

Managing Tremendous School Growth

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In 2011, Unity Christian School undertook a new strategic plan. At this time, Unity Christian School was stagnant in terms of school growth. The k-12 school population hovered between 265 and 285 students. Unity Christian School was seen as a strong sports school with a good track record of building community. Unity Christian School was also seen as having a strong special education program. Families would often send 1 child with learning needs but not the rest of their children. Unity Christian School was not seen as the top Christian school in Chilliwack and the school was often losing students to its competitors. The 2011 5-year strategic plan was developed to address the stagnant growth of the school. This plan has 4 pillars:

1. Educational Excellence
2. Fiscal Health - as measured by such matters as financial condition and enrollment
3. Stakeholder Engagement and Satisfaction
4. Meeting the Unity Christian Graduate Profile

The implementation of the strategic plan also coincided with a massive building project at Unity Christian School. The dilapidated elementary school moved from the other end of town to our middle and high school campus. This 4.6 million dollar project gave Unity Christian School a state of the art prek-12 campus.

I became principal of Unity Christian School soon after our building project was completed and 3 years into our strategic plan. When I became principal in 2013, the population of Unity Christian School was at 273 students. In September of 2014, the school population was at 330 students. Next September, our school population will be at 390 students minimum. This is nearly 40% growth. While Unity knew that the new facility and strategic plan would help us become a stronger Christian School, nobody anticipated this staggering growth.

One of the first things I wanted to identify before beginning my project was what factors help cause our tremendous school growth. I believe the following factors helped grow Unity Christian School:

1. Strong ethos and familial community. People want to be a part of what is happening at Unity.
2. A shift in becoming more than community and sports. Good hiring helped Unity increase its academic profile.
3. Excellent academic rankings
4. Strong reputation in the community.
5. New family satisfaction. New families have their own communities and they share about their happiness with the school with their friends.

6. Running waiting lists in many classes. This helps create hype.
7. Increasing school options, both curricularly and extracurricularly.

Within 1 year of our new prek-12 campus opening, we were running waiting lists in many classes. While this helped create hype around our school and helped grow demand to get into the school, the board and admin also recognized that we were turning families away to our competitors or away from Christian education entirely.

Unity Christian School was built to be single track from k-7 and dual track from grade 8-12. Class Size Guidelines were established in 2013 that established class size limits for each grade. By the beginning of 2014, 4 elementary classes were at capacity with large waiting lists.

The single track to dual track system had flaws. The most new registrations at Unity occur between grade 5 and grade 8. New registrations are rare from grade 10 and up. Growth from grade 7-8 always bordered between single track and dual track. In order for Unity's high school to be fully dual track (i.e. 50 students per grade) a larger intake from elementary school would need to occur. I believed that the best way for this to happen would be to shift our thinking to becoming a track and a half elementary program, enabling us to have a larger dual track program in high school. My challenge was: how to sell this to a community that just came off of a major building project that gave us a set school size. The plan to become track and a half to dual track would mean that Unity would need to expand again.

Past Board Sharing Evening

In order to begin the process of talking about new expansion, the first part of my project was to learn from the past. School boards and school committees cycle every 3-6 years. Parents are often invested until their kids are through school and then fade away. It was important to me to bring back past board members, maintenance committee, administrators and development chairs to learn about our last 2 building projects.

In 2001, the Unity Christian High School Campus was built. In 2013, the campus doubled in square footage when the elementary school transitioned over. In order to begin talking about expansion again, I felt we needed to have our current board engage with key stakeholders from the past. Darren Spysma, a founding teacher of our high school and current SCSBC learning leader was able to facilitate the event. In working with my consultant, Dave Medema, we were able to prepare the following questions for our current and past school leaders:

- What is the compelling vision behind possible future expansion?
- What were the celebration items? What hurdles will any future expansion have to overcome and what will we need to do to overcome them?
- How well did the community rally around expansion plans? How do you think they will respond to a future expansion proposal?

- How did groups such as CES form independently of the board? How would they impact any movement towards future expansion?
- What longer-term goals came up during both expansions?
- Where do you see the future of Unity?
- At what level was Agassiz engaged in the process?

This evening turned out to be very successful. Not only did our current board learn so much about the initial vision of Christian education in Chilliwack, the past members who contributed so much to Unity were re-engaged in what was happening at Unity. We were able to share a meal and share about Christian education. It became a very special night of re-engaging and working together towards a common goal.

4 themes emerged from our board/stakeholder sharing evening:

- How big does Unity want to get?
- Land Assembly
- Admissions Policy – not too restrictive
- CES Developments – importance of and future direction (new blood)***
- Excellence – in everything we do

***CES is a group of parents that have children at Unity who contract building projects

It became clear during the meeting and in other focus groups with staff and current families that Unity Christian School prides itself on our close family feel. Unity Christian is a place where all parents are involved in raising our children together. Everybody knows one another. A fear of growing too much and losing this sense of community was a clear concern. Everyone surveyed wanted to see Christian education grow, albeit incrementally. There was much excitement over increasing in excellence through the ability to expand programs.

