

## An Analysis of High School Mission Statements in Massachusetts from 2001 to 2019

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### Abstract

*Through a study of school mission statements, this paper offers a unique examination and perspective on the shifting priorities of school. A random sample of 50 Massachusetts public high school mission statements was collected in 2001 and again in 2019. Analyzing the school mission statements using a pre-established coding rubric, 95% of schools had thematically changed their mission during this 18-year span. On average, the number of themes represented in mission statements increased from 5.1 to 6.2 per school. While emotional (91%), cognitive (86%), and civic (67%) development remained the most frequently occurring themes across mission statements, a significant increase in the frequency of career preparation (19% in 2001 to 38% in 2019) and challenging environment (38% in 2001 to 62% in 2019) was observed in 2019. Considerations of how local, state, and national reform efforts and policies may relate to trends in school purpose and mission statements themes are discussed.*

**Keywords:** School Purpose, Mission Statement, Content Analysis, Educational Philosophy, School Mission Statements, Emotional Development, Academic/Cognitive Development, Civic Development

### 1.0 Introduction

“Each school is its own community, with a unique context. The goals, aspirations, and talents of its students, teachers, and surrounding communities shape its purpose. If we want our education system to be dynamic and innovative, we need to respect each school’s distinct nature, and give schools the trust and support to determine how best to formulate and achieve a well-thought-out purpose and set of goals. We need to embrace and encourage—not seek to eliminate—local differences in our approach to educating students. That said, we need clarity for the overarching purpose of education, irrespective of local context, and a foundation for putting our students in a position to succeed in life.”

-Wagner & Dintersmith (2015), p. 42

### 1.1 Background

Throughout history, various theorists and policy makers have sought to define and evaluate the purpose of school. Even in ancient times, philosophers as diverse as Aristotle, Emerson, Plato, Mo Tzu, Locke, and Confucius studied and shaped education (Johnson & Reed, 2011; Noddings, 2006). As public education and society have evolved across the United States, educational philosophers such as Dewey (1938), Counts (1978), and Adler (1982) have put forth systematic and detailed arguments regarding the purposes of schooling. For example, Counts suggested in the 1930’s that the purpose of school was primarily social integration (Schiro, 2013);

However, modern schools are typically thought to serve numerous functions which may include intellectual development, vocational training, occupation preparation, enculturation, ethical development, citizenship, and the promotion of personal health and emotional well-being (Adler, 1982; Goodlad, 2006; Stemler & Bebell, 2012).

Furthermore, regardless of their theoretical or philosophical underpinnings, compulsory schools provide a pragmatic credentialing function (Larabee, 1997) that varies according to the local economic and social needs of their unique communities (Tyack, 1988). Indeed, United States public schools have a long history of determining their own purposes via local control and funding of community schools. Fueled by emerging global competition in the post WWII-era, the U.S. federal government increasingly sought influence in shaping the nature and structure of what was historically the jurisdiction of local communities. By the 1980's, an increased urgency for national educational reform was signaled by the publication of *A Nation At Risk* (1983), portraying a domestic K-12 educational landscape so stagnant that it risked jeopardizing the country's economic security. Further fueled by decades of perceived lackadaisical U.S. testing performance in multinational assessment programs (Mullis, Martin, Foy, & Hooper, 2016; OECD, 2016), federal educational reform efforts have steadily increased influence and emphasis on students' academic achievement. Specifically, federal reforms such as *America 2000* and *No Child Left Behind* strongly solidified federal emphasis on students' academic and cognitive performance throughout the 1990's and 2000's via high-stakes testing and accountability programs that mandated standardized curriculum measurements.

In the past decade a seemingly endless string of educational reform efforts have been levied at the national, state, and local levels to address a myriad of perceived problems, inadequacies, and short-comings of the status quo educational system. Determining the effectiveness and impacts of such educational reform efforts and their potential influence on actual teaching and learning practices has been the concern of much modern educational research and policy literature (e.g., Chalhoub-Deville, 2016; Croft, Roberts, & Stenhouse, 2015). For a number of reasons, the success of most educational reform efforts have been studied using student performance on standards-based assessments as the outcome measure. Indeed, student performance on standardized assessments has evolved into the de facto measure of educational success not only for students, but also for teachers, schools, programs, and even entire states and nations (Dintersmith & Wagner, 2015). Yet, amidst this evolution, the question of whether such assessments are congruent with how schools themselves define their purpose has been largely overlooked. The current investigation seeks to examine how schools themselves publicly define their own purpose and how such purposes may be changing over time.

To summarize, state and federal reform efforts in the U.S. have shaped and reshaped the purpose of schools and education since at least the 1950's. School leaders, researchers, and policy makers often struggle to address the extent to which local school communities are able to respond and reform to top-down policy directives. As the national, state, and local pendulum swings from reform effort to reform effort, how do we evaluate the extent that schools are actually changing? In light of the state and national policy reform of recent decades, the current study seeks to explore empirically how schools' core purpose may be changing over time, if at all. Specifically, we examine the malleability of school mission statements by investigating if and how a random sample of Massachusetts's public high school mission statements changed over an 18-year span from 2001 to 2019. In the time between our earlier and later mission statement samples, an entire generation of children was born and completed their K-12 schooling. While these children attended school and grew older, how did the values of their school systems change, and in what ways will the changes they experienced affect the next generation of students?

