

John Barkel, Principal
Fremont Christian School, Fremont, MI
Consultant: Henry Contant

Mission, Vision, and Core Values

“Big things” happen for a reason. Whether those things are intentional or by God’s plan, they happen to solve a purpose. Fremont Christian School has experienced incredibly “big things” in the past ten years. Some of them have been carried out intentionally, but so many have been, no doubt, due to God’s plan and his will, which is so much more influential and meaningful than our own. Now that God has opened our eyes to the potential that we have, it’s our turn to turn back to him with our purpose. Let me tell you how FCS has gone from a suffering school on the brink of closing, to a bright, vibrant, Spirit-filled school, and what has led FCS and myself to develop a rich and meaningful set of tools that will guide this place well into the future.

The past ten years have been nothing short of adventurous for Fremont Christian School. Ten years ago enrollment was on a steady decline. The teaching staff was full of mostly veteran teachers who were pretty comfortable with the way things were. There was no sense of staff community. The FCS school board had pulled money from our endowment fund to make payroll. This action led to several financial supporters of the school becoming upset and ended up pulling FCS from their wills. The school principal made poor leadership decisions regularly that angered parents, teachers and students, and no improvement was evident in his six years in administration at FCS. FCS operates with two buildings. At one time, both buildings were at student capacity. Ten years ago, the elementary building had one teacher with one small group of students causing concerns of accountability and student safety. Excitement was rarely found here at FCS and the words “shut down” were being used more and more.

A brief glimpse of excitement and hope came with the idea of consolidating the two buildings. The board created a plan to build four classrooms onto one building at a cost of \$750,000. We could then cut our operation costs from the elementary building. This plan was contingent on raising \$250,000, selling the elementary building for \$250,000, and taking a loan out for the final \$250,000. We were only able to raise \$120,000, the elementary building had no interested buyers, and we weren’t ready to

take too large of a loan out. The plan fell through and the excitement was lost. If we did not do something significant, Fremont Christian would close.

Five years ago, there was a shift in administration. I had taught at FCS for six years, earned my Educational Leadership Master's within that time, and, with no plans of ever getting involved in school leadership, I took the open principal job at FCS. My first and second years were tough. However, due to a supportive and open-minded board president, I was able to stay the course.

Our board president led the rest of the board to realize that this ship needs to change its heading. Increasing enrollment became the main goal for the board. This is a great goal, but we have found that it needs to be a collateral benefit of something greater. But, that's what the board became fixed on.

The staff and board was the first major change in altering this ship's course. Teachers started to change their way of thinking and natural turn over, the staff at FCS became fresh again. This required firing a teacher, and pressuring others to leave. It also changed the way we interview and what the requirements are for hiring teachers. The new teachers that were brought on board were full of energy, personable, and very easy to get along with. Our board vetting process changed dramatically. If even one board member has an issue with a proposed candidate, that candidate is taken off the list. The board looks for open-minded people who may or may not be parents. A mix of non-parents and parents is preferred.

The FCS board also desired to begin a Spanish Immersion program. This program has been the catalyst to our increase in enrollment. The perception of FCS had changed with adopting this program. We were not stuck in a rut anymore, but were thinking progressively. Parents desire their children to have a unique learning experience they cannot get anywhere else in our community. With the new students in Spanish Immersion came their siblings in the older grades. The board's goal of growing enrollment was being met. FCS went from 143 students in 2012 to 242 students in 2017. We are projecting further growth in the next year.

The board has now shifted its major goal from growing enrollment, to raising funds so we can build an addition to house our students. We have hired a development director who God has blessed with an incredible ability to raise funds. As she and I team

up, her strategies and great personality have brought us significant funds in many needed areas including technology, curriculum, and brick and mortar.

Fremont Christian School is full of excitement and the feeling of success. We are meeting our goals and checking off our tasks on our to-do lists. It's fun. However, there is something that has been shadowed in all of these "big things." The questions of what are we doing and why are we doing it can be answered by many, but the answers would vary from board member, to teacher, to parents, to myself. We aren't gathering around a common mission and vision. We all support this school, love this school, are enjoying being part of the excitement, but where are we in God's plan? How are we responding to the blessings he is granting us? We need to put the puzzle together, and to do so, we need to rally behind a common mission for what we are doing here, and a shared vision to see where we want to go.

