

Edmonton Christian Schools
Edmonton Alberta
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Project: Building a Strategic Plan

Edmonton Christian Schools (ECS) has truly been blessed over the last number of years. They have been offering Christian Education to families in Edmonton and surrounding area for 66 years. In 1999 the Edmonton Society for Christian Education formed a partnership with the Edmonton Public School District and became an alternative Christian program. ECS is now governed through that partnership. This means of course that ECS is primarily funded by the Public School District. The parents pay some tuition to cover the cost of the buildings and to pay the extra cost of running the Christian program. This tuition however is significantly lower than what parents would typically be expected to pay for a Christian program in other parts of the country.

ECS now has 3 campuses. One pre-kindergarten to grade 8 campus in the west end of the city, one pre-kindergarten to grade 9 campus in the North East end of the city and one grade 10 through 12 high School which is also in the west end of the city. In all 3 schools there are almost 1500 students.

Over the past 12 years ECS has spent \$13 million renovating old buildings and building one new building. The school was able to raise \$7 million and in the course of the last 12 years have been financing the rest of the money. Presently there is a manageable debt of just over \$3 million. The aggressive paying down of this debt has been a significant part of the strategic focus for the last 5 years.

Along with paying down the debt another significant strategic focus centred on the development of a teaching for transformation curriculum development model. Significant time and resources have been put into this model. For a number of years now the staff has been developing and implementing a curriculum that challenged students to join in on God's plan for restoration. Students see God's story, discuss the competing stories and are challenged to live the story by using their gifts to restore creation to God's original intent. The work is inspiring, energizing and yet time consuming and difficult.

As these 2 projects are well on the way it is time to develop a new strategic plan. We needed to re-imagine what good looked like at ECS, affirm the vision and mission, measure/benchmark how we are

doing and develop strategies/initiatives that would move the present projects forward and jumpstart new ones.

In order to do this the board struck a strategic planning committee (SPC). The planning committee consisted of 3 board members, one administrator, and me as the Executive Director. The planning committee met several times between September 2014 and March 2015.

Over the past 2 years Edmonton Christian has been going through discussions that asked the question whether or not the vision and mission of the school was real and assessable. The conclusion was that changes had to be made to fit what was actually happening in the school. The teaching for transformation curriculum was generating significant changes and the language around the vision and mission had to change. The new vision of the school, “accepting Christ’s invitation to live for renewal”, and the new mission statement, “responding to God’s grace, Edmonton Christian schools challenges students through Christ centred education to play their role in God’s story”, certainly resonated with the staff, the students and the community.

The SPC now wanted to know what does great look like when it comes to that vision and mission. They took on the task of creating a “What Does Great Look Like” (WDGLL) list. Board members, teachers, parents, students and administrators all took part in creating the list. When all was said and done several items were suggested. The list was presented under 3 major categories; school culture, the enablers of the vision, (buildings, marketing, and administration) and curriculum.

Although the SPC understood that we would have difficulty truly imagining the perfect school, a comprehensive list was developed. The exercise was certainly a lot of fun and it created a lot of energy as we dreamed about what ECS could be if all of its students accepted Christ’s invitation to live for renewal and were playing their part in God’s story. WDGLL at ECS included much about students responding to God’s call for renewal. As well, the lists included statements about students being challenged to a deep relationship with Jesus, to build community with others in the school community and to serve others.

The next step was to determine how well we were doing. How close to the ideal were we. To complete this step we used two outside organizations to help. The 1st organization, the Prairie Centre for Christian

Education, ran a few surveys with staff and parents and they did a 4 day on-site review of the school. The 2nd organization was CARDUS, a think tank that has done significant research in education specifically around whether or not Christian schools were making a difference. We were very fortunate to form this partnership with CARDUS and were pleased with the professional way in which the research was done. Much of the analysis of the research was done with their partners at Notre Dame University.

CARDUS sent out online surveys to students, parents, staff and alumni. Before the surveys were actually sent, however, the SPC spent a lot of time with the organization ensuring that the questions that were asked were appropriate. We were not looking for satisfaction data but we were looking for ways in which we could benchmark how close we were to the ideal.

We were able to glean much from the surveys around school culture and curriculum especially as it related to how well we were doing with the teaching for transformation model. In measuring the curriculum we wanted to know if our students were actually playing their role in God's story. This meant we wanted to know whether or not they were being justice seekers, earth keepers, idolatry discerners, beauty creators, order discoverers, God worshipers, servant workers, creation enjoyers, image reflectors and community builders. In the end, somewhere in the neighbourhood of 800 pages of data was collected. We came a long way to determining if the learning our students were engaging in motivated them to play their role in God's story. In measuring school culture we really wanted to know if we were a school where community thrived, where students supported one another and where the joy and shalom of our God ruled the day. This was also accomplished. We were also interested of course in whether or not the enablers were meeting the necessary standards especially as it related to whether or not our buildings were good enough to handle the educational initiatives. Although the surveys didn't specifically deal with this we were able to infer information that we needed.