## 1.2 Using School Mission Statements for Research

Over the past two decades, researchers have shown that school mission statements can be a meaningful artifact and data source to define and quantify how schools, as organizations, define their educational purpose (Berleur, & Harvanek, 1997; Davis, Ruhe, Lee, & Rajadhyaksha, 2007; Stemler & Bebell, 1999, 2012). Indeed, in most locales, the mission statement publicly reflects the local vision and current compact between the community and school organization (Allen & Kern, 2018; Jones & Crochet, 2007). Using a variety of coding tools and rubrics, researchers have shown that both individual and collections of school mission statements can be empirically coded to contribute reliable data that locally addresses such broader topics as school purpose, school choice, and alignment of educational reform efforts.

Indeed, a growing body of research has demonstrated that school mission statements provide an accessible and valid resource in capturing and measuring the school perspective for the current inquiry (Allen, Kern, Waters, & Vella-Brodrick, 2018; Chapple, 2015; Stemler, Bebell, & Sonnabend, 2011; Slate, Jones, Wiesman, Alexander, & Saenz, 2008).

A study by Slate et al. (2008) analyzed random samples of 50 high performing and 50 low performing elementary schools in the states of Texas and found that the three most frequently cited themes across their sample were: i) cognitive/academic success (54% of schools), ii) social development (35% of schools), and iii) citizenship (33% of schools).

A mixed-methods study by Stemler, Bebell, and Sonnabend (2011) examining high school mission statements in ten geographically and politically diverse states throughout the U.S. and found that the most frequently mission statement themes were: i) civic development (58% of schools), ii) emotional development (55% of schools), and iii) cognitive development (53% of schools). Overall, the 421 randomly sampled schools included a wide range in the number and diversity of themes expressed in their mission statements (mean = 3.4, SD = 1.9). Taken together, the empirical studies have demonstrated that the majority of U.S. school mission statements include multiple themes in their mission statements.

As most educational observers would expect, research has shown these priorities vary systematically by type of schools. Recently, Allen, Kern, Vella-Broderick, and Waters (2017) used a stratified sample of nearly 300 secondary school mission statements in Victoria, Australia to explore the relationship between academic achievement and prevalence of different themes. Across their quantitative analyses of both public and private secondary schools, they found 88% of school missions referenced academic/cognitive development followed by emotional development expressed by references to mental health (66.2%) and school belonging (57.5%). Moreover, the researchers “found that the inclusion of both academic and mental health promotion themes correlated with higher levels of academic achievement for the school. This is not to say the inclusion of these themes causes success, but when schools include non-academic themes in their vision and mission statements, academic success is not hampered.” (Allen & Kern, 2018).

### **1.3 Theoretical Framework**

A theoretical framework of objectives-based program evaluation (Tyler, 2013) informs and guides the current inquiry (Worthen, Sanders, & Fitzpatrick, 1997). Tyler’s work frequently highlighted the importance of congruence between objectives (e.g., school purpose and mission) and outcomes, assessments, and/or dependent variables. As such, the current study seeks to use a sample of Massachusetts public high school mission statements collected in 2001 and again in 2019 to investigate how school’s self-define and articulate their purpose, and how such purposes and themes may be changing over time. The current study also seeks to document empirically how much school mission statements (as a proxy for school purpose) may have changed over an 18-year period of local, state, and national reform efforts.

## **2.0 Methods**

### **2.1 Sample**

Massachusetts provides an ideal and somewhat conservative research setting for a number of reasons. First, Massachusetts is arguably the birthplace of compulsory public schooling in the US. Founded in 1636, the Boston Latin School was not only the first public school in the “new world” but is still a successful high school serving Boston students. In short, Massachusetts public education has a long and well-studied history to support this inquiry into early 21<sup>st</sup> century shifts in public school themes and purpose. Second, Massachusetts has a long history of strong academic performance and highly rated public schools. In 2018, Forbes used a number of performance indices (funding, class size, test scores, completion rates, teacher credentials, etc.) to rate Massachusetts public schools “best of any U.S. state” (Forbes, 2018). The Forbes results echo past scholarly and popular efforts to evaluate public schools, and the public education system of Massachusetts typically ranks as amongst the very best in the nation. Third, Massachusetts was an early adopter and proponent of standards-based reform efforts. Following a series of court-mandated statewide reforms in the 1990’s, both standards-based school reform efforts and definitions of student success via an academic/cognitive testing program were fully cemented by the high-stakes MCAS exams which began in 1998 (McDuffy, 1993; MERA, St. 1993, c.71). Arguably, few states were as well positioned and prepared for the increasing federal emphasis and standards-based reforms efforts over our study period, 2001-2019. As such, exploring potential shifts in Massachusetts public school mission statements should be illuminative.

In fall 2001, a true random sample of 50 Massachusetts public high schools was drawn from a comprehensive Massachusetts Department of Education database of the state’s 399 public secondary schools (Bebell & Stemler, 2004). However, not every school identified in the original random sample could be included in the current analyses and study. To empirically analyze changes in mission statements over this 18-year period, the research team needed both the 2001 and 2019 mission statements for each school. Table 1 summarizes the eligible mission statements that were identified and ultimately used in the study.

