

Close the rhetoric/reality gap

“There’s a gap.” Helen sits in her office, mulling over the gap between her school’s mission statement and the reality of her program. “This is a Christian school—Christian teachers, devotions, Bible class, chapel, a positive environment. These are good, but only take us so far in achieving our mission. We need more. I need more. I need an additional way to close the gap.”

Helen leaves her office and heads for the staff room, wondering if defining the mission in terms of student learning would help. “We need to move from activities to goals, goals that help us increasingly do the mission in the classroom.” On the bulletin board she sees an announcement about a workshop on student objectives. She reads, “Use student objectives to close the rhetoric/reality gap.”

Helen thinks, “Student objectives. That sounds familiar. Something like schoolwide outcomes. Wasn’t that what Henry called expected schoolwide learning results?” She keeps reading: “Student objectives define your mission in terms of measurable student learning. They are overarching curriculum standards that are attainable.”

“That’s what I need,” thinks Helen. “Something attainable. Something measurable. Something connected to student learning—that’s what school is about.”

Ever feel like Helen?

Are student objectives right for you and your school?

Find out by answering 6 questions:

1. Yes/No: I want to close the gap between our rhetoric (our mission) and our reality.
2. Yes/No: I want to know how well we’re achieving our mission.
3. Yes/No: I want to connect mission, student learning, curriculum, and school improvement planning.
4. Yes/No: Using student objectives would help our parents better understand and support our mission.
5. Yes/No: My students would catch our vision for Christian education better if they understood what it meant in terms of student learning.
6. Yes/No: Collaborating with other ACSI schools would help us close the rhetoric/reality gap.

If you answered “Yes” to any of the 6 items above, read on! I’ll start with the story of how we

developed our student objectives, outline a process and a set of criteria that you can use to develop yours, explain how student objectives have helped us, and close with a vision for the future.

Are you ready? *We weren’t.*

Table 1: Sample Student Objectives

<p>Responsible Learners who...</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Understand Bible stories, the plan of salvation, and a Christian worldview 2. Understand subject content and skills 3. Integrate content and skills from different subjects 4. Value learning 5. Use appropriate learning strategies
<p>Discerning Thinkers who...</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Use a biblical perspective 2. Solve problems 3. Organize and use information to support conclusions 4. Make creative products and presentations
<p>Productive Collaborators who...</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Respect themselves and others as being created in God's image 2. Work with others
<p>Effective Communicators who...</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Communicate through writing, speaking, reading, listening, graphs and charts, and the arts 2. Integrate different forms of communication
<p>Faithful Caretakers who...</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Serve God and others, and care for God's creation 2. Value and maintain physical, social, emotional, moral, and spiritual health

Panic—we started in a state of panic

And panic is not a good place to be. I sat in my office, looking *Focus on Learning*, the reaccreditation manual from the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC). I liked the title.

I liked that the reaccreditation process had been boiled down to two questions: (1) “How are students doing with respect to the [student objectives]...?” and (2) “Is the school doing everything possible to support high achievement of these [student objectives] for all its students?”

I didn’t like it that I couldn’t answer the questions. “Great!” I thought. “This reaccreditation process is predicated on student objectives. We *don’t* have them. What are they? I *don’t* get it.”

At this point, I did an understandable thing—I panicked, got to work, and tried to unsettle everyone as little as possible.

But where do you begin when you don’t understand what student objectives are? I knew what department objectives were, but our students were learning without student objectives—so why develop student objectives? One part of me answered, “Because the board says we have to be accredited with WASC, and in order to be accredited with WASC, we have to have student objectives.” Another part of me answered, “This will be good for us. It’ll help us close the rhetoric/reality gap.”

I moved from panicking to working. Then I noticed that *Focus on Learning* had a section on student objectives—a definition, a set of descriptors, a sample procedure for developing these, and sample student objectives. I learned that student objectives were schoolwide, interdisciplinary, measurable student learning outcomes that define what a student should know and be able to do.

I read the words. I didn’t really understand them. They didn’t sound like department objectives. Department objectives were more like non-measurable ideals.

