

Creating a Mission Statement for an Athletic Department

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Abstract

Mission statements are a must have for every business or school. People look at mission statements to understand what a certain business or school is truly about and to understand their goals and mission for the future; but unfortunately most of them get it wrong. Many are lengthy, some are very general and predictable, and most are usually forgotten about. This paper talks about the importance of mission statements, what they should really include, and describes the steps that were used to develop a mission statement for my school's athletic department. The mission statement that was created focuses heavily on the importance of our philosophy and the development of life skills.

Creating a Mission Statement for an Athletic Department

Introduction

Mission statements are very prevalent in today's world. They aim to declare an organization's purpose, goals, and philosophical views (Ireland & Hitt, 1992). Every business and school has one, and mission statements are what many people look at to get a sense of what the goal or purpose is of a business or school. The school that I currently work at is going through the process of systematizing and documenting its curriculum and developing an overall mission statement within each academic area. We are a unique school because we are a private academy that specializes in assisting students who have learning disabilities. Each year, more and more parents come to us to seek our expertise in helping students who have these learning differences as well as some differences that go beyond the realm of our expertise. This overall increase in our student population has made us realize that there is a need for our school to have a clear mission statement to guide our decisions about our students and our future.

Being the athletic director at my school, I realized the need for a mission statement for our athletic department. We have a very unique way of approaching athletics, just like our academics, and this approach needs to be explained to current and potential parents and students. I have heard many of our current parents say the reason they stay at our school is because of the athletics program. They see the impact our athletics program has had on their children's lives, physically, emotionally, and socially and they believe they wouldn't get that anywhere else.

As I reflected on the unique aspects of our athletics program, I thought to myself, why doesn't our athletics program have a mission statement to talk about the unique things we do? How will potential parents know the benefits of our program and why does our program work well for students who have learning disabilities? When I had an opportunity to develop a

research project for my online course, EAD 801 Leadership and Organizational Development, in the spring of 2012, I wanted to take this opportunity to develop a mission statement for Eton Academy Athletics.

Background & Rationale

To protect anonymity of the subjects in this research project, names and locations have been changed. Eton Academy serves students with learning disabilities in the 1st-12th grade. The most prevalent disability at Eton, and with its athletes, is Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder or ADHD. ADHD is a common behavioral disorder that affects an estimated 8% to 10% of school-aged children (What is ADHD?, 2008). People with ADHD have differences in the various parts of their brains that control attention and activity. This may result in difficulty focusing on a conversation or being attentive during class.

Another key piece of background information is the philosophy of the athletics program at Eton Academy. The athletics program is open to all middle and high school students and it includes a no-cut policy, with a high emphasis on equitable playing time. Although many of the sports offered are played in an intramural format, where the students play against one another, our basketball teams (6th/7th grade boys, 7th/8th grade boys, middle school girls, varsity girls, and varsity boys) and middle soccer teams do competitively play against other teams of similar athletic ability. The other sports we offer to our athletes throughout the year include the following:

- Running Club
- Tennis
- Bowling

- Volleyball

Currently we have over eighty students that participate in our athletics program and, in a school that is comprised of only 185 students, having approximately 43% of them participate in some type of sport throughout the school year is a great statistic. Our athletics program offers a chance for all of our middle and high school students to participate in an organized sport system and feel a sense of belonging to a team.

This sense of belonging and open participation is something that is missing from many youth sports programs today. Tom Farrey (2008), the author of *Game On: The All-American Race to Make Champions of our Children*, discusses these missing components in his book. He writes,

“Youth sport is the most important institution in all of sports because it is where the magic begins, but it’s an institution at a historic crossroads, one in which performance often matters more than participation does. It’s less and less accessible to the late bloomer, the genetically ordinary, the economically disadvantaged, the child of a one-parent household, the physically or mentally disabled, and the kid who needs exercise more than any other-the clinically obese (p.15).”

That is why our athletics program plays a huge role in a majority of our students’ lives. It gives many of them a chance to be active, engage socially with their peers, and gain the acceptance that many of them need and would not get anywhere else. Our program creates all of these unique opportunities for our students, but we don’t have anything that explains what we actually do in our program and what we truly want to develop in our athletes.