Table 1. Mission statements located and coded in 2001 and 2019

	2001	2019
# of schools identified through random sampling in 2001	50	50
# of mission statements identified and coded	42	45
% of mission statements identified and coded	84%	90%
# of matched 2001 and 2019 mission statements available for analysis	42	42
% of matched 2001 and 2019 mission statements available for analysis	84%	84%

In the original 2001 inquiry, individual mission statements were successfully obtained from 42 out of 50 schools (84%) via the school or district's website, email, telephone, and/or fax. In Spring 2019, 18 years later, the research team obtained 45 school mission statements (90%) from original school sample. Examined cumulatively across the two collection periods, researchers identified a total of 42 schools from which mission statements were collected both in 2001 and 2019, representing 84% of the 50 original schools. As such, the current inquiry was limited to 42 Massachusetts High Schools listed below in Table 2.

Table 2. Listing of participating MA high schools with 2001 and 2019 mission statements

School Name	Location	Student Enrollment (2017/2018)	NCES Demographic Designation
Agawam High School	Agawam	1,222	Suburb: Large
Andover High School	Andover	1,806	Suburb: Large
Auburn High School	Auburn	795	Suburb: Large
B. M. C. Durfee High School	Fall River	2,123	Suburb: Large
Bedford High School	Bedford	888	Suburb: Large
Boston Renaissance Charter Public School	Boston	955	City: Large
Bridgewater-Raynham Regional High School	Bridgewater	1,463	Suburb: Large
Bristol County Agricultural High School	Dighton	468	Suburb: Large
Carver High School	Carver	836	Suburb: Large
Chelsea High School	Chelsea	1,545	Suburb: Large
Duxbury High School	Duxbury	1,057	Suburb: Large
Essex Agricultural and Technical Institute	Hathorne	1,307	Suburb: Large
Framingham High School	Framingham	2,012	City: Small
Francis W. Parker Charter School	Devens	395	Suburb: Large
Jeremiah E. Burke High School	Dorchester	489	City: Large
Lawrence High School	Lawrence	3,304	Suburb: Large
Lynn English High School	Lynn	1,598	Suburb: Large
Madison Park Technical Vocational High School	Roxbury	841	City: Large
Mansfield High School	Mansfield	1,315	Suburb: Large
Mashpee High School	Mashpee	415	Suburb: Midsize
Minnechaug Regional High School	Wilbraham	1,147	Suburb: Large
North Reading High School	North Reading	811	Suburb: Large
Northampton High School	Northampton	874	Suburb: Large
Norwell High School	Norwell	709	Suburb: Large
Old Rochester Regional High School	Mattapoissett	748	Rural: Fringe
Pathfinder Regional Vocational Technical High School	Palmer	618	Suburb: Large
Pioneer Valley Performing Arts Charter Public School	Hadley	471	Suburb: Large
Pittsfield High School	Pittsfield	861	City: Small
Plymouth South High School	Plymouth	1,026	Suburb: Midsize
Rockland Public High School	Rockland	703	Suburb: Large
Sharon High School	Sharon	1,058	Suburb: Large
Somerville High School	Somerville	1,259	Suburb: Large
South Hadley High School	South Hadley	545	Suburb: Large
Springfield Central High School	Springfield	2,055	City: Midsize
Taunton High School	Taunton	2,502	Suburb: Large
Wakefield High School	Wakefield	1,016	Suburb: Large
Wareham High School	Wareham	518	Suburb: Midsize
Watertown High School	Watertown	662	Suburb: Large
Wayland High School	Wayland	828	Suburb: Large
West Boylston Middle/High School	West Boylston	513	Suburb: Large
West Bridgewater Jr-Sr High School	West Bridgewater	619	Suburb: Large
Winchester High School	Winchester	1,268	Suburb: Large

Given the truly random sample of 42 schools from the state's 399 public schools serving grades 9-12, the sample school characteristics include a wide range of communities and school types. The final sample included a variety of different kinds of public high schools in Massachusetts, including four vocational high schools and three charter schools. The average number of students per school served in the final study sample was 1,087, somewhat larger than 2017/2018 statewide average of 803 (NCES, 2018). Based on current enrollment data, 45,645 students attend our final sample of 42 high schools, or about 15.6% of the total number of grade 9-12 public school students in the entire state (NCES, 2018).

## 2.2 Procedures: *Collecting Mission Statements for Source Data*

Prior research has documented the efficacy of using school mission statements as a data source across a variety of settings (Bebell & Stemler, 2004; Berleur, & Harvanek, 1997; Davis et al., 2007; Slate et al., 2008; Stemler & Bebell, 1999; Stemler, Bebell, & Sonnabend, 2011; Stober, 1997). As such, school mission statements provided the sole data source for the current investigation. In both 2001 and 2019, researchers gathered high school mission statements from the school or district's website, email, telephone, and/or fax. In most cases, finding and identifying each high school's mission statement was discrete and easily apparent. Occasionally, the research team encountered ambiguity between a school's mission statement and other statements like vision, goals, common beliefs, and core values. In these cases, we focused on the mission statement but would always err on the side of inclusion. In other words, the research team consistently included all relevant text associated with the school mission statement including goals, vision, and core values. For example, Framingham High School included in their 2019 mission statement a list of the school's core values, all of which were included and coded in our analyses:

Framingham High School will provide students with a comprehensive, challenging, and diverse learning environment which will enable our students to become successful members of the global community.