I read the words again, but still couldn’t fully grasp the meaning. So I kept rereading while I collected samples from other schools.

I felt better. I remembered that during a recent philosophy review committee meeting we had talked about focusing on implementing the philosophy (instead of revising—wordsmithing—it). I had an inkling that student objectives could help us implement our philosophy.

Given that student objectives seemed related to the philosophy, student objectives sounded like the province of the board. However, the process outlined by *Focus on Learning* didn’t indicate this. Instead, the *Focus on Learning* process said students, parents, staff, and board should participate in developing student objectives.

I thought, “Parents aren’t even involved in curriculum development. Neither are students. Why are they involved in developing student objectives?”

Again, I did an understandable thing. I panicked, got to work, and tried to unsettle everyone as little as possible. *Focus on Learning* suggested roundtable discussions and brainstorming sessions involving students, parents, staff, and board members. A good process. But it was already early December, and I didn’t want to spring such a process on people just before Christmas vacation.

Surveys seemed like a good alternative, so in December I asked secondary students, parents, and staff to select 5 student objectives from a list of 22 that I had compiled.

In January 1999, I published the results in student and school publications. Faculty used the student objective survey results to talk with student council representatives, reviewed the philosophy statement, and then developed an initial draft. “Things are moving!” I thought.

The teaching staff adopted a set of student objectives for field-testing, with the understanding that during the spring, school community input would be sought and that revisions could be made in June.

As a result of field-testing, we shortened the list of objectives, made them more readable, and mailed them to parents in June. I was feeling good. And I felt even better as we used our student objectives to successfully complete the reaccreditation process.

We finished student objective development—then I learned we were just getting started.

Documentation completion = start implementation. And implementation is at least 90% of the work. I was feeling too good to realize this—we had survived reaccreditation, received a 6-year term and were implementing our strategic plan.

Yet from September 1999 – June 2003, something was wrong. Maybe I should have clued in when a

Use student objectives to close the rhetoric/reality gap of Christian education

teacher said, “Student objectives *describe* what I do”—instead of saying, “Student objectives *guide* what I do.”

Maybe I should have clued in when we continued asking, “How well do the student objectives *reflect* our departmental objectives?”—instead of asking, “How well do our student objectives *determine* our department objectives?”

Maybe I should have clued in when I couldn’t figure out the connection between our strategic plan and our student objectives. Certainly I should have clued in when wordsmithing these during the board approval process did not result in increased implementation. But I didn’t.

Finally in the fall of 2003, it clicked. We had a corporate “aha” experience. We understood what student objectives were, that they defined mission achievement. The result? A flurry of implementation.

First, we used the student objectives to revise department standards. We developed a chart that showed the alignment between the student objectives and each department standard. We used the chart to revise department standards and to require all departments to have standards on helping students understand a Christian worldview and on helping students use a biblical perspective.

Second, we developed assessments designed for students to demonstrate their achievement of the student objectives. We scored the assessments using rubrics that were explicitly based on standards (and consequently on the student objectives). We used student assessment data to monitor student achievement of the student objectives (and consequently the achievement of the mission).

Third, we required secondary students to use the student objectives to assess their learning and to use their findings to develop a growth plan. They presented their plans to their parents during student-led conferences.

Fourth, we developed a SMART goal for student learning: 90% of high school students will score above standard on all student objectives, scores being taken from rubric-scored assessments. We used this goal to drive school improvement.

Fifth, we used publications to describe how, for example, chapel and writing help students achieve the student objectives and, consequently, the mission.

In January 2005 we started the reaccreditation process, which stipulated that we review our student objectives. So, students, parents, and staff contributed to the effective revision of our student objectives (see Table 1). How?

First graders, for example, voted 20 to 2 to keep the category “caretakers” instead of changing it to “stewards.” Students in grades 4, 6, 7, and 11 confirmed that suggested changes reduced difficult vocabulary; for example, in the original draft, 6th graders identified 6.53 difficult words and in the proposed draft, they identified 2.2 difficult words.

Parents said they preferred placing the distinctively Christian statements at the top of each category instead of at the end, as this emphasized that we are a Christian school; for example, “Discerning Thinker” category now lists “Use a biblical perspective” first.

