most effective ways to use technology to increase student mastery of core curriculum standards and proficiencies in language arts literacy.
6. Continue to refine common midterms and finals for English I and English II to work toward more effective application of skills and alignment with NJCCCS.
7. Evaluate and revise course curriculum guides to work toward more effective instruction and alignment with NJCCCS.

In the official department goals documentation, each goal has 2-4 bulleted suggestions for achieving these goals. In the seven years I have worked in the English department, these goals have been developed and decided upon collaboratively by the teachers and supervisor over the course of several meetings. The current goals are not largely different than the goals from two or three years ago, but our current supervisor, who just completed his first year in the position, felt strongly about number 4, and took “executive privilege” to include that in the department goals.

Finally, the Personal Improvement Plan. As part of the yearly evaluation routine, teachers are required to submit to their supervisors their PIP for the upcoming year (among other items). This PIP must be filled out on a provided form that also requires alignment to Department Goals and District Aims. My PIP for the 2007-2008 school year follows, along with the department and district objectives to which each point aligns:

PIP	English Dept. Goal	District Aim
* Teach and require student utilization of Wiki technology in at least one unit of Honors Major British Writers.	5	Special Projects; Highest Student Achievement
* Construct and revise an instrument for student feedback on my website, and implement feasible suggested changes to increase student use and utility.	5	Special Projects; Highest Student Achievement
* Participate in professional development activities that count toward the state-mandated 20-hour requirement.	1, 2, 5	Highest Performing Workforce
* Take courses toward an Educational Specialist (Ed.S.) degree and apply new knowledge to practice.	1, 2	Highest Performing Workforce

While I have been aligning my PIPs like this for years, I have done it mostly out of rote habit – I did it because that's what I was required to do. Quite frankly, as the school year winds to an end, critical thought and reflection on my teaching practices often takes a backseat to grading, calling parents, keeping students on-task, and all the other associated daily duties. Reflecting on the vision statement here, however, I can see how the plan that guides my professional development from year to year really is directly linked to the district vision statement of “Performance Excellence for Everyone.” I do these things because I want my students to succeed, and have a multidimensional education, and have a teacher who stays current with technology and educational theory, but I also do it because that's what the district vision statement mandated of me as a teacher way before I was hired.

Lashway (1997) would approve of the vision statement-related structure at HCRHS. In his book *Leading with Vision*, he warns against confusing the *statement* of the vision with the *evidence* of the achieved vision. He calls for school to institutionalize their vision statements beyond posters or wallet cards, and integrating them into everyday functioning at the school. Among his suggestions for systemic change are setting specific goals and objective to help attain the vision (such as our District Aims), providing professional development for teachers and support staff that aligns with the overall vision statement, and possibly even restructuring the budget in order to allocate priority funds to projects that best serve the vision (Lashway 1997). Allen (2001) covers many of these same points, but also discusses the need for ongoing dialogue and reflection regarding the vision. While my school could probably do a better job of this, I think of our yearly PIP alignment as one way of getting the faculty to reflect on how we incorporate the vision into our professional lives.

The final product of the HCRHS vision statement is evident in the second paragraph of this paper. We continue to be a community of learners who make good on our promise to provide (and demand) “performance excellence for everyone” - not just students, but faculty and staff, as well. It is a vision in which we are all invested, and it is a vision that is supported, both philosophically and financially, by our administration. It is a simple, concise statement that defines and guides our daily practice, and the past, current, and future successes of our students and graduates are proof positive of both its value and its significance to our profession.

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