Our Core Values Are:  
Individual Responsibility & Accountability  
Collaboration & Civic Involvement  
Academic Excellence  
Respect, Honest, & Integrity  
Exploration & Development of Personal Interests

## 2.3 Instrumentation

Prior research has demonstrated that school mission statements can be systematically and reliably coded using content analysis (Bebell & Stemler, 2004; Berleur & Harvanek, 1997; Stemler & Bebell, 1999; Stemler, Bebell, & Sonnabend, 2011; Stober, 1997). The current investigation used a well-established methodology and coding rubric to quantify the themes and characteristics found in each of the high school mission statements collected in 2001 and again in 2019 (Stemler & Bebell, 1999). Originally developed in 1999, the mission statement coding rubric examines 12 of the most commonly espoused themes found in school mission statements as well as 64 sub-themes, essentially quantifying the presence or absence of a wide range of school characteristics. Since its original development, variations of the school mission statement coding rubric have been used by researchers for numerous studies and self-administered by hundreds of educational leaders in schools around the globe (Allen, et al., 2017; Allen et al., 2018; Boerema, 2006). Below, Table 3 displays the school mission statement coding rubric used throughout the current study.

**Table 3. School Mission Statement Coding Rubric (v3. 2019)**

STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS	SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS
<b>A = COGNITIVE/ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT</b> 0 = Misc. 1 = foster cognitive development 2 = problem solving 3 = creativity 4 = effective communication 5 = critical thinking 6 = literacy 7 = acquire knowledge 8 = participate in the arts 9 = improve student achievement/test scores 10 = intellectual curiosity 11 = personalized learning	<b>G = SAFE/NURTURING ENVIRONMENT</b> 0 = Misc. 1 = safe environment 2 = provide nurturing environment 3 = person-centered 4 = collaborative environment 5 = equitable environment 6 = inclusive environment
<b>B = SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT</b> 0 = Misc. 1 = social interaction 2 = become effective parents 3 = help others 4 = teamwork 5 = collaborate	<b>H = CHALLENGING ENVIRONMENT</b> 0 = Misc. 1 = provide challenging environment 2 = provide engaging work 3 = highly qualified faculty 4 = rigorous curriculum
<b>C = EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT</b> 0 = Misc. 1 = positive attitudes 2 = ethical morality 3 = joy for learning 4 = life-long learning 5 = self-sufficient 6 = self-discipline 7 = reach potential 8 = emotional skills 9 = promote confidence 10 = spiritual development 11 = respect for others 12 = risk-taking 13 = personally meaningful success 14 = mental health of students 15 = responsible person	<b>I = DATA AND TECHNOLOGY ENVIRONMENT</b> 0 = Misc. 1 = Technologically competent 2 = Creative use of technology 3 = Technologically advanced 4 = Data-driven decision making
<b>D = CIVIC DEVELOPMENT</b> 0 = Misc. 1 = productive 2 = responsible citizen 3 = public service 4 = contributing member of society 5 = leadership 6 = model democratic practices	<b>J = INTEGRATE INTO LOCAL COMMUNITY</b> 0 = Misc. 1 = promote community 2 = community partnerships 3 = diverse student body 4 = community service
<b>E = PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT</b> 0 = Misc. 1 = Physical development	<b>K = INTEGRATE INTO GLOBAL COMMUNITY</b> 0 = Misc. 1 = appreciate diversity 2 = global awareness 3 = adaptive students 4 = cultural awareness
<b>F = CAREER PREPARATION</b> 0 = Misc. 1 = competitive in the workforce 2 = marketable skills 3 = apply skills	<b>L = INTEGRATE INTO SPIRITUAL COMMUNITY</b> 0 = Misc. 1 = religious education/environment

The scoring rubric classified mission statements based on twelve themes, six of which were generally oriented toward student outcomes (themes A-E) and six towards the school environment (themes F-L). As an example, the February 2019 mission statement from Framingham High School in Framingham, MA yielded six different major themes; Cognitive Development (A), Social Development (B), Emotional Development (C), Civic Development (D), Challenging Environment (H), and Integrate into Global Community (K):

Framingham High School will provide students with a comprehensive, challenging (H1), and diverse learning environment which will enable our students to become successful members of the global community (K0). Our Core Values Are:

- Individual Responsibility (C15) & Accountability
- Collaboration (B5) & Civic Involvement (D0)
- Academic Excellence (A0)
- Respect, Honesty, & Integrity (C11, C0)
- Exploration & Development of Personal Interests (C13)

## 2.4 Procedures for Coding Mission Statements

Following a well-established protocol, two undergraduate education/psychology students were recruited and trained using a sample of non-study high school mission statements (Stemler, Bebell, & Sonnabend, 2011). Following their training exercises, both raters independently coded a series of example mission statements to establish an acceptable inter-rater reliability before using the rubric to independently code the entire sample of mission statements. Specifically, percent agreement and Cohen's kappa were used to assess the overall inter-rater reliability for each theme encountered by the two independent raters across the entire sample of school mission statements. Percent agreement ranged from 69% to 98% across the 12 mission statement themes, with a median agreement of 86% and a median kappa value of .64. When coding the mission statements, a third independent rater facilitated an in-person meeting to establish consensus when a disagreement occurred between the original two raters. A final consensus rating for each 2001 and 2019 mission statement ( $n=84$ ) was then entered into a MS Excel database in addition to word count, school demographics, and other notes. Descriptive analyses were performed using MS Excel (Version 16) while significance tests, inter-rater reliability, and other inferential statistics were performed primarily in SPSS (Version 25).