General Conclusions Regarding Needed Growth -

- we need to create a culture where parents are more intimately involved/engaged with the vision and mission
- we have some issues with marketing our schools-especially as it relates to attracting high school students
- we need to build a better relationship with alumni
- the relationships that students have with teachers and administrators and with each other, although good, could be better

- As far as our buildings are concerned we need to begin planning the rebuilding of our West School campus. Our West school isn't meeting the needed standard. We also need to evaluate our High School and Northeast School buildings to determine how they can be better suited for educational initiatives
- teaching for transformation (TFT) implementation needs to be refreshed
- Our Bible program may not be meeting the needs of our students. With a changing student population Bible knowledge varies greatly.
- we need to continue to foster a better relationship with EPS especially as it relates to the selection of the principal
- we need to continue to evaluate our programs with a view to ensuring programs are available for each child

Areas Where We Should Foster Continued Growth

1. The Continuation of the Development of TFT

School administration has been working on next steps in the implementation of TFT. Collaborative teacher groups have been formed with the intention of teachers supporting each other through TFT implementation. A special emphasis is being placed on students living the throughlines. Next steps would include teachers moving towards engaging students through formational learning experiences. ESCE will continue to support this work.

2. Fostering Relations with EPS

Continued contact is being made with the district to ensure that the needs of ESCE, relative to supporting the Christian Program at ECS, are on the minds of EPS personnel. Items to be pursued are: maintaining the uniqueness of ECS, ensuring the important and substantive role of the society, longevity of the program, negotiating a new agreement (the agreement has been submitted), ensuring appropriate payments for the use of the facilities, negotiating new lease agreements, expanding Christian Education in the city, and whatever else may come up.

A significant part of negotiating a new agreement with EPS includes the principal selection process.

The Executive Director has the responsibility of pursuing this goal.

3. Review and Revamp the Bible Program

Administration has begun the review process. Data is being collected on what is being done in the program K-12. Research is being conducted on what programs are available. Information is to be collected by the end of June, 2015 with a plan to make changes to the Bible curriculum that will start as early as Sept. 2015.

4. Marketing Review and Renew

Regarding the marketing program we suggest hiring a marketing consulting firm to review what we are doing and recommend appropriate new strategies. Aspects include:

- the role of society as opposed to the role of the school
- role of the principal
- 1st point of contact
- School Tours
- open houses
- role of school secretaries, teachers
- role of admissions person at Society office
- advertising
 - where
 - how often
 - deliberate word-of-mouth advertising
 - how do we tell our story
- registration
- fundraising
- making contacts
 - churches
 - parents
 - students – connections with other schools
 - community
- Brand
 - pamphlets
 - enrolment packages
 - website
- Facebook
- Twitter

New Growth Initiatives

1. Hire a Story Teller

As identified we could do a better job of engaging our parents with the vision and mission of the school, engaging our alumni, and marketing our schools. In our SPC discussions, and in discussions with the administration of the school, we feel that many of these issues could be dealt with if we were better at telling our story. We do some great things at ECS and lives have been changed through the influence of our schools. We need to tell the story of how students lives are changing as they live the throughlines, of students learning through lines through curriculum, and of formational learning experiences. We need to shape the language so that we are intentionally and overtly connecting vision, mission and throughlines to curriculum, service projects, and extracurricular activities. As well, a story teller could help students reflect on how they have been actively playing their role in God's story.

A story teller could:

- collect and tell stories of what makes ECS the place that it is
- Post stories on a blog, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.
- use mainly video but also words to tell the story
- engage parents, through story, about the school's vision and mission, with the intent of having our parents better understand the vision and mission and to get them involved in the program
- engage churches so they better understand who we are and what we do
- create regular "Pathways" with the intention of telling both the ECS and ESCE story
- engage the alumni through story with the intention of keeping them more closely connected to the school

2. Explore Creating a Restorative Practice School

As we explore how the relationships could improve between students and students, students and teachers, and students and administrators we believe it would be important to explore what it would take to become a restorative practice school.

The board will create a committee to explore putting into place a restorative practice School. The committee should be made up of mainly administrators but should include a parent or two, a board member, a restorative practice consultant and perhaps the Executive Director. The committee would get an understanding of what that looks like by learning, discussion, visiting a restorative practice School, and have consultants tell us what that looks like. The committee would also explore costs, explore time commitments, explore the amount of training necessary and put together implementation strategies.

3. Appoint Building Committee

The strategic planning committee also believes that it is time for the board to strike an ad hoc building committee. The purpose of the committee would be to plan the reconstruction of our West campus with a view to beginning development in the spring of 2019. Although the High School and Northeast School do have some ongoing building needs this building committee's task will be focused on issues relative to the West campus.