As the athletic director, I realized the need for a mission statement, and that it was my responsibility to learn more about them, so that I could create one for our program. I needed to develop a mission statement that defines our program, guides it in the right direction, and describes what we want to develop in our young athletes. After reading Michael Fullan's (2001) book, *Leading in a Culture of Change*, I realized my moral purpose, a quality that leaders must possess in order to guide them through important decisions like change and knowledge building (p.7), was my main driving force behind wanting to become more educated about mission statements. Fullan writes, "Whatever one's style, every leader, to be effective, must have and work on improving his or her moral purpose (p.13)." This realization of the need for a mission statement was driven by my moral purpose and my passion for wanting our athletics program to be the best for our students.

Research Questions

As I began my research, I reflected on what I really needed to know in order to create a mission statement that defines our purpose, guides our future, and develops important life skills for our athletes. The following questions helped me with my initial research and with the creation of the mission statement for our athletics program:

- What are the needs of our student athletes?
- How does our athletic program address those needs?
- What principles or beliefs guide our program?
- For what reasons do students participate in our athletic program?
- What challenges does our athletic program face?
- What do we want our athletes to get out of this program?

Methodology

To help answer the questions posed above, I used a process, beginning with reviewing various forms of literature regarding mission statements. This information helped me to understand the purpose and components of mission statements. Next, I researched current mission statements from high schools, and other athletic departments around the country. Researching other mission statements provided me with a first-hand account of what other programs have done, and gave me potential ideas on what our mission statement should and should not include. My next step in my process was to read literature regarding today's youth sports programs. I wanted to see the key issues that were affecting youth sports and to see what other programs were doing to address these issues. I chose literature that discussed developing certain life skills through sport, the major issues occurring in youth sport today, and the difficulties of young athletes.

My final step was to conduct interviews that included two administrators from my school, the middle and upper school directors, and a current coach from my school. I chose these people to interview because they have helped create mission statements, and have been involved in athletics throughout their lives, whether playing or coaching in them. Their answers provided me with different perspectives of what our athletics program does for our athletes and where they see us going in the future.

Review of Related Literature

In conducting my research, I also reviewed the following literature on certain topics to help develop a mission statement for my athletic department. The literature focused on such topics as mission statements, examples of current mission statements from athletics departments, and information about youth sports today. The literature I chose to review covers a wide range

of topics, and may seem a bit overwhelming, but because I work with athletes of a specific group (i.e. all having some type of learning difference) I needed a wide array of literature to cover the information about mission statements and the issues affecting youth sports today. The summary of my findings is described below in each sub-section.

Mission Statements

While reading the literature, I was surprised to discover the true purpose of a mission statement. Before my research, I thought a mission statement was something that a business or school wrote to describe who they are, almost like a catchphrase. But after reading the literature, I realized a good mission statement provides more than that.

Mission statements are very prevalent in today's world. They aim to declare an organization's purpose, goals, and philosophical views (Ireland & Hitt, 1992). Author Lew Allen, a director of the Georgia League of Professional Schools in Athens, states that mission statements should guide, inform, and inspire a program to teach strategies, help with evaluations, and increase parent and community involvement (Allen, 2012). I love the words, guide, inform, and inspire. They are words that I truly believe in as a teacher, athletic director, and coach that should be the true driving force behind what we do. A mission statement is not just a simple catchphrase, it is something that helps guide a program, explain its values, and is a form of assessment and evaluation to see if a program is truly in line with their mission.

The problem that arises with this, however, is that sometimes schools and companies make their mission statement too simple or too complex for anyone to follow. Allen (2012) states that there are five major problems with mission statements in schools, he interchanges the name "mission" with "guiding," and I used them as examples of what not to include in my mission statement. Allen (2012) stated:

1. Much of what is found in the guiding statements of schools is so general that it is virtually impossible for people to know what success looks like.
2. Guiding statements often don't link desired results or philosophical stances with specific teaching and assessment practices.
3. Guiding statements are generally too long and too complicated.
4. Often many of the people in a school had no part in writing its belief statements.
5. Life in schools discourages people from having reflective, ongoing dialogues about the mission.

Overall the best mission statements simply define a program and suggest a future goal (Betkus, Glassman & McAfee, 2000). We have to start practicing what we preach and we have to realize that organizations demonstrate their fundamental purpose not through the words of finely crafted mission statements, but in their day-to-day actions (DuFour, 2012). Mission statements are not just simply words on paper, they need to be acted upon and demonstrated each day to truly be relevant and withstanding.