Through focus groups, including the board/past stakeholder sharing evening, it became clear to the board that the track and a half to dual track system at Unity was a viable way of reducing waiting lists while continuing to keep our community feel. This shift would make grow our schools maximum capacity from 400 students to 475 students.

The issues were now:

- Elementary classroom space
- New building expansion or portable acquisition
- Having multiple classrooms per grade in the elementary school
- Intentionally growing high school programs to further advance the school
- Communication

Elementary Classroom Space

While there is tremendous excitement with our school growth and our plans to continue to grow, one mistake I made was neglecting to see the anxiety this caused the elementary teaching staff. When I presented our growth to all staff, I quickly became

aware that this was a lot of change for our elementary staff. Two years ago, the elementary staff were on a campus with 6 teachers and a handful of assistants. They then moved to the big campus and were immersed with 20 new staff members. Now, we were telling them that they would be changing classrooms, moving the intermediate classes out of the elementary wing, and they would be adding teachers. This was a lot of change to process and, in hindsight, I wish I navigated through this with the elementary team better than I did. Since this initial communication, I have been able to sit with the elementary staff and have 2 brainstorming sessions. These meetings have been positive and the anxiety at the staff level is shifting into excitement.

New Building Expansion and Portable Acquisition

The 2012 expansion enabled Unity Christian to grow to approximately 400 students. The new plan to build a track and half to dual track school will enable Unity to grow to 480 students. The biggest hurdle for this growth is classroom space. For the 2015/2016 school year, we have added a second kindergarten class as well as a 4/5 combined class. Even this has been difficult. 1 elementary class will move into a flex room and the other will move into our current computer lab. Money has been set aside to ensure these rooms become good student learning centers. Part of my project has been to form a committee that looks into expanding the campus. Through the board/past stakeholder sharing night, we learned that it was possible to build 8 additional classrooms on our current campus. Unfortunately, the cost is too high at this time as we just came off of a major building project. A new development committee has been formed with the task of raising funds to grow Christian education at Unity.

The task force on building expansion will spend the summer looking at portable acquisition. Our current middle school can shift into portables for the 2016/17 school year that would enable our intermediate classes to shift into the current middle school wing.

Having Multiple Classrooms per Grade in the Elementary School

Since 1969, Unity Christian School has always run 1 class at each grade in the elementary school. In September, we will have our 1st dual and track and a half classes. Our admin team and education committee have dove into research and explored how to best do this for Unity Christian School. From how to split classes to common planning time, everything is new for us. For our new kindergarten hire, our current kindergarten teacher sat in on the interviews. The 2 kindergarten positions will be our 1st dual track elementary grade in our school's history. For the 2016/2017-year, we will have several combined classes. 21st century learning has been a key professional goal for our school this year. The admin team and education committee will need to continue to research and learn about 21st century methods to build our track and a half elementary program to best work for Unity Christian School. 1 thing we will be researching is; would three 4/5 combined classes be better than running a grade 4, grade 5, and grade 4/5 class. I want our elementary staff to own this process and be challenged to take risks. I hope to

engage our staff well next year as we further discuss these topics at Unity.

Intentionally Growing High School Programs to Further Advance our School

Unity Christian School has a large intake of students enter in grade 8 and 9. We gain from a feeder school as well as gain many families who are happy with the local public elementary schools but are worried about the large public high schools. In our single track to grade 7 and dual track through high school system, our intake in grade 8 is typically around 36 students. This allows us to create 2 classes on 18 students. A track and a half system will allow us to have a grade 9 intake of 45-50 students. This will allow us to grow our high school programs. Already for next year, we are adding foods, choir, and law to our high school programming.

In 2013, a full shop facility was built on our new campus. Our woodwork programs have thrived since inception. With our current school growth, we are now able to expand our shop programs. The education committee will spend the next year reviewing this with the goal of adding a mechanics program for the 2016/2017 school year. Chilliwack is a blue collar town and a mechanics program will most certainly allow us to meet our mission of enabling all students to reach their God-given potential.

Other courses that will be explored include: an advanced math stream, psychology, business, metal work, English literature, athletic leadership, and service.

Communication

One thing I have learned in my 2 years as principal is the importance of communicating the same message with the same language over and over. It amazes me to see others in our community pickup on the language and message and start speaking the same way. Through this, a culture of excitement and innovation is developing around our strategic plan and possible expansion. Stakeholders are excited to try new things and see the school thrive and flourish. The key now will be to steer the vision into reality. The “why” fits the “vision” but the next steps can cause some anxiety. Communicating our “why” well over the next year may be the largest challenge in this project.

Conclusion

In a time of explosive growth, it has been critical to learn from the past and current stakeholders to help build a plan for the next 5-10 years. Through my work in Van Lunen, I have been able to strategically gain information from a number of types of stakeholders at Unity Christian School to help build a plan that will allow us to grow Christian education and allow us to further meet our mission and vision. My 1st child will graduate from Unity Christian School in 10 years from now. The plan developed this year to grow, and the engagement that has been gained from our entire community makes this an exciting 10 years.