

# **Van Lunen Fellows Project**

## **Increasing School Enrollment through Promoters**

### **Joseph M. Cottrell**

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#### **INTRODUCTION**

I have had the privilege and honor of serving Christian families as principal at Northwest Christian School for the last decade. Our school educates students in grades pre-kindergarten through eighth grade. Northwest began as a local church ministry in 1966 holding classes in the basement of Newton Christian Reformed Church. For almost a half century our school has been a beacon of God's biblical light and truth in northern New Jersey as we pursue our mission of providing children of Christian families with a Christ-centered education that promotes biblical principles, academic excellence and a lifetime of service to God. Today we have a facility that has eleven classrooms and a gymnasium that sits on fourteen beautiful acres in rural, mountainous Sussex County, New Jersey's most northern county that touches both Pennsylvania and New York.

#### **THE PROBLEM**

Our county and the surrounding areas are very beautiful. The terrain is heavily forested, rocky and rugged. It is teeming with wildlife and is not densely populated, which is a far cry from the heavily populated crowded cities and suburbs to the south. In fact, our county has the highest number of acres per capita in northern New Jersey.

The rugged terrain, spread out housing, and large lot requirements are factors in our biggest difficulty, a declining population. Our county has lost 21% of its student population over the last ten years. Other reasons for that decline are high property taxes, a lack of jobs which has caused people to move out of the county, residents having to drive long distances to find corporate work, and folks are simply not having as many children as in years past.

The decrease in student population countywide has trickled down to our Christian school and has negatively affected our enrollment and our future financial sustainability. This year we have fourteen students less than what we conservatively budgeted for, resulting in a projected \$70,000 deficit.

Our enrollment currently is 15% less than in 2008, the beginning of our current recession and down 29% from ten years ago. We need additional students to fund this ministry into the future.

## **THE PLAN – THE SOLUTION**

My project is to launch a detailed survey, the Parent Satisfaction Referral Survey, to our school community in conjunction with Grace Works Ministries in Colorado. The purpose of this survey is twofold. One, to give our school board detailed feedback on what our parents perceive as strengths and weaknesses and what is most important to our parents. Secondly, to identify people in our school family who are willing to promote and market the school to the Christian community.

I will organize the team of marketers, give motivation, structure and instruction of how we will be intentional in our efforts, monitor the results and work with the team in gaining fifteen additional students for the 2015-2016 school year.

## **THE PROCESS – IMPLEMENTATION**

The promoters and I worked as a team to distribute 50 colorful, tastefully designed, informative lawn signs that were posted in strategic locations advertising our week long Open House April 13-17th. Permission was obtained from local churches to have literature tables on Sunday mornings promoting God's work at Northwest. The principal spoke to two MOPS (Mothers of Preschoolers) groups and three local churches about the biblical philosophy of Christian education at Northwest, and set up an information table at Newton Day. We featured articles in our Home Announcements communicating to the entire school the importance of their referrals and recommendation of the school to others in their sphere of influence, but the main thrust of the project was to actively engage the team of promoters who identified themselves as people who would be willing to promote the school face to face with people they know.

I used the survey as a reference in calling promoters to attend a one hour meeting in our gymnasium on April 21, 2015. The promoters were aware that we would have a pizza fellowship for about forty minutes, and then I would give a twenty minute presentation for about twenty attendees who were very attentive and interested in helping promote the school.

Posted below are my comments to the school promoters to help solve the problem of an insufficient number of students to financially sustain the ministry into the future:

“God has done an incredible work in the lives of many NCS students over the last half century. Do you believe that? God has sustained His work here for almost fifty years. He has used the staff, the Board, and you the parents to solidify a biblical faith in the Lord Jesus Christ that has truly been lived out in the lives of the precious young people God has entrusted us with, to build up, teach and nurture.

The Lord has used this school to fulfill the great commission Jesus gave in Matthew 28:19-20 (NAS). “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the

Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit teaching them to observe all that I commanded you and lo, I am with you always even to the end of the age.” A life that is dedicated to love Christ, to live for Him, to glorify Him is absolutely priceless, and that is our vision, our aim.

One of my goals for tonight is that we will be committed as a team to be more intentional and cohesive in our efforts to tell the people in our sphere of influence of the importance and value of a Christ-centered education.

We know that in 2008 this country experienced a very serious financial upheaval that we are still slowly recovering from. The New Jersey Herald recently reported that during the last decade our county has lost 21% of its students. This decline in total number of students has trickled down to our Christian school and has negatively affected our enrollment and our financial sustainability going into the future.

I would like to take a few minutes to appeal to both the rational side and the emotional side of your brain. Some folks call them the rider and the elephant with the rational side being the rider and the emotional side being the elephant.

On this table I have \$1,000 in \$1.00 bills, and I want to use them to illustrate our current financial condition. Each dollar represents about three hundred dollars. We have three major accounts. As of April 1, our main checking account had \$89,000, our savings account had \$52,000 and our capital fund had \$32,000 for making necessary repairs or improvements to our facility. As of April 1st, the three accounts totaled \$173,000.”

I conducted a visual presentation of allowing parents to “see” handfuls of banded dollar bills that represented our total cash availability. The promoters were guided through a 3 ½ month journey ending on July 19th to let them see our total cash assets as we finish our fiscal accounting year before we enter into a new school year. Each month I would “show” the amount of money that represented our starting monthly balance and would add in approximately \$43,000 in income and then take out \$73,000 for expenses. I showed them not only the starting balance of each month but also the ending balance after the expenses were subtracted. This demonstration ended by showing one fistful of money representing \$36,000. When our promoters saw the fistful of cash that correlated to our total cash assets as of 7/19/15, it shocked them and helped them to understand our dire financial position. The comments that follow are the conclusion of my presentation to our promoters.