Staff offered suggestions to make the document shorter and more user-friendly; for example, we changed “Generate creative ideas, products, or performances” to “Make creative projects and presentations.”

It’s now the fall of 2005, and we continue to use student objectives to close the rhetoric/reality gap. In response to student assessment data from last school year, we are using questions (e.g., What is true?) to help 90% of high school students score at or above standard on the following student objective: understanding a Christian worldview.

We are also implementing the following schoolwide improvement plan: By June 16, 2006, use a complete set of student objective baseline data to make decisions for getting 90% of high school students to score at or above standard on a given student objective.

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8 questions to answer before developing student objectives

(1) Who initiates the development of student objectives? *The administration.* Says David Wilcox, international director for the Association of Christian Schools International, “This is just the norm, rather than a philosophical issue. The educational leadership of an educational institution is usually more informed about...research issues including the importance of student outcomes.”

The administration should research student objectives:

- What they are.
- How they help close the rhetoric/reality gap.
- The criteria used for developing them (see Table 2).
- What student objectives other schools use (see Table 1).
- Suggested processes for developing them.

(2) Aren't student objectives the province of the board? *Yes and no.* Student objectives define the mission in terms of measurable student learning. They resemble “ends” statements, and the development and approval of “ends” statements is generally the province of the board.

However, student objectives are also overarching curriculum standards. Given this, and that curriculum standards are the province of the administration, and that curriculum training and experience are needed to develop effective student objectives, I recommend the board rely on the experts it has hired to carry out the mission—that is, the administration.

Check out student objectives from other Christian schools

1. Dalat International School:
<http://www.dalat.org/goals.html>
2. Faith Academy:
<http://www.faith.edu.ph/?page=mission-statement>
3. Morrison Academy:
<http://www.mca.org.tw/index.cfm?id=193#vision>
4. Taejon Christian International School:
<http://www.tcis.or.kr/SLEs.html>

(3) What is the board's role in the development and approval of the student objectives?

Policy. Rather than playing a direct, hands-on role, I recommend that the board develop a policy for student objectives and hold the administration accountable to this policy.

Here's a sample policy:

(1) The administration will develop and revise the student objectives.

(2) Student objectives must:

- Define the mission in terms of measurable student learning
- Be Christ-centered, promoting the development and application of a biblical worldview
- Be based on sound, current research and practice
- Be for all students
- Address the whole person
- Be interdisciplinary
- Be attainable

(3) If the administration's proposal:

- Addresses the criteria, the board will approve the proposal as submitted.
- Does not address one or more criteria, the board will indicate which criteria were not met and ask the administration to make revisions.

(4) Who should the administration involve in the development of student objectives?

Students, parents, staff, and board members. This is what the Western Association of Schools and Colleges suggests.

Wilcox explains, “The broader the involvement of the various segments of the school community, the more likely the outcomes will be comprehensive and representative of the community served. This response assumes a situation where the leadership of the school and the parent community are fundamentally unified as a believing community....The reality is that the administration (including curriculum coordinators) and the faculty are the primary developers of the outcome statements.”

(5) What process can the administration use to develop student objectives? *Roundtable discussion.*

This is an effective way for students, parents, staff, and board members to collaborate on developing student objectives. Use these 5 steps:

First, use examples to explain what student objectives are, the role they play, and the criteria that will be used for developing them.

Second, ask each group to brainstorm answers to the following question: “Given our mission, what do we want all students to know, be able to do, and value?”

Third, pair up groups. Have each paired group collaborate to develop one set of student objectives. Post the results and have a whole group debriefing.

Fourth, explain that an administration-appointed committee will use the results and criteria to develop a proposed set of student objectives. This set will be field-tested for at least a semester and then revised (using community input).

Finally, have the administration approve the student objectives and submit the student objectives to the board for approval.

(6) Is it mandatory that we develop our own distinct set of student objectives? *No, nor is it necessarily wise to do so.* Christian schools have finite resources and so rely on a variety of outside resources—ACSI, curriculum organizations, textbook publishers, state agencies, and consultants. Using an established set of student objectives from another school is an example of relying on an outside resource.

