

## Cultivating Enrollment Growth in a Small High School

**Joy Fisk, Head of School**  
Van Lunen Fellow 2014-2015

**Arborbrook Christian Academy**  
Matthews, North Carolina  
www.arborbrook.org



**Consultant: Zach Clark**

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### Background

Arborbrook Christian Academy is a small school of 180 students in grades K-12 in Matthews, North Carolina, a suburb of Charlotte. Now in our tenth year as a school, we have been experiencing increasing enrollment growth between 5 and 20 percent each year for the past three years, but high school enrollment over that same time frame has remained largely stagnant. I set out to see if there was anything we could do to address the lack of growth in our high school.

### Three P's

Believing that word of mouth is the most important means of growth for a school such as ours and further realizing that for word of mouth to be strong, our current families have to be well satisfied with the quality of their child's education at our school, I chose to focus on three P's: the product, the people, and our public perception. The **product** included a focus on improved academic quality, facility improvements, and an improved atmosphere. Focusing on **people** meant better engaging with families, creating a culture of giving, and expanding our community. And **public perception** was addressed through consistent messaging, a vibrant web and social media presence, and giving prospective families more personal attention.

### IMPROVING THE PRODUCT: ACADEMICS, FACILITY, AND ATMOSPHERE

First we sought to improve the quality of what we are offering to families. I was inspired by Jim Marsh's definition of excellence: "Being better tomorrow than you are today." While there were limitations we face based upon our size and budget, there are always things we can do to be better.

### **Pursuing Excellence in Academics**

One of our unique attributes as a school is our belief in the methods of Charlotte Mason, an educator in England in the late 1800s who believed children were persons, not empty receptacles to be filled. Her belief in time outdoors, living books, narration and more resonates very well with K-6 families, but as students become older and prepare for college, we found they needed more.

- a) We are pursuing dual accreditation with CSI and SACS. We have a School Improvement Team currently working on our self-study towards that end.
- b) We hired two new junior high/high school teachers with their doctorates.

- c) We are giving every first and second year teacher a mentor and paying these mentors to meet weekly and provide guidance.
- d) We are better focusing on the needs of our gifted students through encouraging participation in Duke TIPS, a junior high book club, and a planned Challenge Academy due to start next fall for grades 5-8.
- e) We added a weekly writing workshop for our junior high and Spanish in our junior high as an alternative to band.
- f) We are planning changes to our writing curriculum K-12 this summer, looking for new books to supplement the classics we read in the intermediate grades, and replacing out-of-date or ineffective books at the high school.

### **Improving the Facility**

Our athletes have never had access to a gym on our campus before since the “gym” building was unusable with a leaky roof, a cement floor, and older lights that cost \$150 just to switch on. We decided to prioritize renovation of this gym. We also sought to improve our physical campus. Curb appeal is an issue for our school since we lease space from an old country church with a great deal of land but very old buildings. We are also almost out of classroom space. We did the following:

- a) We renovated our gym, fixing the roof, adding a French drain, putting in a new gym floor, re-installing and re-using goals and bleachers, and installing new lights. We had a pep rally in February to celebrate this major milestone in the life of our school and even hosted a home game in our “new” gym.
- b) We received a donation from a nearby Lowes for materials to build a long privacy fence this summer to hide the adjacent property (an eyesore with rusted sheds and barrels) from view.
- c) We are about to begin Phase II of our gym renovation, which includes four new high school classrooms and two new ADA-compliant bathrooms.
- d) We expanded our garden areas all over campus with fruit trees, a butterfly garden, and other areas planned by our high school permaculture class.
- e) We built a gazebo on our property, large enough for a class to use, with the help of a parent volunteer and student workers as part of a Project Management Spring Term class.

