

Solving the Governance Puzzle

Based upon the instruction received at our first Van Lunen conference, it was evident that Summit Christian Academy needed a strategic plan to survive and thrive. Upon return from the conference, strategic planning was discussed with the school board. Since the school board was subservient to the church deacon board, the board expressed concern over the ability for the school board to determine the direction and future of the school by developing a strategic plan. Several questions were raised to the deacon board concerning their desire to continue the ministry of Summit Christian Academy. Quickly, the strategic plan became the survival of the school as an independent organization.

Since the very first question of authority in the middle of 2009 until early 2010, the leadership team of Summit Baptist Bible Church and the school board of Summit Christian Academy attempted to resolve the question of authority. Through several meetings, the church leadership determined that the church was not committed to a K4 – twelfth grade school on two campuses. In turn, the school board began investigating potential independence for the school. With the church body's approval, the school was granted independence, which was finalized in early June 2010.

Tim Connor
Director of Development
Grace Community School
Tyler, Texas
903-566-5678 x 150
tconnor@gracetyler.org

Solving the Governance Puzzle

History

In the fall of 1974, the Summit Baptist Bible Church of Clarks Summit began Summit Baptist Academy to provide for the growing need to have a school for elementary and high school students based on the Bible. Within just a few years the enrollment at the Academy outgrew available facilities as students from many other churches enrolled in the school. In an effort to see the Academy's ministry continue to grow, Summit Baptist Bible Church led the way in organizing an association of fundamental and Bible-believing churches to assume responsibility for the Academy's grades 7 through 12. The association was called Baptist High School, and our school began its ministry on the current Secondary Campus in September 1982. In the spring of 2004, the board of directors dissolved the current corporation, and turned over the complete ownership and governance of the school to Summit Baptist Bible Church, one of the corporation churches. Summit Baptist Academy and Baptist High School were merged into Summit Christian Academy, providing a seamless Pre K-12 Christian school system for families of northeastern Pennsylvania.

Upon the transference of ownership, I had the incredible opportunity to rebuild the school governance structure from the ground up with the assistance and support of the deacons of Summit Baptist Bible Church. We turned to ACSI and followed the advice of John Schimmer and built a governance structure on the Policy Governance model from John Carver. The governance model clearly identified power and authority from the church leadership (deacons & pastoral staff) to the school board to the administrator.

Project Focus

During the summer of 2009, I attended the Van Lunen Center with the intent of developing my skills in executive management. Through the discussions and teachings, it became apparent that Summit Christian Academy was not thriving, but barely surviving through various ownership and leadership transitions. Along with these transitions, Summit Christian Academy continued to build financial debt, straining the relationship between the church and school. Therefore, upon my return, the school board scheduled a weekend retreat to begin developing a strategic plan for Summit Christian Academy.

The strategic planning retreat identified a critical component to the school's future success – the authority structure for the school. While the strategic plan would provide an impetus for change within the school, the school board was concerned about the support from the deacon board and even suggested that the church leadership team may need to complete a strategic plan for the school. Ultimately, the school board questioned its authority to create a strategic plan and sought guidance from the church deacon board seeking specific direction for the future of the school. For the next several months, the single question of authority became the focal point for the survival of the school.

Project Process

In order for Summit Christian Academy to survive, the church leadership and school needed to resolve the authority structure. Referring back to the founding documentation, it was clear that the deacon board had authority over the school board. Now, the church was questioning their commitment to support the school. Through several meetings, the church leadership determined that the church was not committed to a K4 – twelfth grade school on two campuses. In turn, the school board began investigating potential independence for the school, with a renewed passion and vigor to see the school survive and thrive.

To investigate a potential independent school, the church formed a transitional board comprised of additional deacon representation serving on the current school board. This transitional school board proposed the release of Summit Christian Academy to an independent school. The proposal was accepted by the deacon board and posted for a church vote. Prior to the church vote, we held an informational meeting that detailed the background to the church membership about the conclusion to release the school from the church. Each segment of the leadership team (deacons, pastoral staff, school board, and school administration) made a brief presentation and took questions. The following week, the church membership overwhelmingly voted to release the school from the church. Over the next several weeks, the specific details were discussed and determined with the assistance of legal counsel. Finally, in June 2010, the official papers were signed.

Project Results

Throughout the entire year, I watched the school go from strategic planning, to discussions of school closure, to a change of ownership, and the formation of a new school board. Thankfully, the school will remain open and survive under new ownership. Obviously, the hope is that an independent school structure will provide the stability needed for the school to thrive.

During the independence investigation, it became evident that I did not have the strength and will to continue to serve the school as the head of school. In early January 2010, this information was made public to our constituents and a plan was set in motion to promote two individuals from within the school to serve as building principals.

Project Analysis

I had the unique experience of re-building a school from the ground up twice within five years. In the initial re-build, the church leadership welcomed the addition of the school and permitted the school to develop policies under the Policy Governance model. These policies were well thought out and approved at every level of our organization. The policies guided us well – until there was conflict over authority. In hindsight, we needed to separate the authority of the church leadership, clearly defining the role of the pastoral staff and deacon board. With the responsibilities clearly delineated, the checks and balances would have been more effective.

During my five years of leadership, I was able to see our school board mature in their role. I placed a very high emphasis on educating board members on their specific roles and responsibilities. I saw the school board protecting the mission of the school. I saw a school board gain strength as it

became more selective in membership. Eventually, the school board was strong enough to propose independence, saving the school from closure. God provided the right board members at the right time for this tremendous task.

The governance structure of a school is critical to its success. For Summit Christian Academy, the success of the school will be determined by a new independent school board. It is highly recommended that Christian school leaders invest time and energy into developing strong school board members, thereby protecting the mission of the school. Although a complicated leadership structure in a church-run school led to the independence of Summit Christian Academy, I do believe that a church-run school could operate effectively. Particular attention should be directed at the roles, responsibilities and authority of each particular position in leadership.