## 3.0 Results

The current investigation sought to better document how schools themselves define their own purpose via their mission statement and the degree to which these mission statement themes and values may be shifting over time. Of the 42 high schools with identified mission statements for both 2001 and 2019, only two mission statements were perfectly identical across that 18-year period (4.8%). In other words, even a superficial look at school mission statements from 2001 to 2019 revealed that public high school mission statements were not static and underwent at least some textual transformation over this time period. Simply stated, 95.2% of high school mission statements in the study changed over this 18-year period.

### 3.1 Word Count

As one of the simplest quantitative measures of text, word count provides a descriptive window into the sample of high school mission statements in 2001 and again in 2019. Table 4 shows the word count of mission statements for the 2001 and 2019 sample of schools.

Table 4. Mission statement word count from 2001 and 2019

	2001	2019
Mean	137.5	153.3
Standard Deviation	155.4	140.3
Minimum	17	19
Maximum	697	714
<i>N</i>	42	42

As shown in Table 4, the descriptive statistics for the 2001 and 2019 mission statement word count were relatively similar. In 2001, the average word count for the sample of mission statements was 137.5 with a standard deviation of 155.4. Examining range, some high schools expressed their purpose in 2001 with as few as 17 words while others took as many 697 words. The vast majority of mission statements in the study were under 250 words in 2001 and 2019, but the standard deviation remained large. In 2019, the average word count for the sample of mission statements was 153.3 with standard deviation of 140.3. The minimum word count for mission statements in 2019 was 19 words and the maximum was 714, both slightly greater than the 2001 minimum and maximum. Over the 18-year study period, the average change in the word count of mission statements increased by 15.7 words, however this change was not statistically significant ( $t = -.65$ ,  $df = 41$ ,  $p = .52$ ). Although the overwhelming majority of schools changed their mission statement over this 18-year period (95%), in many cases the mission statements did not appreciably change in word count. To provide a richer perspective of the degree that high school purpose may be shifting over time, the results of a thematic analyses of mission statements continues below.

### 3.2 Examining Mission Statement Themes

The overall number of the themes observed across the sample of 2001 and 2019 high school mission statements is explored below in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Number of themes portrayed by high school mission statements in 2001 and 2019

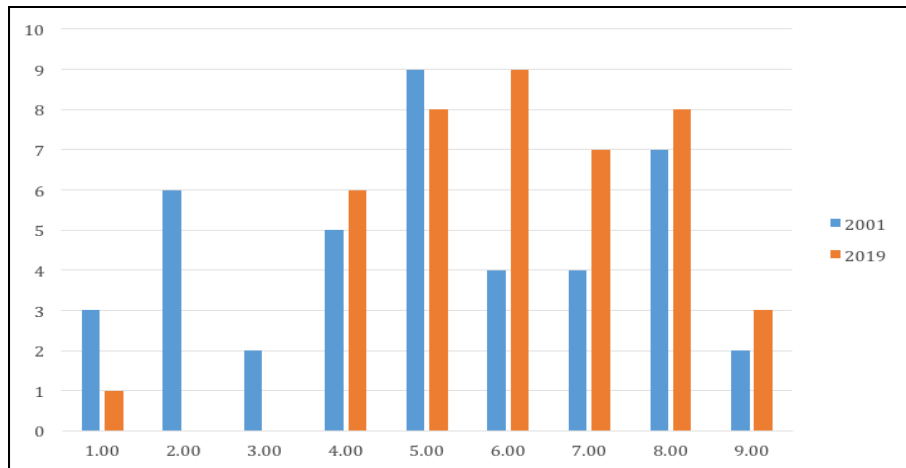
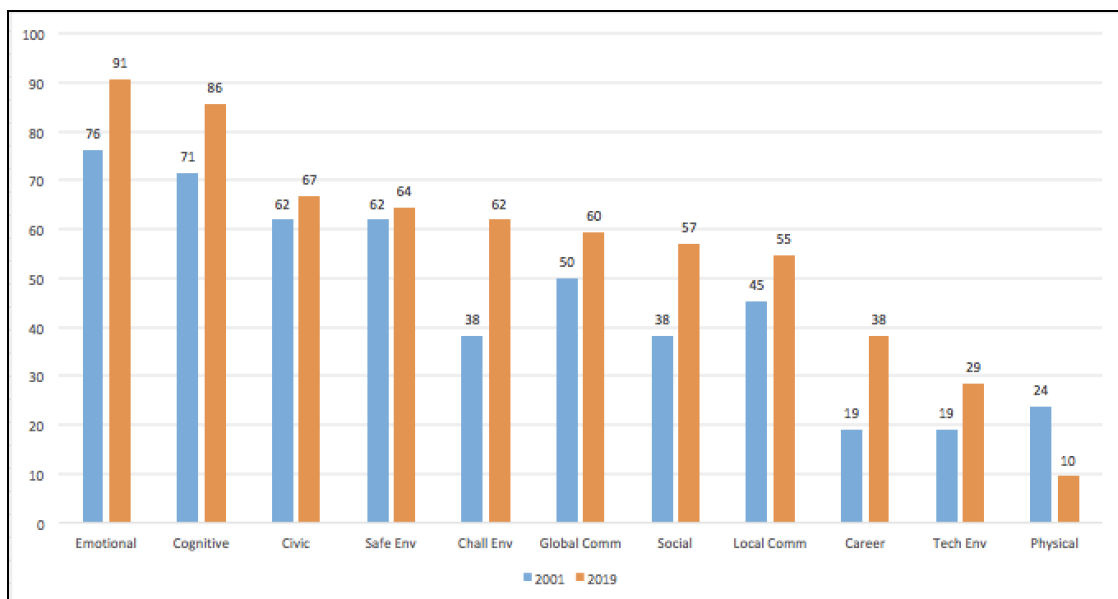