### **Encouraging a Healthy Atmosphere**

Four years ago, the high school moved to a separate campus. While it was a good move at the time, we found that we could not grow the school from that location as it was viewed as a separate entity from the lower school campus and came across as much too small. Plus we lost some of the sweet spirit of unity between families that we had when we were on a single campus. So last spring, we made the very difficult decision to move the high school back to the lower school campus, even though we were almost out of room. That big change paved the way for a greatly improved atmosphere this past year in our junior high and high school. Other things we did to address atmosphere included:

- a) We increased the “fun factor” by adding a clubs period every Tuesday morning. Clubs included Literary Magazine, Science Club, Spanish Club, Spirit Club, Worship Team, Elementary Aides, and more.
- b) We included our junior high students in our “spring term” offerings and held this special week in March instead of in May as we had done previously. For

- spring term, students could help build the gazebo, participate in a soccer clinic with the Charlotte Eagles, or go on a history adventure every day to a different location (or high school students could work on their internships).
- c) We added new after-school electives for junior high such as a career counseling elective, keyboarding, and Odyssey of the Mind.
  - d) We added permaculture and martial arts to our high school electives.
  - e) We encouraged connections between our junior high and high school through Club Protocol, ending with the Freshman Formal (8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grades)
  - f) We changed Bible to smaller, more intimate same-gender groups in both junior high and high school.
  - g) Following the advice in *Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard*, we looked for “bright spots” by awarding a weekly “Falcon Award” to a junior high and high school student who went above and beyond in some way.

## **FOCUSING ON PEOPLE: LISTENING, GIVING, AND COMMUNITY**

### **Listening and Building Relationships Within our School**

The first week in Grand Rapids with the Van Lunen Center, I was encouraged to find that many Heads of School were introverts like I am. With the help of Dave Medema’s PVA report, I began to see this less as a defect, and more as a part of who I am as a strategist and decided to run with it.

- a) We began inviting families to events we called “Java with Joy,” small group desserts or breakfasts in the homes of some of our parents (4-7 families at a time) where I could get feedback and also share vision. These meetings were highly encouraging and garnered significant positive feedback and good ideas as well. With encouragement from Zach Clark, by the end of the school year, every Arborbrook family had been invited to one of these events.
- b) In a similar vein, I held a lunch (with donuts) for each high school class over the course of two weeks and asked them what they loved about Arborbrook and what they would change if they could. It is very important to give students a voice and they appreciated being heard.
- c) We held a ten-year anniversary celebration where we honored our founding families, give parents the opportunity to tour their children’s classrooms, showed an iMovie of photos from the past ten years, entertained families via a main stage outdoors with various student groups performing, sold food from food trucks, heard from our past director and from me, and much more. All of our stakeholders and families, old and new, were invited to come.

### **Creating a Culture of Giving**

One of the first things I was encouraged to change as a result of the workshops I attended as a fellow was to re-think our fundraising efforts entirely. We had poured a lot of parent effort and time into a silent auction every year, which required a “necessary ending.” I was encouraged by many speakers to establish a culture of giving instead of a culture of fundraising.

After much prayer and thought and discussions with my Development Director Rhonda Reynolds, we came up with a strategic plan we called “Preserve-Renovate-Innovate” that we shared with families via a letter in early December. This plan called for us as a school to...

- a) **Preserve:** We set a vision for preserving what is best about our school (preserving the faith, childhood, and our Charlotte Mason roots) specifically through addressing teacher salaries (keeping our best teachers)
- b) **Renovate:** We needed \$50,000 to renovate the gym and build out new classrooms over and above the \$200,000 loan we are taking out as a school.
- c) **Innovate:** We plan to bring innovation to the junior high through a 1:1 iPad initiative next year.

We followed up with a newsletter in April that updated families on our giving and we sent both mailings to every current family and grandparent as well as other “friends of Arborbrook.” I further explained it at each of our “Java with Joy” events and as of this date, we have raised \$60,000 towards our \$100,000 goal, far more than we have ever raised in a year.

### **Expanding our Community**

Although many grandparents help pay for their grandchild’s tuition, we have not ever held an event for grandparents nor specifically welcomed them to our campus. I love to see interaction between generations, and I knew this was something we needed to address. We also knew we wanted our students to be more outward focused, with a heart to serve in the larger community.

