

Strengthening Christian Education

Summary: The goal of this project was to strengthen Christian schools in the greater Muskegon area through collaboration.

Results: Together we have identified several key areas where our schools can act together or combine in the upcoming years. These areas include: advancement, marketing, curriculum, and technology. Furthermore, our four schools have agreed to a two-year time-line that will unite our schools in these key areas and evaluate our progress.

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Focus

Western Michigan boasts a strong tradition of Christian education. While many of the Christian schools in Michigan were founded before 1900, changing culture and demographics have impacted private schools throughout the state. In response to the changing demographics, Christian schools have had several responses. In some cities and areas schools have combined. This typically resulted in the closing of one or more campuses. In other areas, schools have remained independent and have also suffered significant decline. Specifically, high schools have often had an advantage in fund-raising and media attention at the expense of independent elementary schools in the same area. While each of our schools has been relatively successful in recent years, our hope was to develop a model of collaboration and cooperation not out of fear of decline, but out of a desire to strengthen Christian education as a whole throughout the region. Our goal was to create a model of collaboration that improves all of our schools.

Process

The administrators of the Grand Haven Christian, Muskegon Christian, New Era Christian, and Western Michigan Christian High began meeting monthly to discuss areas of cooperation and a timetable to complete this process. The goals of this venture were shared with each independent school board and a Visioning Committee was formed. This committee was composed of the four administrators and representatives from each school. This committee met bi-monthly to discuss progress and to approve specific goals and targets to be presented to each separate school board.

Over the course of the first few meetings we outlined goals and hopes for the upcoming year. We brainstormed possible areas of cooperation and collaboration and evaluated our budgets and expenditures in each area.

Our steps were communicated throughout the year to our boards, staffs, and society in general. This was done through bulletin announcements, presentations at meetings, and discussions.

Several future obstacles were discussed. The financial implications may prove to be the most difficult. Moving from individual revenue sources and budgets to a unified budget will be challenging. Over the course of the first year capital income will be separate. Simply dividing revenue on a per pupil basis is a possibility, but this needs to be temporary. Establishing a united ethos will be important for long-term success. One possible solution is to establish a new shared endowment that benefits all schools. The existing independent endowments will remain in place.

Establishing oversight and accountability is another concern. Over the course of the first year the Visioning Committee will develop a strategic plan and the administrators will be held accountable for accomplishing the various targets. Each target area will also be evaluated. In the upcoming year we will begin to establish a structure for joint governance.

Results

The Visioning Committee has decided that moving forward toward collaboration over the next two years is the best course of action. Combining efforts, reduction of other costs, and staff changes allowed these changes with no additional expenses. The following are our target areas for the upcoming year:

1. Curriculum: We have decided upon several significant areas where we can work together. In 2010-2011 we began coordinating our curriculum each registering with Curriculum Trak and beginning to plan and coordinate curriculum together. Furthermore, we have decided to hire a single curriculum director to lead each of our schools professional development and coordinate our curricular work.
2. Marketing: All of our schools have decided to combine our recruitment, retention, and advertising. We will hire a single marketing coordinator to develop and implement a unified marketing plan. All recruiting efforts will be coordinated K-12.
3. Advancement: While each school will maintain independent annual funds, a single Chief Advancement Officer will oversee advancement and major capital gifts for all the schools.
4. Technology: Each of the school purchased RenWeb together to coordinate and integrate our recruitment, enrollment, and tuition collection software. Future purchases will be coordinated.
5. Governance: Joint board training will take place with all four boards in September. This will continue throughout the year. We will also continue to establish an ideal model for joint governance.

Analysis

This project has been very positive rewarding. It is evident that new methods and approaches to Christian education are vital for future success. While as schools and individuals we have worked well together for many years it has been good to move forward in more concrete ways. Through this Van Lunen project we learned several things. First, the value of relationships and partnerships. Many long-standing relationships and established trust helped to move this effort forward. Second, there is significant time involved in making key decisions and in transitioning. Each school has a board and committees, as well as culture and traditions. Working with and through these takes time and patience. As is proper for school endeavors we will evaluate the effectiveness of this project as it relates to our mission and vision. Ultimately, this process will succeed or fail in four key areas. Unification will have to demonstrate growth in funds raised, students recruited, and overall quality of education.