Figure 1 shows the variability in the number of themes present in the school mission statements. In 2001, the distribution of the number of themes listed across mission statements followed a normal distribution ( $M = 5.1, SD = 2.4, N = 42$ ), with a range from 1 to 9 themes included across the sample of the mission statements. In other words, the 2001 results showed the average high school mission statement included about five different themes although a standard deviation of 2.4 themes indicates substantial variability across the sample. Eighteen years later in 2019, the average number of mission statement themes increased to 6.2 ( $M = 6.2, SD = 1.7, N = 42$ ), with the observed range from 1 to 9 themes remaining unchanged from 2001. Thus, the 2019 high school mission statements contained an average of one additional theme than they did in 2001. Indeed, a closer look at the data reveals that 21 of the 42 eligible schools in the study (50%) increased the number of themes in their mission statement between 2001 and 2019 while just 13 schools (31%) decreased the number of themes and 8 schools (19%) stayed the same. A paired t-test reveals that the observed increase in the overall number of mission statement themes between 2001 and 2019 was statistically significant ( $t = -2.6, df = 41, p = .01$ ).

Given that the number of mission statement themes increased significantly in 2019, further analyses illuminate how mission statements may have changed over this period. As such, Figure 2 provides a summary of the observed frequency of the 11 mission statement themes found across the sample of Massachusetts’s high schools in 2001 and again in 2019<sup>1</sup>.

Figure 2. Percent of mission statement themes observed inschools in 2001 and 2019



<sup>1</sup>The spiritual development theme was not found in any of the 2001 or 2019 public school mission statements and is not depicted here.



In 2001, emotional development was the most frequently articulated theme across mission statements (76% of schools). Cognitive development (71% of schools) and civic development (62% of schools) were also frequently occurring themes in 2001. In addition to student attributes, school attributes were regularly portrayed in school mission statements. For example, in the 2001 sample, 62% schools described a safe environment in their mission statement compared to just 38% of schools describing a challenging environment. Like the 2001 results, emotional development was found to be the most frequently articulated theme, showing up in 91% of the 2019 Massachusetts sample. Similarly, cognitive development (86% of schools) and civic development (67% of schools) remained frequently occurring themes across the 2019 mission statements. In addition, a majority of 2019 schools included safe environment (64%) and/or challenging environment (62%) in their mission statement. Attributes about preparation for the global community (60%) and/or local community (55%) were also observed in the 2019 mission statements. Below, Figure 3 depicts the change in frequency of mission statement themes between 2001 and 2019.

Figure 3. Percent change of mission statements themes between 2001 and 2019

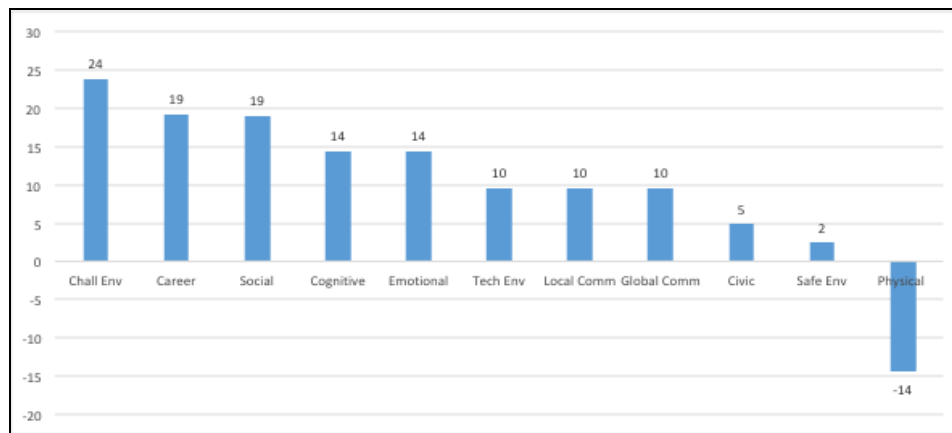


Figure 3 shows that ten of the eleven coded mission statement themes increased from 2001 to 2019. Only the theme of physical development (far right of Figure 3) decreased over the eighteen-year study. The largest increase over the study period (24%) was observed for the challenging environment theme increasing from 38% of school mission statements in 2001 to 62% by 2019. Career preparation, social development, and cognitive development also exhibited notable increases over the 18-year study, indicating that these mission themes were more frequently included in 2019 than a generation prior. For example, just under half of the sampled high schools (38%) described social development in their 2001 mission statements. The prevalence of social development increased by 19% such that 57% of the 2019 sample now described social development in their high school mission. To better determine how much of this variation could be attributed to chance and variability within the samples, McNemar's test (essentially a repeated measures chi-square) was calculated for each of the eleven coded mission statement themes. Although we observed a percentage increase across many themes over the study period, only the challenging environment and career preparation themes were found to be statistically significant. Specifically, challenging environment increased from 38.1% of school mission statements in 2001 to 61.9% of mission statements in 2019 ( $p = .05$ ), while career preparation increased from 19% of missions in 2001 to 38.1% in 2019 ( $p = .04$ ).