(7) Doesn't using another school's student objectives diminish our distinctiveness? *No, I don't think so,* anymore than using denominational creeds, hymns, and procedures diminishes your church's distinctiveness. Where and how you go about achieving the student objectives (your staff and students, facilities, location, standards, assessments, and instructional strategies) will continue to reflect your distinctiveness.

For example, two Christian schools could *both* focus on helping their students be “productive collaborators who respect themselves and others as being created in God's image.” Alpha Christian School might, for example, focus in social studies on helping students avoid the self-centeredness that marks cultures. Beta Christian School might focus in social studies on helping students consistently demonstrate a healthy self-respect based on an appreciation for Christian beliefs, Japanese culture, and homeland culture. Same student objective, distinctive local focus.

Remember, the goal is to close the gap between rhetoric and reality—*not* to develop a set of student objectives. Given this, and that it took us 5 years to figure out how to use our student objectives to improve student learning, you may want to begin by field-testing an established set (see Table 1).

(8) If we start with another school's student objectives, do we need to modify the process? *A little bit.* If you do this, remember to:

- Verify that this set meets your board's criteria.
- Train community members in the nature and function of student objectives.
- Explain why you chose the set.
- Use community feedback to revise the field-tested set as appropriate.

You may invite an administrator from the school that developed your chosen set of student objectives to help you with the process.

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We've used student objectives to close rhetoric/reality gap

So, would using schoolwide student objectives help you? Remember your quiz answers? I answered “yes” to all 6 items. Here's why!

(1) I want to close the gap between our rhetoric and our reality. Mission statements define overall purpose, but they do not define what a student must know, be able to do, and value. This results in a gap between the rhetoric of the mission statement and what teachers and students are accountable to achieve in the reality of the classroom. Student objectives define the mission in terms of specific, measurable student learning. Consequently, they help close the gap.

(2) I want to know how well we're achieving our mission. To do this, I need to define what mission achievement involves—which is what student objectives do. We use student objectives to determine academic standards. We then assess students on the standards.

The result? Assessment data provides information on the standards and consequently, the student objectives and mission. Our goal is to have a complete set of student objective achievement data each year and to use the data to increase student learning. For example, we determined that our students needed to improve in using a biblical perspective. We modified our curriculum and student performance improved on using a biblical perspective.

We've taken this a step further. Our mission and student objectives define *what* must be achieved. To define the *amount* of learning that must be achieved, we have developed a SMART goal: Not later than Thursday, June 12, 2008 each student objective will have an achievement rating of 90% of high school students at or above standard, scores being taken from a complete set of end-of-course department assessments.

Knowing how much our students need to learn helps me know how we're doing—like points on a scoreboard help a basketball coach and team know how they're doing. By looking at student objective achievement data, I learn the “score.” That helps me make effective decisions to reach our SMART goal.

(3) I want to connect mission, student learning, curriculum, and school improvement planning. To do this, I need to define the mission in terms of student learning—which is what student objectives do. Next, I need to develop a curriculum that is designed to help students achieve our student objectives.

Student objectives clarify what our students must learn in order to achieve the mission, which in turn clarifies what our teachers must teach—and must no longer teach because it does not result in mission achievement. Finally, I can use student objective assessment data as the basis of our school improvement planning. We can use it to increase student learning.

(4) Using student objectives has helped our parents better understand and support our mission. Mission statements are global. This results in parents not having a specific handle on what their children will learn nor on how that learning is connected to the mission.

Student objectives define the mission in terms of student learning. We have successfully used our student objectives to help our parents have a clearer picture of how our school will help their children.

(5) Our students catch our vision for Christian education better when they understand what it means in terms of student learning. A key reason our students did not catch the vision of Christian education is because it was not defined in terms of what they had to learn. When teachers define the vision of Christian education in terms of what students have to learn, students catch the vision.

(6) Collaborating with other ACSI schools would help us close the rhetoric/reality gap. We have student objectives, and we need help using them. If our teachers could work with your teachers on helping students increase achievement of a given student objective (for example, “use a biblical perspective”), we'd be more likely to develop quality content standards, assessments, and instructional strategies.