### **Continuation of Presentation Talk**

“This \$36,000 remaining on July 19th is the total amount of revenue that we have to our name. We will have exhausted all of our checking and all but \$3,000 of our savings. A good rule of thumb in finance for an institution is that you have at least three months’ expenses in the bank. In our case that is approximately \$220,000. As of July 19, 2015, we basically do not have a checking or savings account as a cushion to rely on next year like we did this year. This is not a time of panic, but a time of trusting God and for us to rise up and take action. I gave this object lesson to stir you up in your emotions—so you will be motivated to intentionally promote the

school to moms and dads in your sphere of influence—people you run into in all aspects of your life. The greatest witness to God’s work at Northwest is you.

No one can influence another person to enter into the vital ministry of Christian education like you! You believe in Christian education. You know and understand the value and importance of it. You have put your money where your mouth is. You believe and know we are carrying out the Great Commission in making disciples. Matthew 28:19-20 (NAS)

Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you, and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.

Our kids are being bombarded by the world’s system of thinking which is ungodly and opposite of God’s thinking. I cannot stress enough the importance of how crucial it is to think God’s thoughts and evaluate all of life through the Word of God. Proverbs 23:7 (NAS) says “For as he thinks within himself so he is.” The way our children and teens think is the way they will live and the way they will teach their children, your future grandchildren to live. We need to work towards raising up a generation of biblical thinkers for Jesus’ sake and the sake of our families, church and country.

So I am appealing to you to make a commitment with God’s help to work towards speaking to two families during the next thirty days. We will meet back in thirty days for another brief meeting to check on how we all are doing. Encourage others in our school family who could not be here to do the same thing by talking to others who are candidates for Christian education.

Our goal is 160 students for next September which will be an increase of fifteen students. Your testimony and insight is so valuable when talking to others. Remember we want to keep this work going into the future for the glory of God and the benefit of the children.

I want to close with our major points of communication---our structure or the content that I want us to communicate to people who we are engaging with to promote our school.”

**Conversation Points to Cover When Promoting NCS:**

**1. Christian distinctives:**

- Biblical integration in everything we do; all activities including every academic discipline
- Teachers praying with their students every day
- Teachers counseling their students with the Word of God
- Emphasizing living for the Lord Jesus Christ and loving Him above all
- Having teachers that emulate Jesus Christ and model a person who lives by faith in Jesus Christ according to the Scriptures Luke 6:40
- An emphasis on memorization, meditation on the Word of God
- Being able to speak and write about Christ and the Word of God in reports and presentations

**2. Strong academics –**

- Last year on the Terra Nova III, a widely taken, respected standardized test, we outscored 82 out of every 100 schools who took the same test
- Not teaching to the test, not embracing “Common Core Standards” philosophy
- We are reinforcing what is being taught at home and in church

**3. Small Class Size**

- 1:14 teacher/student ratio

**4. Interscholastic athletics and fitness programs**

**5. Special instruction and aid to students with special needs**

**6. Financial aid available to those who qualify**

- Last year we gave \$200,000 in student aid

**7. Zero tolerance bullying policy**

**8. Free morning care 7:35-8:05**

**9. After School Care for \$5.00 an hour 2:30-5:30 PM**

**10. Bus service or reimbursement of \$880 per student per school year provided in some areas**

**11. Stress coming to the school and meeting with the principal for a free educational consultation**

**12. Get the name and phone numbers of folks you speak with to the principal, and he will follow up with them.**

**13. Listen to them, what are their concerns, what does their son or daughter need and then respond how we can specifically help their child**

“We can do this! We can be enthusiastic, knowledgeable, compassionate promoters who can make a difference in helping the financial stability and sustainability which will enable us to carry out our mission and vision. Thank you for coming! Let’s get out there and promote for the glory of Christ!”

I shared with the group that we will meet again in thirty days, to compare notes, to help us stay on track with promoting and to encourage each other in this important work. We did meet again on May 21 and shared stories, successes and ideas, how we can more effectively promote the school. We had ten promoters, down from the twenty at the first meeting we had on April 21, 2015. We had a productive meeting which I believe will bear results in the future. To date, we have three new families who will be enrolling for next year. Results are slow to come in, but I am optimistic as time rolls forward that we will get additional students due to our efforts and God’s help.

# NCS Financial Picture

April 1st – July 19th, 2015

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\$89,401.26	Lakeland Checking Account
\$31,739.20	Lakeland Capital Account
\$52,011.49	Capital One/ING Savings Account
<b>\$173,151.95</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>

## APRIL

Beginning Balance	Plus Income	Equals	Minus Expenses	Ending Balance
\$173,151.95	\$43,434.81	\$216,586.76	\$73,000	\$143,586.76

## MAY

Beginning Balance	Plus Income	Equals	Minus Expenses	Ending Balance
\$143,586.76	\$43,434.81	\$187,021.57	\$73,000	\$114,021.57

## JUNE

Beginning Balance	Plus Income	Equals	Minus Expenses	Ending Balance
\$114,021.57	\$43,434.81	\$157,456.38	\$73,000	\$84,456.38

## JULY

Beginning Balance	Plus Income	Equals	Minus Expenses	Ending Balance
\$84,456.38	\$0	\$84,456.38	\$48,180	\$36,276.38

Minus any bad debt plus any payment of any bad debt