Examples of Current Mission Statements

To help see what an actual athletic department mission statement looked like, I researched mission statements from high schools and colleges around the country. The three that interested me the most came from Squalicum High School in Washington, the Loveland City School District in Ohio, and Dobson High School in Arizona. Table 1 (see Appendix), provides the examples of each mission statement and the critiques I gave it using the Rubrics for Mission Statements (North Central Association, 2012) and the problems that Allen described above. The information that I looked for within each mission statement was the clear articulation of the

purpose of the athletic department, the identification of what is to be developed in its athletes, and whether the mission could be used to guide further decisions.

After reading and analyzing the statements, I saw the issues that Allen (2012) described. Some were lengthy; the purpose was unclear. The words within the mission statement sounded intriguing, but they were very general, and it would be very hard to use them as an assessment or evaluation piece for their programs. These statements made me realize that writing a mission statement is going to be difficult and I have to step back and make sure that my mission statement answers the follow questions:

- What is our athletics program purpose?
- What do we want to develop in our young athletes?
- How are we going to use our mission to guide us in the future?

Youth Sports Today

Being the athletic director, I have first-hand experience on how sports affect the lives of children. I see the smiles on their faces when they score their first goal in soccer or first basket in basketball, and it is something great. But what else do we do, as a program, to truly make a positive impact on our athletes' lives? What are their needs and what do we need to be addressing?

After reading the literature in regard to youth sports, there were three major concerns that kept reoccurring. These three concerns included the increasing obesity epidemic in our country, the need to develop leadership skills in our young athletes, and the need to develop social skills. I know that our students struggle with these issues on a daily basis; some are overweight, many have issues regarding leadership, and many have difficulties socially. Some of this is in direct relation to their learning difference; I have many students who are on the autism spectrum, and

many who have never played sports and who get little physical activity. These three issues need to be addressed in our mission because they are the key issues facing youth sport today.

Findings & Conclusions

After reviewing the related literature, interviews, and examining the true needs of our students, I decided to focus on developing a mission statement that really emphasizes developing certain life skills in our athletes. Throughout the interviews and literature the importance of life skill development seemed to be in the forefront of good athletics programming. Mary Bishop, the director of the Upper School, stated,

“Our athletics program provides our students with the unique opportunity to participate on a team, regardless of their skill. Our coaches celebrate the strengths of each student on the team, while teaching them athletic and life skills (2012).”

Whether it was from the text or the interviews, this important issue of life skill development is something that we do at Eton and it is a huge need that youth sports can fill. Students come to our school because they want to learn strategies and they need to be successful in the world, and our athletics program needs to do the same. Athletics provides a great opportunity for students to develop life skills, but these skills are not learned simply by playing or participating in sports; they have to be taught explicitly. Therefore, I wanted to create a mission that emphasized how, through athletics and participation in our program, our athletes will develop the following life skills:

- Leadership
- Lifelong physical activity habits
- Social skills

Being a Leader

Students with learning disabilities tend to fall into the background and want to go unnoticed. They are nervous to take risks because they don't want to say the wrong thing in front of their classmates for fear of ridiculing. They have a hard time self-advocating, and they often feel left out of social situations (What is ADHD?, 2008). Many of these feelings come from experiencing failure in the classroom and many do not know how to cope. One way to overcome these feelings is by instilling leadership skills in athletes with learning disabilities. Being a good leader involves a number of qualities; the most important being self-esteem. By closely focusing on teaching athletes leadership skills during the athletic season, the hope is that they will see the positive effects it has on their self-esteem and, hopefully, transfer those feelings into the classroom.

So how does an athletic program develop leadership skills in athletes with learning disabilities? Opportunities and activities have to be provided to its participants to do so. Coach John Wooden, the legendary UCLA basketball coach, who for over 27 years led his teams to ten NCAA championships, four perfect 30-0 seasons and was named ESPN's Greatest Coach of the 21st Century, defined leadership as, "the ability to get individuals to work together for the common good and the best possible results while at the same time letting them know they did it themselves." (Wooden & Jamison, 1997).

One way we do this is by involving our high school students in our summer athletic camps as "Camp Leaders." Each summer we hold basketball and soccer camps for our 5th-8th grade students. The camps focus on developing skills, teaching the concept of teamwork, and developing a love for the game. The "Camp Leaders," are responsible for helping the coaches with various duties, working individually on skills with the campers, and leading various team

building and leadership exercises. I have witnessed the positive impact it has had on our high school students and this should be stated in our mission.