My admission into the Van Lunen Fellowship has encouraged me and pushed me to take on the task of creating a new mission and vision for Fremont Christian. I've gained an incredible amount of knowledge and have connected with wonderful people through this experience. What I've learned, and the people I've met have helped me through this project. The most significant resource that has helped start this process is through the guidance from Henry Contant. Henry flew out to Fremont Christian to work with the school board here and do a workshop on becoming visionary. FCS is blessed to have a board that is willing to think differently. The board has embraced the knowledge and wisdom Henry shared. We still have some things to work on, but we have come miles in the area of becoming visionary and are able to better define the role of the board in a healthy school.

Henry taught us about being efficient in meetings so we can spend more time thinking about our heading. Henry taught us about using task forces to research projects and complete the work of the board. We have created two different task forces since his time with us. One task force has been created to study and propose a building addition to accommodate new students and increase our security. The second task force is called our "Mission Task Force" and they are guiding the development of a new mission statement, new vision statement, and defining our core values. This method of creating a task force has been very helpful. They are focused on a task and are very

efficient. They keep the visionary board members from getting too involved in the minutiae of smaller projects, allowing them to stay looking ahead.

Fremont Christian's Mission Task Force is a critical part of my Van Lunen project. This group consists of two board members, two parents and myself. This group wanted input from as many families and staff members as possible. The task force sent out a survey to parents, students and staff. The survey asked questions such as, "Why do you love the school?" "What would you like to change?" The task force rewarded the class with the most responses a pizza party, so the response rate was very high. A little motivation goes a long way. We used the responses to create four proposed mission statements that then went before the school board and the full staff. There were two that stood out so we took elements from each of those and drafted a final version. We had a unanimous vote in favor of this final mission statement which reads, "Glorifying God by educating and nurturing students to impact the world for Christ." We are excited about this new mission statement as it will certainly share what we are doing, but also will be used as a guide in decisions the board and staff will make.

Currently, the task force is working on developing core values that are accompanied by rationale and Scripture that support them. We are using the survey results we also used in creating the mission statement. This has been significantly more complicated as one word can change the entire feel and even truthfulness of the stated value. This part of the project has taken much longer than anticipated, but we want to do it right. My initial goal was to be complete with this portion of the project at this time and be well into the development of a vision statement. I'm content with how long this is taking us as it shows this is not being rushed, but careful input and thought is going into this important document making it more usable and meaningful.

Our task force is struggling with how best to develop a vision statement. We feel this part of the project should involve more than just five people creating the statement. Our mission statement and core values used the input from surveys which we feel is sufficient and has given our community the opportunity to give their input. We did not gather enough data to include where families and staff would like to see where the school should go. We also aren't sure if this is something that should be created solely from the board. We are trying to figure out who all should be involved.

We want our new vision statement to help guide us in creating a new strategic plan. This is a major reason we are struggling with who all should be involved and how best to coordinate this effort. Do we want many voices or do we want the voices of people who we know are strategic in the way they think? This conversation has caused mild disagreement when it has been discussed. We have had strategic plans and they have been great, but they do not look far enough down the road, and this is because we have not had a vision statement. The board feels that once these three documents are completed and used, then a meaningful strategic plan can be created and used. The FCS board desires to bring in a third party guide or consultant to navigate us through the development of a new strategic plan. The goal for this to be completed is by the winter of 2017.

When I look back on my VanLunen experience, I am grateful for an opportunity to grow spiritually and professionally, and I see how it has been a great benefit for Fremont Christian School. Through the creation of a much needed mission statement that involve our constituency, have been centered around Christ, and are to be used intentionally, I see a Christian school that will continue to reshape the way it operates, and to make decisions that reflect the light of Christ to all families who are involved. Our work on creating core values and a vision statement will continue beyond the deadline of this project. I am personally grateful for the fellowship that has been created within the Maroon Platoon and the greater VanLunen Fellowship. I feel part of something that is unique and wonderful, and will not end when this current fellowship is complete. This has been a blessing in so many ways. I praise God for this amazing experience.