



Following the Mission

To provide Christ-centred learning in all areas of schooling for Christ-like service in all areas of life.

Summary: The goal of this project was move C.C.S. in the direction of being more faithful to its mission while responding to the demands of today's parents and students.

Results: The board, staff, and parents understand the need to be faithful to the mission of the school and that change is required in order to respond to the demands of a post-modern culture. To this end; the service element of the school's mission statement is being enriched and a stronger emphasis is being placed on professional growth throughout the school to meet the needs of our students.

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Background

Chatham Christian Schools has serviced this area since 1957. The school was started by Dutch immigrants who came to Canada soon after World War II. These immigrants attended Christian Reformed Churches and were accustomed to the faith based schools that were long established in the Netherlands. Christian school was so important to these church fathers that a common story to hear from these families is that on Saturday evening the father would put the money earned from the week previous into three envelopes. The first envelop was for the church, the second envelop was for the Christian school, and what was left would be for the living expenses for the coming week. C.C.S. experienced many years of growth as families from the Christian Reformed Church continued to send their children to the Christian school. In the early 1990s and 2000s families from outside of this denomination also started to catch the vision of Christian education. After moving to new facilities in 1999, enrollment was greater than 400 students from Kindergarten to grade 12.

Times have changed, however. The school has experienced a decline in enrolment for the last 6 years to the point where we had 280 students in JK to grade 12 this past school year. There have been a number of factors contributing to this decline:

- During the most recent recession a significant portion of the manufacturing base of Chatham Kent has been reduced or left the community entirely.
- The public and separate school boards have improved the quality of their programs and compete head on with what we have always claimed we do better than they do which providing superior academics.
- The post-modern family does not feel they owe loyalty to the local Christian school. We need to prove that there is truly something unique and valuable going on at our school. Families will no longer “sacrifice” for their child’s education but they will “invest” in their child’s education.
- There have been historically negative experiences for some of our students and these are shared with others.

Another important piece of background information is the fact that I am the 4th principal to serve this school in the last 5 years. While many good things have been taking place in the school during these years of leadership change certain negative aspects of the school have not been getting addressed.

While all of this has been going on there is an incredible array of parents, teachers, and community supporters within the community that desire to see Chatham Christian positively impact the community.

Process

Upon arriving at the school two years ago I noticed some of the negative talk about the school within the community. This was evident to me in some of the exit interviews conducted with families whose children were graduating out of the school or who had decided that they would seek to have the children schooled elsewhere.

I could also sense quickly that there were tensions that existed between what many staff perceived as two schools, an elementary and a high school, instead of one school. In order to address this divide the administrative team started to have combined staff meetings to begin to address some of these differences and to begin to help us all see the common ground that we share.

This first year also saw the development director and I conduct 15 exit interviews with families who were either moving out of town or who had decided not to return to our school. These were often painful interviews to have since some of these families were leaving with hurt feelings or a sense that they had not received what they had hoped for. I also sat with many families who had other complaints about the school but had decided to continue to send their children to our school.

The results of these conversations were shared with the board. By the end of June, 2012, these results were compiled and presented to the staff by the chair of the board and myself.

Results

One of the key results of listening to the parents was that we were not a perfect school and that if we were going to retain our current families and attract other families we needed to act on what we were learning.

Here are some of the practical and measurable results;

- The board, committees, and staff are looking more closely at our mission statement and trying to frame more decisions within the context of this statement.
- The entire staff is getting more accustomed to meeting together to grow and promote Christian education.
- Our grade 4-8 students spent 7 afternoons during the past school year serving in their community. This is in response to the heart of the mission statement and a desire to

answer this question positively; “If we no longer existed would anyone in Chatham notice.” This will be increased to 10 afternoons next school year.

- Dan Beerens spent a day with the entire staff and pushed us all to consider what our mission is and how and why education must change.
- The board conducted 4 evenings of strategic thinking with the entire school community. The ideas that were shared supported an excited passion for the mission of the school that will set our school apart. The board will create a strategic plan based on the ideas from these meetings that should be ready by the fall of 2012.
- We hired 3 new teachers and a new V.P. who share the vision.
- While we had a handful of exit interviews with families who are leaving our school this spring we had 15 admissions interviews with families who want their children at our school.
- We all acknowledge that much more time needs to be spent on professional growth at the staff, board and committee level. This has started but it must become much more entrenched into the fabric of the school.

What have I learned:

- Change never takes place at the pace I would like it to. Patience is a hard thing for me to learn.
- I need to get better at setting the foundation for the change that needs to take place. In general I have usually had more time to reflect on the change than the folks whose lives will be initially affected by it.
- This process is not about me—it is about trying to follow the path that God has already laid out—this is tough to remember when criticism comes my way.
- I need to read more.
- There is no such thing as too much communication.
- Difficult conversation need to happen and should not be postponed.
- Deep change will only happen when the staff plays a much larger role in leading the change. Sometimes the change needs to be pushed on people who are resistant but it sure is more exciting when more people lead it.
- Until Christ returns, we will never arrive at total and complete solution.