Promoting Physical Activity

One of the biggest issues that our country is facing today is the obesity epidemic facing our children. According to the CDC Website, approximately 17% (or 12.5 million) of children and adolescents aged 2-19 years old are obese, and the current generation of children will be the first in a century predicted to live shorter lives than their parents. More and more children are gaining weight because of the lack of activity and poor eating habits they are acquiring. Many of the programs that would provide this type of education, like physical education classes and grass-roots sports, are being cut from state and federal budgets because of unsteady financial times and the lack of money making appeal (Farrey, 2008).

Eton Academy Athletics promotes physical activity because of the “no-cut” policy of our athletics department. This policy allows athletes to participate in sports throughout their entire school career. This opportunity is, unfortunately, not available to every student in the United States and is one of the main causes of low participation levels during the high school years. After about the age of fourteen, participation levels in youth sports goes down dramatically and, some believe, that this decrease in participation is due to lack of interest. In actuality, the decreased population relates directly to the structure of our athletic system (Farrey, 2008).

My athletes fit right into this category. If our program did not exist, many of our students would not be able to participate on other school teams because of their low to average skill level. They would have a hard time finding a team to play on and it would severely hurt their chances of having an opportunity to stay physically active. Farrey (2008) also supported this statement in his book, *Game On*, “more than ever sports structure is configured in a manner designed to

identify and promote the next generation of athlete entertainers. These talented children have become the focus of the youth sports system, which leaves few options for the teenager of low or average ability (p. 80).”

Physical activity needs to be used as a tool by my athletes for various reasons. It provides them with a way to fight childhood obesity, and to start living a healthy lifestyle. Eton Academy Athletics understands the importance of physical activity and it will continue to promote it because the earlier a person develops healthy fitness habits, the more likely they are to continue those habits throughout their lives.

Providing Opportunities for Social Interactions

One of the major motives that children have for sport participation is the opportunity it provides them to be with friends and develop new relationships (Weinberg & Gould, 2007), and our athletes are no different. Our overall student population comes from different cities, towns, and counties from around Michigan. It is very difficult for them to develop close friendships with other students because many of them do not live near school, and the only opportunities they have to be social with one another are during after school activities. Our athletics program not only provides them with an opportunity to participate in a variety of sports, but it also allows them to spend time and be social with each other.

Developmental sport psychologist Maureen Weiss and her colleagues have studied peer relationships in sport and have conducted many studies to see what effects they have on one another (Weinberg & Gould, 2007). In one study, they identified positive and negative dimensions in regard to friendship and sports participation. Positive dimensions included, companionship, intimacy, and loyalty, while some of the negative dimensions included conflict

and betrayal. The study found that certain things friends said or did to each other increased one's self esteem and made a positive impact (Weinberg & Gould, 2007).

Our athletes need this social development to increase those ideas of companionship, loyalty, and self-esteem, because many have yet to experience them. Our program provides them with an opportunity to be social and make friendships after school. This is a huge part of our mission and it needs to be expressed.

Implications

After all of the research, interviews, and literature, I have created an athletic mission statement for our sports program that speaks to our overall philosophy with a main emphasis on developing life skills in our athletes. As I learned in Unit 5, in EAD 801, a mission statement is more than just a sentence. It includes demographic information about the school, the mission of the program, and the shared coaching or teaching beliefs of the people involved. Again, a mission statement is not just a brief sentence; it has to include the information necessary to guide a program in the future, and to help evaluate its effectiveness (Allen, 2012). This mission statement will define our purpose, guide our future, and help us evaluate our program.

By creating this mission statement it starts to solidify our athletics program and it will inform current and potential parents of all the unique things we do. Some other benefits of creating this mission statement include allowing me, the athletic director, to evaluate our programs effectiveness and inform the coaches of their expectations.

Summary

The mission statement that I have developed for my athletics program is described below. It first gives a brief description of the program's philosophy and the demographics of our school.

Then it goes on to share our overall mission and the shared coaching and teaching beliefs of our program.

