

13th Annual

# Thinking & Learning Conference

**TOM HIERCK**

Sunday 22 May

**Authentic Alignment –  
Compliance or Commitment?**

Session 3

**MELBOURNE**

# TOM HIERCK

Tom Hierck has been an educator since 1983, in a career that has spanned all year levels and included many roles in public education. His experiences as a teacher, school leader, department of education project leader and executive director have provided a unique context for his education philosophy. Tom is a compelling presenter, infusing his message of hope with strategies culled from the real world. He understands that educators face unprecedented challenges and knows which strategies will best serve learning communities. Tom has presented to schools across North America and internationally, imparting a message of celebration for educators seeking to make a difference in the lives of students.



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## Why Collective Commitment Is More Important Than Compliance

What is your school's current mission or guiding statement?

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What two words would you use to describe your school's culture?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_

### The Problem With Mission Statements

We have learned that developing mission statements is no simple task, and that building the collective will to bring these mission statements to life is equally challenging. Many schools get caught up in creating the mission statement—the document itself—rather than creating the school described in the statement. They achieve the flawed goal of creating the document, which causes a cavalcade of related, predictable issues to surface. There are four common problems that lead schools to develop mission statements not worth the paper on which they're written. We find that schools often:

1. Share and shelve
2. Have all fluff, and no stuff
3. Engage in t-shirting
4. Accept pockets of excellence

**Problem 1: Share and Shelve**

Schools often invest precious time and energy discussing and developing traditional mission statements. They gather information, consider issues, answer questions, come to consensus, and decide on specific verbiage. After that, some iteration of the following steps takes place in most schools. Reflect on this sequence of steps and ask yourself if it sounds familiar.

1. We create the new mission statement.
2. We send a copy to the central office.
3. We mount the mission statement on the wall of the school foyer.
4. We post the mission statement to the school website.
5. We add the mission statement to the banner of the school newsletter.
6. We sometimes extract a catchphrase from the mission statement.
7. We go back and do what we've always done, rarely realizing that the mission statement plays no part in the daily work of teaching and learning.
8. Repeat as necessary (usually when a new leader arrives).

**Problem 2: All Fluff and No Stuff**

Because the typical mission statement rarely serves as a guide to inform your choices, behaviors, and decisions, it is, in essence, "fluff." When you consider the time spent creating a mission statement versus the fact that its ideals seldom trickle down to the daily work of teachers and leaders, it's easy to understand the cynicism that arises. Lew Allen (2001) notes, [These statements are] feel-good sentiments that have been created for public relations reasons and are not serious statements of intent. Such statements as "We want our students to reach their full potential mentally, physically, and socially" or "We seek excellence in all that we do" cry out to be ignored because they allude to ideas and results that are impossible to track. A school can never know if its students are reaching their "full potential" or if they are seeking more "excellence" this year than last. Such statements are probably meant to set a tone and to inspire people. Instead, they encourage people to ignore them.

As we'll explain, many schools simply ask too much of the traditional mission statement. You diminish the effectiveness of the statement when you try to make it do what it was not designed to do. Clarifying your school's mission undoubtedly has an important place in a PLC.

**Problem 3: T-Shirting**

Once the staff has created the mission statement, it typically works harder to develop mottos and slogans than it does to ensure that powerful practices aligned with the statement guide the work of teachers and leaders. We call this problem t-shirting. It means you place more emphasis on slogans for t-shirts, lanyards, coffee mugs, bumper stickers, and banners than on how your statements actually guide instructional and assessment practices and interventions. In our experience, few can articulate how their statement explicitly manifests itself in daily work. When t-shirting the new slogans and mottos without really changing daily instruction and leadership, you simply add to the confusion and ambiguity that you face, and you have nothing to show for it except some new t-shirts or bumper stickers.

**Problem 4: Pockets of Excellence**

Our experience shows that schools comprise highly educated, well-intentioned, hopeful, hard-working, and dedicated staff. We want to add committed to that list of accolades, but we're hesitant—not because we believe that some staff aren't capable of deep commitment, but because the larger question is, Committed to what? Most schools lack a powerful guiding lens through which to focus that staff members understand, recognize, and repeat. Without one, schools will at best comprise hard-working people executing random acts of improvement, which result in pockets of excellence. These schools have no real collective commitment to engage in high-leverage, research-based best practices and risk the quality of the student learning experience because that experience will depend entirely on which teacher the student gets.

We find that many schools tolerate pockets of excellence. Why is it acceptable for one team to implement practices that you know are best for students, while you allow another team to opt out? Why resign yourself to wide variation in commitment to agreed-on best practices? While the answers to these questions may vary, they all lead back to the school's mission—defining why you exist and what school you're seeking to become, and making the collective commitment to ensure it happens.

### What Is a Mantra?

A mantra is a three- to five-word statement that clearly defines who your school is, and why you matter to people. A mantra is a powerful, energy-infused chant that everyone inside and outside your organization can instantly get their heads around.

A mantra is defined as a word, sound, or statement repeated frequently to aid in concentration of thought. In Sanskrit, mantra literally means “instrument of thought.” In schools, we suggest a mantra is a highly effective organizing principle easily shared by people who care.

Your school’s mantra should be created collaboratively, and meet the FOUR criteria: focused, inspiring, visionary, and expectant.

### For clarifying your fundamental purpose and your school’s mantra, ask:

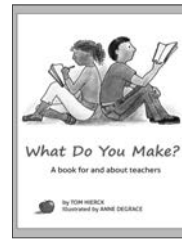
1. What is our school’s fundamental purpose? What is our school’s unshakable sense of mission?
2. What makes our school special and unique?
3. What do we mean when we say that *all* students can learn? Does *all* really mean *all*?
4. Was our school built as a place where teachers come and teach or as a place where students come and learn? What evidence do we have to support our choice?
5. What happens in our school or district when a student experiences difficulty in learning?
6. What is our school’s one non-negotiable that serves as a lens for everything we do? What is our school’s North Star? Our mantra?
7. Why did you become an educator?



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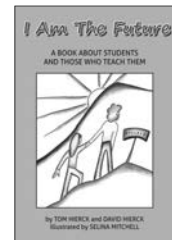
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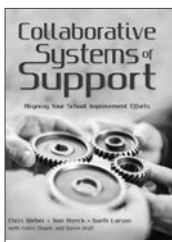
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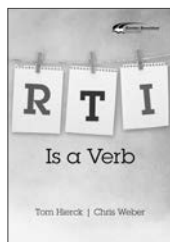
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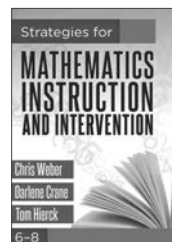
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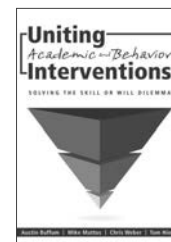
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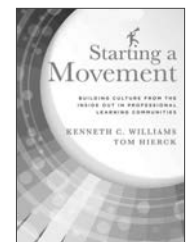
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