### 3.3 Examples

The following example mission statements (including the coded themes) provide some context for how such trends actually played out in Massachusetts high schools. In Example 1, the mission statement of Old Rochester Regional High School is shown to have changed both in substance and format from 2001 to 2019.

## Example 1: Old Rochester Regional High School

2001: Old Rochester Regional High School is dedicated to personal growth for all students. We believe that the primary purpose of education is to provide experiences and opportunities for all students to attain academic (A0) and personal (C0) achievement, to become responsible (C15) members of an ever-changing society, and to develop self-worth (C9) and respect for the dignity of others (C11).

2019: The Old Rochester Regional community works together to educate each person in a safe (G1), challenging (H1) environment. As we prepare students for participation in society (D0), we foster their academic (A0) and personal (C0) growth.

Academic Expectations:

- Read, analyze, and synthesize information (A6)
- Think critically (A5)
- Communicate effectively (A4)
- Use technology as a resource and a tool (I0)

Civic Expectations:

- Communicate effectively (A4)

Social Expectations:

- Collaborate (B5) and adapt
- Demonstrate cultural awareness (K4)

As illustrated above, Old Rochester's 2001 mission included just two main themes identified by the mission statement coding rubric: (A) cognitive development, and (C) emotional development. By 2019, however, the mission expanded to include a total of 8 major themes: (A) cognitive, (B) social, (C) emotional, (G) safe environment, (H) challenging environment, (I) data/technology environment, and (K) integrate into global community. It is worth noting that the Old Rochester Regional High School mission statement did not substantially increase the length (i.e. word count) of their mission statement between 2001 and 2019, but increased their number and variety themes. A second example is provided from Plymouth South High School.

## Example 2: Plymouth South High School

2001: Create an environment which encourages and guides the social (B0), emotional (C0), physical (E0), and educational development of each child. Foster student and staff responsibilities and respect for self, all other people, societal needs, and local and world environments. Recognize and use to the fullest the rich diversity (K1) and professional skills of the staff by structuring and environment which encompasses risk-taking (C12), critical (A5) and creative thinking (A3), innovations, experimentation, personal responsibility (C15), and shared decision-making as a meaningful part of the process of facilitating learning and growth for all students, staff, and other citizens in our school community.

2019: The mission of Plymouth South High School is to deliver a rigorous, comprehensive education (H4) and expose students to authentic experiences in a caring, safe, and respectful environment (G1). Plymouth South High School welcomes a diverse student body (J3) and prepares them to become critical thinkers (A5), productive citizens (D1), and independent in a changing society. The Plymouth South High School student will maintain a culture of respect (C11) and lead by example.

Consistent with the average trends observed across the sample, the Plymouth South High School mission statement increased by one theme over the 18-year study period. However, like most of the individual schools we examined, the Plymouth story is more nuanced than the simple addition a new theme. Between 2001 and 2019, the school dropped the physical development theme from their mission statement and added two new themes: challenging environment (H) and safe environment (G). The Plymouth South High School example is also emblematic of the overall study finding that showed the theme of challenging environment had increased more than any other mission statement theme (24%) between 2001 to 2019.

**4.0 Discussion**

Considering that school purpose is a foundational component for any educational inquiry or discussion, there are appreciably few efforts to quantify and empirically study how schools define and articulate their own purpose. Indeed, "thoughtful, systematic attention to larger questions of purpose is rarely at the heart of American social and educational discourse" (Pekarsky, 2007, p. 4). In the current study, an established coding rubric was applied to measure a number of themes commonly espoused in school mission statements. Using this established methodology and approach, the number and variety of themes were identified and analyzed from a random sample of 42 Massachusetts public high school mission statements originally collected in 2001 and again in 2019, 18 years

later. As such, the current study sought to better understand how schools defined their purpose and investigate the extent, if at all, that school mission statements measurably changed between 2001 to 2019.

Study results clearly demonstrated notable changes over the 18-year period with 40 of the 42 randomly sampled high school mission statements (95%) changing from 2001 to 2019. Mission statements were dynamic and evolving for the vast majority of public high schools during these first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For a child born in a random Massachusetts community in 2001, we can be reasonably confident their local public high school mission statement had changed by their Spring 2019 high school graduation. Although the average mission statement word count did not statistically change over the 18-year period, changes to the structure and thematic content of school mission statements revealed notable patterns.

First, the average number of themes articulated in high school mission statements increased over time, from 5.1 themes in 2001 to 6.1 themes in 2019. This statistically significant increase suggests that most Massachusetts high schools not only altered their mission statement, but introduced new concepts and themes over time.

Specifically, 10 of the 11 themes found in public high school mission statements in Massachusetts increased between 2001 and 2019. The largest change was observed for the challenging environment theme, increasing 25% across school mission statements between 2001 and 2019. The themes of career preparation, social development, and cognitive development also showed notable increases over the 18-year study period.