Eton Academy Athletics Mission Statement

Eton Academy Athletics:

- The Eton Academy athletics program is open to all middle and high school students. We have a no-cut policy, where anyone who wants to participate can, with a high emphasis on equitable playing time. Many of our athletes have never played a sport before and our program provides them with their first opportunity to play in an organized sport system. Many of our sports are played in an intramural format, but we do competitively play against other teams in soccer and basketball. Other sports that are offered throughout the year include run club, bowling, tennis, and volleyball. Currently we have over eighty students that participate in our athletics program and, in a school that is comprised of only 185 students; approximately 43% of them participate in some type of sport throughout the school year.

Our Mission:

- Through the use of athletics, explicit instruction and the guidance and support of our coaches, our athletes will participate in activities that foster teamwork, sportsmanship, and develop life skills that are essential to young athletes. These life skills include the concepts of leadership, developing essential social skills, and an appreciation of lifelong physical activity.

Our Shared Coaching and Teaching Beliefs:

- We believe each sport will be coached by an Eton Academy teacher who has first-hand experience of working with students with learning differences.

- We believe that every middle school and high school student that wants to participate in athletics can and will be given equitable playing time.
- We believe our coaches are sport mentors that are compassionate and understanding of their athletes. They will encourage, guide, and be their cheerleader on the sidelines.
- We believe that athletics is a great way to teach life skills to our athletes. Life skills are not simply learned by just playing a sport, but through explicit teaching provided by our coaches.
- We believe that parents are instrumental in their athlete's overall growth. Parents know their child best and they need to feel included. Involving parents in their child's athletic experience builds a supportive environment and helps build a positive relationship between the coaches and parents.

Upon completion of this paper, I am going to submit this mission statement as a draft to my head of school for his approval. After discussing the mission statement and correcting any of the necessary changes, I will then formally present this mission statement to our current and potential parents. It will be expressed via email, in a parent newsletter, or hopefully in a brand new Eton Academy Athletics webpage, which I hope to develop soon.

New Questions

This research project was both enlightening and informative. It helped me see the needs of my athletes, and let me create something entirely new for our program. I know my research was limited and informal in its approach, but all good research brings about new questions that may happen in the future. These questions include the following:

- If a bigger need arises with my students, how can the overall mission statement be altered?
- How will I further embed the concept of life skills development in our athletics program?
- How will I introduce this mission statement to my coaches, and how will they take it?
- How will I truly assess this mission statement to guide our program in the future?

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Appendix

Table 1

Example of Mission Statement	Things done well	Things needed to improve upon
<p>Squalicum High School, Washington</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Squalicum High School athletic department will create and foster an environment that provides opportunities for student-athletes to enrich their high school experience through participation on athletic teams, which are competitive at the conference and state level. We are dedicated to providing opportunities, which will enhance the intellectual, physical, social, moral and cultural development of the whole person, while conducting all activities with honesty and integrity in accordance with the principles of good sportsmanship and ethical conduct. <p>Retrieved from : http://squalicum.bellinghamschools.org/athletic-mission-statement</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> States a clear purpose I like how they discussed developing the whole person Including sportsmanship and ethical conduct 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A little to lengthy Very general Would like to see some specifics on how they do the things they say Very hard to assess
<p>Loveland City School District, Ohio</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Loveland City School District Athletic Program will provide a wide variety of athletic opportunities that will aid in the overall development of our students. Participation in athletics will provide students with a significant opportunity to become involved with other students and their coaches in an educational experience that takes place outside of the classroom. <p>Retrieved from: http://www.loveland.k12.oh.us/lhs/athletics/pages/Mission_Statement.pdf</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seems to focus on social aspect Not too long Clarifies the purpose somewhat 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It is very, very, general States what they want developed, but no specifics Very basic
<p>Dobson High School, Arizona</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Mesa Public Schools Athletic Program, and Dobson High School, is committed to promote, direct, and conduct interscholastic athletics in such a manner as to further the aims of general education. It will teach advanced knowledge and skill of sport, promote friendly relationships with other schools, encourage participation by students, and teach good sportsmanship and fair play. Furthermore, interscholastic athletics will develop desirable traits in the individual, encourage optimal participation, and enhance fulfillment of competitive desires. <p>Retrieved from: http://www.mpsaz.org/dobson/athletics/mission/</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A clear purpose is stated. Develops a clear picture in my mind I like how it includes how it will supplement their general education Again a focus on sportsmanship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Again a little lengthy Says it will develop desirable traits, but what are those?