



## **Securing the Future while Improving the Present**

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### **Project Summary**

Dallas Lutheran School is 7-12 grade school of approximately 210 students and is mainly supported by tuition dollars. The school is located in a very competitive private/parochial school market and has seen enrollment drop from a high of 315 students in 2004 to its current level. The school was without a strategic plan and had been without an Executive Director from 2006-2008 before the current administrator took the position. In addition, there was a real feeling of angst pervading the community over the drop in enrollment. The school has long been looked at as a high academic school. However, the concentration on academics and the accompanying loss of enrollment had caused some movement away from the mission direction of the school. So, the twin issues of creating an exciting plan for the future while fortifying the present needed to be addressed in a way that provided a confident picture to the immediate school community as well as the community at large.

### **Goals of the Project**

- Have a planning session to create the framework for a comprehensive strategic plan
  - Develop and write a strategic plan
- Create a blueprint that would return the main emphasis of the school to being a “Community of Grace”

### **Results of the Project**

- January 2011 planning session with DLS Board, some parents and staff, and a consultant from an educational planning firm
  - Board committee working on Strategic Plan
  - Core beliefs and strategies for plan have been written
  - “Community of Grace” vision has been cast and implemented

## **Project Overview**

When I came to Dallas Lutheran School (DLS) in the summer of 2008 I came to a school that had been without a Head Administrator for two entire school years. During that time the Board was forced into many decisions and discussions that are not typically found in the normal Board scope. Partially because of that the school had no formal strategic plan. The closest thing to a strategic plan would be the five year plans put together for accreditation.

Another result of the years without an administrator is that they took a very laissez-faire approach in regard to the Executive Director position. They, in my opinion, were so happy to have someone making the decisions that they pretty much rubber-stamped everything. While many administrators would welcome this, as a new administrator I wished for more input and framework for the future.

In addition, enrollment dropped from a high of 315 in 2004 to 210 for the 2010-2011 school year. This caused a fair amount of concern within the entire community and led to a high level of concentration on finances and academics while a slow, inadvertent move away from the faith ideals of the school seemed to be taking place.

Although the school is an Association school, the reality is the six congregations combined to directly support the school with less than 1% of the total operating budget. This is not going to change in the near future so a plan for financial stability was also important.

In order to deal with these two major issues-a strategic plan and a renewal of core values-this project was developed to address both needs. A process to develop a strategic plan was put in place and the Executive Director took the lead in addressing the return to a focus of grace at DLS.

## **Strategic Planning Process**

The beginning of this process really began during the summer of 2010 at the Van Lunen Fellows gathering in Grand Rapids, Michigan. My initial meeting with my Van Lunen appointed consultant, Ms. Kiki Johnson, immediately gave me the hope that this could be accomplished. Ms. Johnson had the experience and knowledge needed to help me see the steps needed to go forward.

At our first DLS Board meeting of the new school year I shared some of my concerns about the future of DLS with the idea of laying the foundation to suggest a planning exercise. To my delight, the Board members suggested the idea of a strategic plan without much prompting from me. As we talked more I suggested the idea of having a planning meeting with a consultant to moderate the session. From there I contacted Ms. Johnson at Carney, Sandhoe, and Associates and we talked about fees and expectations. With a generous and significant contribution from the Van Lunen Foundation we were able to get Ms. Johnson on our campus January 22, 2011 for an all-day planning session.

At that session our DLS Board, along with invited parents and staff, were led through a process designed by Ms. Johnson to help us identify issues to be addressed in our strategic plan. At the suggestion of Ms. Johnson, I was largely silent throughout the day and allowed the conversation to flow easily during the process.

After the meeting, at our next Board gathering, we put the thoughts into words on paper and appointed a committee to work on furthering the process with the goal of having a strategic plan in place by the end of the 2010-2011 school year. Two Board members and I comprise the committee which is charged with producing the finished document.

### **Community of Grace Process**

The seeds for the revitalization of the spiritual impetus for DLS also began in the summer of 2010. In my required reading for the Van Lunen fellowship I read an excerpt from the book, "Schools as Communities", that transformed my view of what our school should be. As a result I returned to school determined to share my vision with our faculty and staff.

At our pre-school meetings I shared the concept of returning our school to the concepts of a "Community of Grace". I identified six areas I felt we needed to bring to the forefront of our school's existence as a community. Those areas included being grateful, inviting, mission-driven, unified, accepting, and loving. I created a poster that visually presented these terms as well as two building blocks—living stones and living water.

As expected, there was little opposition to these terms. As a Christian school we accept those ideals. The challenge would be to become intentional with these concepts rather than just anecdotal.

