



**A Narrative Case Study:
Glenmore Christian Academy
From Public to Private**

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Glenmore Christian Academy (GCA) opened as a private Christian school in 1980. This was merely the beginning of the fulfillment of the vision that Dr. Wendell K. Grout had for a school in Calgary that focused on delivering an excellent academic program integrated with Biblical truths. The history of GCA is filled with many amazing moments and it is evident that the school has been blessed through the years. The school operates today in a beautiful facility and is blessed to be continuing to grow its student body, thereby providing a unique school experience to nearly 800 students (ECS - Grade 9).

In 2008, GCA went through a major transition as the GCA Educational Society entered into an agreement with a public school division. As a Faith-Based Alternative Public school, the public school board was responsible for overseeing and managing the academics at the school, including hiring and paying the teaching staff. The Society's role within this new model was to oversee the spiritual aspects of the school, in addition to managing the operations of the society-owned building. In the spirit of the agreement, the two bodies would work together to ensure the students received a Biblically based educational experience, just as Pastor Grout envisioned in the early 1980's. Additionally, the two organizations would benefit financially considering the government would fully fund the students attending the public school program. The additional funds would enable the public school division to expand their programs being offered to all the schools in their division, These funds would also allow the Society to collect fees from parents in order to assist with the non-academic programming, as well as the operation and maintenance of the school building.

Following five years of working together in this agreement, the GCA Board of Directors began a review of the master agreement with the school division. The review included surveys to staff and parents, a town hall meeting, round-table discussions with parents, and discussions with the executives and trustees from the school division. Upon compiling this information, the Board of Directors completed a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis. From that analysis, it was determined that the relationship with the public school division was no longer in line with the goals and plans for the future of the school. Most importantly, it was recognized that the influence of three bodies (GCA Society, public school board and the teacher's union) over the teachers at times created confusion of loyalties, responsibilities and implementation of future visioning and planning for the school.

After generating ideas for the school, a 5-year strategic plan was created by the directors in order to ensure the Board remained focused on developing an exit strategy, as well as an effective transition back to private status that would ensure sustainability for future families. It was a two-tiered plan with goals running parallel to one another. The most apparent hurdle in place for this strategic plan was the reduced government funding for private schools, so budget projections were developed and ideas were generated for developing additional non-tuition based revenues for sustaining the school in the future. While working through financial models, research was completed regarding the process for leaving a public school division and for re-gaining private status. Since the Alberta School Act and the Private Schools Regulation does not contemplate a public school becoming a private school, and

there was record of only one school to have previously completed this process, there was a great deal of information to be discovered. As information was gathered, all questions and potential hurdles were satisfied, except for the financial model. The financial models included so many unknown or uncontrolled variables. The most concerning variable was the discovery that the Ministry of Education could choose to withhold student funding from a private school operating in its first year. Not knowing if funding would be provided to GCA during the first year created two very different projections for the future. The Board of Directors decided that the creation of two financial projections, in order to understand the best and worst-case scenarios in light of the major transition, would be very important. Along with each financial projection, a series of contingencies for revenue development and expense reduction was included. The most important of the contingencies included the requirement to secure financing from our bank to provide for the loss of funding should it be required. Additionally, a decision to expand the student base, as well as developing other non-tuition based revenues, would assist with ensuring a stronger position for the future of the school. Following the development of financial models that were satisfactory in both scenarios, the decision was unanimously made to terminate the agreement with the school division one-year sooner than anticipated.

Once the termination notice was provided, managing the transition of the operating school authority became the focus. This was an intense time at the school and included managing the emotional responses to the change, the practical requirements of managing change as well as the continued management of the day-to-day operation of the school. The learning curve

was steep during this time. The following lists some of what we learned through this process this year:

- What may be popular, or the trend of the time, may not be what is best in the long term for the organization. As more and more private schools in Alberta migrate toward the alternative public option, our rationale for going against the trend is often questioned or misunderstood.
- Making a decision that is focused on the long-term goals of the school, and thinking outside of the existing families, can be challenging and difficult to express. Most families are rightly focused on the immediate needs of their children, but the Board of Directors need to continue to focus on sustainability for future generations of students.
- Standing firm and always referring to the school's vision, clearly stating that vision, and reminding all stakeholders that the decisions being made are for those reasons is imperative. Michael Fullan, in his book, quotes De Gues who noted that, "long-lived companies (those lasting more than fifty years) had a strong sense of purpose and were adaptive to their environments without compromising core ideals." (p.26)
- Provide a safe place for people to express their ideas and concerns. Through this transition, there have been many emotional responses. By providing opportunities for parents and teachers to discuss concerns one on one or in a small group setting was imperative.

Though we do not fully understand the long-term impact this decision will have on the school, we have noticed some short-term differences already in anticipation of this change:

- Experiencing the lowest attrition rate in family registration than has occurred over the past 3-4 years, despite the major transition ahead. Additionally, we have been able to fill the newly expanded ECS and grade 1 class. The additional grade 2 class is nearly full.
- The relationship with our founding church is being developed and the two bodies are working at re-aligning.
- There is a growing sense of excitement for the fall. Parents and teachers are excited about what this transition may bring, and are beginning to generate ideas for the school. This generation of creative ideas is healthy for the school.

Some expected long-term differences this decision should have on the school include:

- Focusing on developing a business model that will help provide non-tuition based revenue for the school. This is keeping in line with Pastor Grout's vision of keeping tuitions at a level that is affordable to as many families as possible.
- Expansion to include a High School. The revenue model for a high school is inherently different than ECS-Grade 9, and the approach to partnerships, programming and offerings to the families in Calgary is expected to be unique.

As Glenmore Christian Academy transitions from the public school model back to private, the importance of keeping the mission, vision and mandate in focus will be imperative to the future success of the school. Much like we are trying to teach our children to problem solve with ingenuity, creativity and an open mind, our current, and future school leaders, need to approach planning for the future of our school with the same in mind.