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## ***The Mission*** by Dr. Peg Luksik

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Everyone has heard of FedEx, the company you call when “it absolutely, positively, has to be there overnight.” FedEx has become a worldwide success in the delivery industry by focusing on that one mission.

Company executives, for example, would ask if an employee training program would result in the company being better able to make sure every package was delivered overnight. If the answer was yes, then the program was implemented. If the answer was no, the program was rejected.

Missions matter. A clear mission is the yardstick by which a company measures its success or failure.

Education is no exception.

Any intelligent conversation about making American education work well must begin by defining the mission of our schools. Right now, there are two missions fighting for dominance. Simply put, is the mission of America’s schools to create a workforce, or is the mission of America’s schools to enable children to reach their fullest potential?

The difference can be clearly seen in these two approaches to secondary school math.

The workforce development position is exemplified in the National Center for Education and the Economy May 2013 report entitled *What Does it Really Mean to be College and Work Ready?* The report discusses the appropriate level of math instruction for secondary schools. It states:

Many community college career programs demand little or no use of mathematics. To the extent that they do use mathematics, the mathematics needed by first year students in these courses is almost exclusively middle school mathematics

Given the strong evidence that mastery of middle school mathematics plays a very important role in college and career success, strong consideration should be given to spending more time, not less, on the mastery of middle school mathematics, and requiring students to master Algebra I no later than the end of their sophomore year in high school, rather than by the end of middle school.

The report speaks about a sequence of math instruction would lead to the completion of at least Algebra II, and lead to Calculus, but deems such a course sequence unnecessary unless a student is aiming at the “less than 5%” of the careers that require them.

The fullest potential argument can be found in a June 1999 report by the United States Department of Education, titled *Answers in the Toolbox*. It states:

Of all pre-college curricula, the highest level of mathematics one studies in secondary school has the strongest continuing influence on bachelor's degree completion. Finishing a course beyond the level of Algebra 2 (for example, trigonometry or pre-calculus) more than doubles the odds that a student who enters postsecondary education will complete a bachelor's degree.

A 2004 Auburn University meta-analysis on the same topic, called *College Math Performance and Last High School Math Course*, revealed the following:

As the highest level of secondary math rose, the likelihood of degree attainment followed, culminating with more than 80% of students who took calculus receiving a degree.

...students who took calculus were 28 times more likely to be a “high achiever” in post-secondary work, and that the level of math taken, regardless of other factors such as race, socio-economic status, or type of high school, was the largest indicator of college achievement level.

Further, students’ exposure to challenging math courses enhances self-regulatory skills that benefit achievement in all courses attempted in post-secondary education.

So a secondary school math program that gives students every opportunity to move as far ahead in math as they are able will result in greater personal success for the student, regardless of whether higher math was necessary for the particular career that student selected.

If the mission of our schools is to help our students achieve their fullest potential, then we should be promoting higher math. But if the mission of our schools is to create a workforce, then this fact is nothing more than an interesting, and irrelevant, side note.

In one case, our schools consider America’s children to be their clients, and every decision will be made based on what best serves our kids. In the other, they consider America’s businesses to be their clients, and every decision will be based on what best serves our corporations.

So, what IS the mission of American education?

A generation of children is waiting for our answer.

Visit Dr. Peg Luksik’s website at:  
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