

Advancement

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School

Saint Simons Christian School is an independent Christian school serving families of Glynn County, Georgia. Enrollment for 2010-11 was 84 students. The school just completed its 17th year. Originally founded as The Whitefield School by Golden Isles Presbyterian Church, the school became independent in the spring of 2007. This sparked a series of changes. In 2008, I started serving as Headmaster. In 2009, we moved to a new location and changed our school name to Saint Simons Christian School.

The school needed to become an independent organization because of financial challenges of the sponsor church. Church membership and school enrollment had dropped significantly. As with most church sponsored schools, our school did as well or as poorly as the church.



Project

God has entrusted us with our school. Faithfully accomplishing our mission of providing an excellent, Christ centered education for families of Glynn County, requires many components: excellent teachers, quality curriculum, faithfulness to our Christian values, and much more. But, at this time, our school's greatest need centers on improving our financial health. This requires us to increase tuition income and increase donations.

Advancement typically focuses on three areas within a school: financial development, marketing, and alumni relations. My project focused on the first two aspects. I sought to advance Saint Simons Christian School through financial development and enrollment growth.

For financial development, I aimed to raise \$185,000 through contributions through the Georgia State Income Tax Credit Program, mailing solicitation, and church support.

For enrollment growth, I sought to achieve 15% enrollment increase for 2010-11 and again for 2011-12.

Project Methods and Actions

For financial development, I focused on the Georgia State Income Tax Program, mail solicitation, and church support.

Tax Credit Program

In 2008 the State of Georgia established a wonderful program that gives tax incentives for contributions to private schools in Georgia. A couple can give up to \$2500 each year and a single can give up to \$1000 each year and receive a dollar-for-dollar credit on their state income taxes.

We learned of the program in late 2009, and we quickly began promoting the program. In 2010 we knew we had an ideal opportunity to raise a significant amount of money for the school at literally no cost to donors.

I hired a Financial Development Assistant, Kelly Williams, and began working closely with her to identify donors, promote the program, and bring in contributions. We created marketing materials, held six informational meetings, sought to cultivate word of mouth marketing, sent e-mails through Constant Contact, and sent out mailings.

Kelly and I met each week for about an hour to review progress from the week, strategize ways to identify new donors, and plan ahead for the next month. These valuable meetings helped me identify a comprehensive vision for starting an advancement office at Saint Simons Christian School at some point in the near future.

In early April Kelly informed me she had taken a higher paying job at a local law firm. Although I was not surprised by this development, it did set back our efforts somewhat. After reviewing my staffing options, I decided to hire an administrative assistant for myself and all of my projects as Headmaster. I would then take on the responsibilities of promoting the tax credit program. I am still settling into this role, but so far I believe it is going well.

Mail Solicitation

In October Don Distelberg provided me a template for a Christmas letter. This enabled me to quickly complete the letter and concentrate my efforts on updating our database to ensure the right people received the mailing and our request for an end-of-year contribution. In the end, the mailing brought in \$12,100 in donations.

For 2011-12, I have set as a goal to have both an end-of-year Christmas mailing in December and an end-of-fiscal year mailing in May.

Church Sponsorships

I also identified two churches to ask about financially supporting the school. One School Board member, who serves at one church, asked the church's finance committee for support, and they ended up giving \$1000. For the other church, I spoke to a school dad who serves on the financial committee. I learned they did not have funds to give due to their own financial challenges. (They are still extremely supportive in non-financial ways.)

For 2011-12, I plan to reach out to eight total churches in the area with the hope that five will give financial support to the school.

Project Results

Financial

As of June 15, 2011, we raised \$118,886.

- Georgia Tax Credit Program: \$105,786
- End-of-Year Mailing: \$12,100
- Church support: \$1,000

Enrollment

In 2009-10 we had 7.3 students per classroom. In 2010-11 we saw a 31.5% increase to 9.3 students per classroom. Yet for 2011-12 we have seen a decrease of 6% to 8.75 students per classroom. This is as of June 30, 2011, and we hope to see an increase before school starts on August 17.



Reflections on the Overall Project and Lessons Learned

Successes

- Over \$105,000 in contributions through the tax credit program greatly enhanced our budget. This program has significant potential.
- Donations through the end-of-year mail solicitation more than doubled our projections.
- We gained a better understanding of how advancement unifies marketing, financial development, and alumni relations. My school tended to view marketing and financial

development as separate tasks, but now we understand how they complement each other.

What We Learned

- The tax credit program was a harder sell than we initially anticipated. Many people do not understand their taxes, and many think this program is too good to be true.
- We need a comprehensive and formal advancement plan. (I have already created a draft of a plan for 2011-12.)
- Additional elements of advancement need to be added: 1) pursuing major donors, 2) pursuing planned giving and bequests, and 3) reconnecting with alumni and alumni parents.
- We need a more active advancement task force. (I have identified potential members for 2011-12, and I plan to finalize the task force this summer.)

Challenges

- The current economic challenges have hit area churches pretty hard. Our school needs to continue to cultivate relationships with local churches to market the school and to seek financial support.
- Having my Financial Development Assistant leave in early April slowed down contributions, but this is a normal part of any organization. In the end I am happy with our new arrangement of roles, but the situation reminded me of the costs of staffing changes.
- I wear many hats as CEO of the school. At times other roles limited my involvement in advancement.

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