Federal policy trends during this period, such as the passage of the *No Child Left Behind Act* in 2001 and the *Race to the Top Act* in 2009 continued an increased emphasis on college and career readiness that signaled a national move towards increased academic and cognitive emphasis and rigor, often defining student, teacher, and school success based solely on student test performance. In 2019, 85% of sampled high schools included academic/cognitive development in their mission statements, a 13% increase from 2001. At the same time, a groundswell of academic research on the benefits of social and emotional learning (Greenberg, Weissberg, O'Brien, Zins, Fredericks, et al., 2003; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009) began to proliferate in ways that were not reflected in federal educational policy, but do seem to have been incorporated into local school mission statements. These findings suggest that school mission statements are sensitive to, but not solely a direct reflection of, federal educational policies.

One of the most striking and concrete results of the 18-year study was how many schools had added new thematic elements to their mission statements. To be clear, the overarching goals and purposes espoused by Massachusetts high schools remained fairly stable over time with emotional, cognitive, and civic development themes consistently present in the majority of sampled mission statements. However, the presence of individual themes increased from 2001 to 2019 such that, on average, schools were incorporating more and varied themes into their mission. Other than a reduction in the prevalence of the physical education in sampled mission statements, study results clearly show that schools do not appear to be cutting other priorities in order to make room for new ones.

If nothing else, the current study shows that Massachusetts high schools have grown increasingly diverse and broad in how they articulated their purpose while state and national efforts to define and measure “success” have been almost exclusively focused on academic/cognitive domains. This systemic drift toward incorporating more themes into the high school mission statements may reflect the fact that schools are being called upon, and in some cases required, to focus on a greater number of priorities for local, state, and national interests.

This incongruent relationship between the growing breadth of school purpose and narrow measures of success has serious implications. The average Massachusetts high school had over six different thematic elements expressed in their 2019 mission statements. Almost universally, Massachusetts public high schools measure and report on only one or two narrow aspects of their success, nearly always from the academic/cognitive domain. Over this 18-year inquiry, we found that schools espoused an ever-increasing range of aims and purposes within their communities while simultaneously being held to a narrow and unitary definition of student success, teacher effectiveness, and overall school health.

#### 4.1 Limitations

Mission statements represent only an artifact and approximation of the complex and dynamic purposes espoused and implemented by a given school community. By nature, mission statements represent only a school's aspiration and espoused purpose. Mission statements, and by extension the current study, do not address the actual day-to-day functions or attempt to measure any teaching and learning practices. However, prior research suggests that mission statements are generally taken seriously by school constituents (Stemler, Bebell, & Sonnabend, 2011) but it is not objectively known the extent to which any of the study schools may be actively implementing the themes observed in their mission. Researchers have only recently begun to systematically study the question of implementation and mission awareness within an organization. Emerging studies suggest that the effectiveness of the mission is mediated by organizational commitment (Davis et al., 2007; Gurley, Peters, Collins, & Fifolt, 2015; Kurland,

Peretz, & Hertz-Lazarowitz, 2010; Rey & Bastons, 2018). That is, how effective a mission statement is depends on the extent to which school leaders can cultivate a shared commitment to the vision.

In addition, this study did not use any performance data as an external check on the validity of the mission statements. To date, few studies have explored the relationship between mission statement and outcome measures, but those studies do provide some preliminary support for the validity of espoused values with objective performance. For example, Slate et al. (2008) compared the mission statements from a random sample of high-performing elementary schools in Texas with the mission statements of a random sample of low-performing schools. They found that significantly greater numbers of high-performing schools had mission statements that focused on providing a challenging environment focused on academic success. Given that the literature has previously addressed validity arguments for using school mission statements for research and reflection (Allen & Kern, 2018; Stemler, Bebell, & Sonnabend, 2011), we feel confident the limited generalizations and interpretations presented here are within reason.

Furthermore, the current study is essentially a descriptive one. Before generalizing the current results and creating inferential connections between local, state, and national educational policies and reform efforts over such a large time span, it is important to consider the sample consisted of just over forty schools from one state.

#### 4.2 Conclusions and Future Directions

Despite the use of a true random sample of high schools in Massachusetts, the sample size restricts us from generalizing too broadly or reflecting too closely on the relationship between specific local, state, and national policies, reform efforts, and trends in school mission/purpose. Nevertheless, this study makes a contribution to the literature as the first systematic effort to monitor changes in school mission statements over time.

Across the 42 sampled high schools, 21 increased the thematic content of their mission statements over the 18-year period, with the average addition of 3.4 themes ( $SD=2.2$ ), whereas 13 schools decreased an average of 1.8 themes ( $SD=1.0$ ). Of the remaining 8 schools which maintained the same number of themes, all but two shifted themes over time. Interestingly, the two high schools with unchanged mission statements over the 18-year study were both charter schools founded in the late 1990's: the Francis W. Parker Charter School (Devens, MA) and the Pioneer Valley Performing Arts Charter High School (Hadley, MA). Although beyond the scope of this inquiry, how specific sub-types of different schools (like charter schools) define themselves in their communities is worthy of further scholarship. For example, critics have argued that some charter schools may be particularly disconnected and unresponsive to their local communities (Green, Baker, Oluwole, & Mead, 2016). Although the final sample of 42 schools included only three examples of charter schools, is it more than coincidental that two of the three had unchanged mission statements when every other school had changed? It is our hope future research may explore similar extrapolations on the shifting purpose of high school (as evidenced by changing mission statements and other measures) in light of local, state, and national reform efforts.

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