As a missionary school located in Tokyo, we're geographically isolated from other Christian schools. In addition, our teachers do not have someone to talk to who teaches the same grade level or same subject. If our teachers could be involved in purposefully collaborating with teachers from your school on projects that are mutually beneficial, that'd be great. Using a common set of student objectives provides a good basis for such collaboration.

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Imagine if ACSI schools in Asia used the same student objectives

Your goal is to achieve the mission by helping your students achieve the student objectives.

You have looked at assessment data and note that 60% of high school students are at or above standard on “discerning thinkers who use a biblical perspective.” Your goal is 90%.

The fall editions of ACSI magazines and newsletters have been focusing on this student objective, as well as on “effective communicators who communicate through writing, speaking, reading, listening, graphs and charts, and the arts.” Your faculty has read and discussed these articles during faculty meetings, and your English department is considering how to implement Power Point at the secondary level.

You realize that your curriculum does not sufficiently describe what a student needs to learn in order to understand a biblical perspective of each subject. You determine that in order to raise scores on using a biblical perspective, you need to address this.

You remember that the ACSI Web site has resources on this. You go there and find a framework that helps a student understand a biblical understanding of each subject area. You click on “God reveals Himself to us through the Bible and ___ (subject/topic).”

There you find Christian worldview questions listed by subject area. For example, in English you find:

- English K-5: What makes a good book good?
- English 6: How do authors help me see truth?
- English 7: How are conflicts resolved in literature and life?
- English 8: What does literature teach me about the need to “Take a Stand ” in spite of opposition?
- English 9: What is the importance of written and spoken words?
- English 10: What is “good” and how will I achieve it? What hinders and helps me in this pursuit?
- English 11: How do Christian and non-Christian authors help us see?
- English 12: How should Christians live in a world filled with suffering?

You keep clicking, and you find a database of assessments (complete with rubrics) that can be sorted by student objective, assessment type, grade level, and subject. You also find several lists—professional readings, upcoming video conferences, and administrators and teachers who are willing to share their expertise.

You look over these resources, and then use skype.com to call a curriculum coordinator listed on the ACSI Web page. You tell her about your students’ performance on using a biblical perspective. She mentions several resources, and she wonders if you have resources to help her increase students’ performance on “faithful caretakers who serve God and others, and care for God's creation.”

You share what you have and tell her that you have just been looking at the ACSI Web site where you have seen that next month there will be a video conference on this student objective.

A month later, several of your teachers participate in the video conference on helping students use a biblical perspective. Your teachers develop worldview questions and use the questions to develop assessments. They network with other participants and share assessments.

Meanwhile, one of your teachers is leading a video conference on “productive collaborators who work effectively with others.” He explains how your school has implemented this student objective in math and social studies. Next, he invites the participants to get in subject area groups to discuss assessments they use to see how well students are achieving on this student objective. The session closes with a question and answer session.

Imagine this happening. If it did, would you be closer to closing the rhetoric/reality gap? *We would.*

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Use the MOSAIC curriculum framework to connect mission, student learning and curriculum

“What does the big picture look like?” thinks Bruce, a ninth grade math/Bible teacher. “Mission, standards, objectives, instructional strategies, assessment.... If I could see how the pieces fit together, I could more effectively carry out our mission.”

“Are standards and objectives the same thing?” Kim, a fourth grade teacher, is frustrated. She’s just attended a faculty meeting and is having trouble with new vocabulary. “We’re headed in a good direction. We need a common vocabulary to get there—or we’ll be talking past each other.”

“Teachers should find our updated English curriculum useful,” reflects Susan, a curriculum coordinator. “The standards are spelled out. Teachers should be clearer on how to help students write more effectively. I can check to see if using the updated curriculum results in improved student writing. But I’m not clear on the connection between the English writing standards and our student objective on communication—which is what I really want to check. **Is there a way to determine how students are doing on our schoolwide student objectives?**”

Bruce, Kim, and Susan are Christian school teachers who are committed to their school mission. Like you, they want to know that their teaching and curriculum work contributes to mission achievement. Is there a curriculum framework that can help them? Yes! It’s called **MOSAIC**:

1. Mission
2. Objectives
3. Standards
4. Assessments
5. Instructional strategies
6. Children

Mission: A school mission statement is a 15- to 25-word statement that identifies the school, its purpose, and possibly its constituency. Here’s an example: Christian Academy in Japan, a school for the children of evangelical missionaries

working in Japan, equips students to impact the world for Christ.