I took it upon myself to kick-start that process. In my opening chapel I brought the concepts to the students. Each Friday I wrote an email to the faculty and staff that shared specific examples of how to be grateful, inviting, mission driven, etc. I express myself in writing quite a bit so it wasn't surprising that I would communicate in that way. By February I had written about as much as I could and then at the end of the year we did a short review. My plan is to revisit the Community of Grace ideals again when we reconvene in August.

### **Project Results**

While we have not completely finished the Strategic Plan, we have developed a document that includes our current Mission Statement, a revised Vision Statement, five core beliefs, and strategy and goals to go with each core belief. We have yet to add action steps/plans but hope to do so in the near future. We have not yet shared these with the community but I believe we will do that soon, even if it is not a complete document.

The Vision Statement and core beliefs are as follows:

**Vision Statement:** DLS has a 35 year history of preparing students for productive Christian lives. As we look to the future, our Vision Statement will drive all decisions in our support of the Mission of DLS. Our Vision is that Dallas Lutheran School exemplifies AND is widely recognized for the following core beliefs:

1. **Community of Grace:** DLS will be foremost a Community of Grace, evident in all actions and decisions.
2. **21<sup>st</sup> Century Curriculum:** DLS will offer 21<sup>st</sup> century academics, instruction methods, and co-curricular opportunities.
3. **Medium sized school:** DLS will be positioned to educate up to 350 students annually in an atmosphere that allows for individual attention and a variety of opportunities.
4. **Sustainable:** From facilities to endowment, DLS will have made strides towards sustainability
5. **Safe Environment:** Physical and social safety will be maintained.

An example of a strategy is the following:

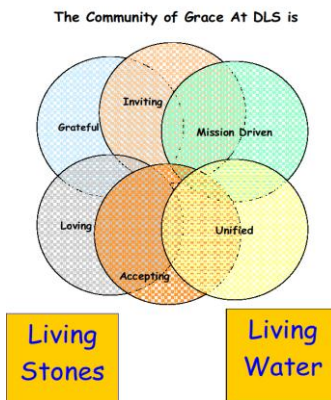
### **Strategy 2: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Curriculum**

*Objective: Using the keys words of collaboration, critical thinking, creativity, connectivity, and character our classrooms and co-curricular activities will incorporate teaching methods and equipment that will prepare our students for the rest of this century. Teachers and leaders will be trained and equipped to carry this out.*

Goals -

1. Continue to regularly update technology in accordance with school technology plan
2. Create and support 21<sup>st</sup> century endowment
3. Research and apply for available technology grants
4. Provide training and support teachers in 21<sup>st</sup> century teaching approaches
5. Build into the academic schedule time for collaboration
6. Create opportunities for global connectivity
7. Developing character as a defined component of all co-curricular activities
8. Each course will include critical thinking components in the outcomes
9. Specific opportunities are provided for creativity by students in and out of the classroom
10. Provide a curriculum that meets or exceeds current college entrance criteria

In terms of the effect of the Community of Grace idea we really noticed a change in the school climate this year. Teachers, parents, and students felt the difference in the way people interacted and the number of discipline issues was lower than the year before. A small copy of the poster is included to show the reminder that was in classrooms:



## Final Thoughts

What I learned throughout this process was that my growth as a leader will never end. I also learned that putting words on paper is much easier than getting people to buy in and work at making it happen.

Our strategic plan is at a good starting point. Yet, I suspect, the hardest part will be the actions steps which we have not developed. By nature a strategic plan is nebulous (the easy part) while the action steps are difficult because they introduce a segment of accountability. Getting a small committee to find time to work together was almost more difficult than a large group and that was not something I had counted on. Still, in the end we have a framework that gives us direction and guidance for the future.

The Community of Grace concept gave me a lot of joy and satisfaction. It began as a kernel of an idea that arose from an article and by the end it was defining my personal ministry and hopefully, that of DLS. In many ways this past school year was the best of my fledgling leadership opportunity here at DLS. On the other hand, there were some serious and stressful challenges that occurred over the last seven weeks of the school year. The presence of the Community of Grace idea gave me the blueprint I needed to deal with many of the challenges.

Dallas Lutheran School and many, indeed most, other Lutheran and Christian schools are involved in more challenging times than we have ever experienced. As a leader I find that I need some constants in order to navigate those challenges. The emergence of a strategic plan and the Community of Grace has provided some of that. When coupled with the Word of God, many of the lessons I learned at the Van Lunen Fellowship gatherings, and the fellowship of other leaders around me it has allowed me to be more confident and, I hope, better in my role as Executive Director of DLS.

What I still need is to fully weave the words of Isaiah 41:10 into my personal and professional life on a daily basis: *So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.* May God grant all of us who have been called to be leaders of HIS schools the peace and strength needed to walk in these words as we lead others.

