

The Van Lunen Center 2007-08
Project Outcome

Regionalization

Since 2003, several Christian schools in Connecticut approached Christian Heritage School to ask the Board of Directors to consider a partnership with or a take over of their school. We have also witnessed the closing of several Christian schools in New England (and there were not that many to begin with). From our removed perspective many of these schools struggled and possibly eventually closed due to low enrollment, poor leadership, and/or insufficient funding (tuition revenue and development dollars). As these schools approached us we collectively wondered about the state of Christian education in Connecticut as well as New England, and specifically about our role as a leading and larger school. Our Board is determined to move prudently as we consider what regionalization may look like and what the role of Christian Heritage would be. The goal of the project for the Van Lunen Center was to examine and define regionalization, consider incremental steps, and plan for the future.

As the year progressed I and members of the Board of Directors had several productive discussions regarding regionalization. We began to formalize a process of examination and investigation of potential schools to partner with. I had numerous meetings with school leaders from our area about ways to cooperate and work together. Specific results include a document created and approved by our board to utilize as a filter when looking at regionalization options. CHS has entered an agreement with one local school to take their high school students into our program. We continue to work with another school on ways to share the burden of compensation benefits for employees as well as ways to partner academically. We have begun earnest discussions with a third school regarding CHS assuming their students into our program and having another campus as part of our school.

**Submitted by Barry Giller, Headmaster
Christian Heritage School
Trumbull, CT**

Project Focus:

The focus of this project became clear as I along with the Board of Directors at Christian Heritage School surveyed the landscape of Christian education in New England. We became alarmed as we witnessed the struggle and more drastically the closing of several like-minded schools in our immediate region. As these schools contemplated their future many of them reached out to CHS and we were not adequately prepared on how to help or even facilitate a conversation on what that assistance may look like. We believe that as God has blessed CHS with stability and success it is our duty to support the entire entity of Christian education. We want to assist these schools, but we will do so only in a manner that does not sacrifice our mission, the families we serve, our faculty, and our resources.

New England is a unique region when considering Christian schooling and its role in the marketplace. Historically, the public school systems in the six states of New England have enjoyed strong academic reputations. Many of the strongest independent boarding schools reside in the region, and the private college preparatory schools are well endowed and established. Evangelical Christianity is not growing in the Northeast while in the US only the Pacific Northwest can 'rival' New England for the lack of influence of the Church. Specifically Fairfield county (where CHS is located) as well as New Haven County are extremely expensive areas to live and the cost of living is often prohibitive for young families. These factors lead to a lack of Christian schools of significance throughout the region. For example, in Connecticut only one school boasts of an enrollment of over 500 students. The Christian schools of our region struggle to compete with public schools and independent schools, and then further struggle on how to set tuitions that are 'affordable' for the Christian community.

These trends and the focus of this project thus beg numerous questions- how can we work together for the betterment of Christian education throughout the region? If regionalization is necessary, what role then would our school play? How can schools that are historically and adamantly independent agree to cooperate? Is regionalization a luxury or a necessity?

Project Methods/Process:

Throughout the course of the year, several steps were taken to investigate what regionalization may look like in our region and in particular Southern Connecticut. These included:

- Numerous formal and informal meetings with the leaders of the local Christian schools in our region

- Study of other regionalization efforts and a discussion with those involved, specifically one currently being discussed in New Hampshire
- Study of school systems in other parts of the country
- Meetings with Dr. Alan Graustein, Regional Director of ACSI for New England, and Dr. Alan Pue, President of the Barnabas Group and Christian school consultant
- Reading of relevant journals and books

Project Results:

Our school's study of regionalization coupled with my discussions with the aforementioned consultants and school leaders has led to several tangible results or ongoing processes, including:

- Living Word Christian Academy (West Haven, CT) decided to close its high school. Their sponsoring church and our school reached an equitable agreement on how to transfer their current high school students to CHS and provide financial support for their families since the tuition at CHS is more than double that of LWCA.
- CHS and The Masters School (West Simsbury, CT) have begun discussions on how to work together regarding providing compensation benefits to faculty members and employees. The two schools have also entertained discussions on what regionalization may look like despite a distance of 70 miles between the schools. The two boards and the schools' headmasters have held numerous discussions regarding cooperation and the future of funding for Christian education in Connecticut.
- I have assisted two schools in Connecticut on their search for new school leaders. As we discuss regionalization their leadership teams felt that it was important to have the insight of another local school administrator as their search ensued.
- CHS received a request from Grace Christian School (Stamford, CT) to consider consolidating them into our school. We continue to prayerfully consider how to prudently move forward with this particular conversation.
- We created a Due Diligence Tool (see attached) that will enable and facilitate a discussion at the Board and Senior Staff levels as we consider regionalization/expansion options and/or efforts.

Analysis:

I am passionate about the mission of Christian education in New England, though I have grave concerns regarding its future. As a member of the regional council of ACSI, I am discouraged that each of our meetings begins with reports of schools struggling for survival. Following the work on this project I am convinced that we need to begin to cooperate in some manner to fortify our collective future. We have been inherently independent and we must explore the many ways that regionalization can benefit our efforts. Too often school leaders isolate themselves and spend time re-inventing the wheel that is already being utilized by another neighboring school. I am encouraged by the discussions now being entertained in both Connecticut and New Hampshire regarding regionalization. The economics of Christian schools need to be re-examined as well as the definition of what is affordable for Christian families. We also need to spend time studying what the successful independent schools are doing. We should not copy their curriculum and ideology, but we can learn from their business practices.

Christian Heritage has collectively learned that we should approach each regionalization opportunity that is presenting itself prudently, cautiously, and prayerfully.

Christian Heritage School Expansion –Due Diligence Tool

Definition:

A leadership tool for Christian Heritage School’s Board and Administrative team to guide preliminary due diligence work in the assessment of potential school expansion opportunities. Expansion opportunities might include, but are not limited to, requests for CHS to acquire/assume leadership of another school or assist in the start up of a new school. The purpose of this tool is to provide a quick and early assessment of the readiness position of CHS proposed entity.

Proposed Procedures:

Step I: Project Definition

1. Proposed Entity
2. Expansion Opportunity: (ex: acquisition, take-over, start-up)
3. Background Information
4. Due Diligence Team Members
5. Due Diligence Schedule (2-3 weeks)
6. Key Contact Information
7. Communication Considerations – Entities, Boards, CHS Community, External

Step II: CHS Readiness Assessment

1. Leadership Readiness
 - Is there leadership/administrative capacity to initiate an expansion project
 - Is leadership in transition or settled
2. Financial Readiness
 - Financial stability of CHS
 - Availability of Capital
3. Cultural/Spiritual Readiness
 - CHS Community Openness/Readiness for Change
4. Strategic Assessment
 - How does opportunity align with our strategic plan?
 - How will opportunity impact continued execution of CHS mission?

Step III: Entity Assessment

1. Overall Needs Assessment
 - Issues/challenges leading to this opportunity
 - Past proposed solutions, results, reasons
2. Leadership Assessment

- School Administration Evaluation
- Board of Director Evaluation
- 3. Financial Assessment
 - High-level Financial Analysis
- 4. Cultural / Spiritual Assessment
 - Alignment with CHS' Statement of Faith, Mission, Purpose, & Core Values

Step IV: Recommendation

1. Proceed with detailed Due Diligence OR
2. Terminate assessment