- a) We held our first-ever Grandparents Day in October, inviting grandparents of students to come to a special brunch, tour their children’s classes, and come to a special assembly. Those who could not come could send small notes or gifts. The day was such a rousing success with grandparents visiting from near and far that we will definitely be doing it again. It increased the sense of intergenerational community that we long to have at our school, and it also had a side benefit of increasing our donor database. One of our first families to contribute a significant amount to our giving campaign was a grandparent. I am indebted to my small group at Van Lunen for this idea, and especially to Henry Contant and John Roberts, who shared excellent ideas with me.
- b) We chose a yearly outreach theme of “homelessness” and a parent outreach team planned a fall and spring drive to collect items for Bright Blessings, an organization that provides birthday parties and gifts for homeless children and uniforms for Crisis Assistance. We also held service days at both organizations where our parents and students could serve.
- c) We are working with the town of Wesley Chapel, where the school is located, to build a community garden in the local park next fall. This will be our first service project next year and will benefit the entire community.

### **ADDRESSING PUBLIC PERCEPTION: MESSAGING, SOCIAL MEDIA & THE WEB, AND PERSONAL ATTENTION**

#### **Choosing a Consistent Strategic Message**

We received wise advice from Zach Clark about changing some of our language.

- a) We created a sense of scarcity by emphasizing we had “only 16 spots” for rising freshmen. Changing our language to talk about our small size as an asset instead of a liability, we had an excellent re-enrollment response from our eighth grade, with 13 of 16 students re-enrolling in January.

- b) We began to focus on what we can do that no one else in Charlotte is doing: provide a focus on the love of learning, a real relationship with Jesus, and a greater balance between academics and the child as a whole person.
- c) We met as an administrative staff and developed a “playbook” (an idea from the book *The Advantage: Why Organizational Health Trumps Everything Else in Business*) and as a result of this we began focusing on changes to our verbiage to become more positive and strategic.

### **Using Social Media and the Web**

Having spent thousands of dollars on print and even radio advertising to little effect, we decided to spend our limited funds more strategically. Social media is by far the most cost-effective way to target information to our intended. We also knew we needed to increase traffic to our website. I was very grateful for Tom McClintock’s presentation, and as a result of his presentation, we did the following:

- a) We increased our Facebook presence through a page (rather than a private group) and more frequent postings, as well as the use of boosted ads.
- b) We updated our blog more frequently and had guests contribute to it
- c) We addressed Search Engine Optimization and began using Google Adwords.
- d) We added keywords to our website and changed page URLs to make them more searchable.
- e) We added Instagram and Pinterest accounts and updated Twitter.

### **Giving Prospective Families Personal Attention**

In Phoenix, Jim McKenzie shared the idea of offering “free educational consultations” with visitors to the campus, taking time as the Head of School to meet with prospective families. He also suggested that rather than considering what was most efficient (for example putting ALL of our information online), we needed to consider what was most effective (trying to get people to actually visit our campus). This was a new thought to me and we began implementing this right away.

- a) We added two late spring open houses and made one of these more intimate to better reflect the size of the group
- b) We began offering scholarships to fill spots in classes with room
- c) I began meeting one-on-one with interested families when they come to visit.

### **Results and Conclusion**

In many ways, enrollment is something we have little direct control over. However, everything we do to improve our school gets us one step closer to a higher enrollment and more satisfied families. Bruce Hekman and other Van Lunen faculty and consultants were so encouraging, and I have been inspired to think in new ways. As a result of our efforts and by the grace of God, we currently have a full rising freshman class, 9% growth in our high school next year thus far, an improved atmosphere (reportedly anecdotally and in survey data), a sense of momentum and excitement about the new gym and the things happening on our campus, new families visiting every day finding us through word of mouth and through the web, and \$60,000 towards teacher raises, our gym renovation, and iPads for next year. We are beginning to see the beginnings of an increased harvest of young people in our high school, excited about what the Lord is doing in their lives, engaged in their own learning, and preparing for the future.