Objectives (also known as expected student outcomes, schoolwide goals, and expected student learning results): Student objectives define your school mission in terms of measurable student learning. An example of a student objective is, “Communicate through writing, speaking, reading, listening, graphs and charts, and the arts.”

Standards define what students must achieve within a given subject in order to achieve the student objectives (and consequently the mission). If your student objective is, “Communicate through writing, speaking, reading, listening, graphs and charts, and the arts,” one of your English standards might be, “Create clear, purposeful texts.”

Assessments are ways students show their achievement of the standards (and consequently the student objectives and mission). Assessments include writing, projects, presentations, labs, and discussion. An example of a unit assessment for 10th graders is, “Write a 750-word persuasive essay on the following: What is wrong with the world? Support your answer with references to the Bible and to stories we studied during this unit.”

Instructional strategies are ways teachers prepare students for assessments. For example, when students are preparing to write their 750-word essays on “What’s wrong with the world?”, they could brainstorm their ideas in small groups before writing their rough drafts.

Children: In class, teachers teach children (not course content). They help children prepare for assessments so they can demonstrate achievement of the standards, and consequently the student objectives and mission.

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Are your student objectives SMART EQUIPMENT?

Student objectives define your school mission in terms of measurable student learning. They define what a teacher should help a student achieve for the student to achieve the mission (see Table 1: Sample Student Objectives).

Your student objectives are the *equipment* your students will use to carry out your mission. Are

you providing your students with SMART EQUIPMENT? (See Table 2.)

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Table 2: SMART EQUIPMENT: Criteria for evaluating effective student objectives

	Criteria	Descriptors
S	Specific	1. Define the mission in terms of student learning, making the mission actionable in specific ways 2. Clear and precise
M	Measurable	3. Measurable using classroom assessments 4. Written in terms of what students will do (<i>not</i> what teachers will do)
A	Attainable	5. Are doable. <i>Don't</i> list goals you or your students cannot achieve
R	Research-based	6. Based on a Christian philosophy of education 7. Based on current research and practice
T	True	8. True to Christian faith commitments 9. True to the creation-fall-redemption-restoration motif 10. True to the 4 Greats: Great Mandate (Gen. 1:26-28), Great Commission (Mt. 28: 18-20), Great Law (Matthew 22:37-39), and Great Body—the Church (Ephesians 4:16) 11. True to helping students develop <i>informed</i> commitment to Jesus Christ
E	Essential	12. Identify essential equipment only
Q	Quotable	13. Quotable in meetings and in casual conversation with parents 14. Concise
U	Usable	15. Usable by elementary students. These are <i>student</i> objectives, so students must be able to talk about the student objectives and use the student objectives to analyze their progress 16. Usable for surveys 17. Usable as the focus for school improvement 18. Usable for curriculum development
I	Interdisciplinary	19. <i>Not</i> subject-specific—subject area standards identify what a student must achieve in a given subject in order to achieve the student objectives
P	Promote academically excellent, Christ-centered education	20. Are academically rigorous 21. Are Christ-centered in category titles (“faithful caretakers” and “discerning thinkers” and in specific objectives (“Serve God and others, and care for God's creation”)
M	Manageable	22. Number 15-20 in total (What number is manageable for students? Parents? Administrators? Curriculum coordinators? Teachers?) 23. Written in meeting-the-standard language 24. Allow department standards to be efficiently aligned to them 25. Facilitate inter-school collaboration—use common student objectives to the greatest extent possible
E	Exciting	26. Your student objectives should be as exciting as your mission
N	Noteworthy	27. Can be applied in a real-world context 28. Noteworthy to write about in articles and ads
T	Total person addressed	29. Address the total person—the spiritual, intellectual, aesthetic, social, emotional, physical, and moral