

A Strategic Plan for The King's Academy

Seymour, Tennessee

Harrison-Chilhowee Baptist Academy struggled with low enrollment for decades before acquiring a new identity—The King's Academy—in 1993. Fifteen years of steady, sustained growth, along with the accompanying challenges, have followed. Financial constraints prevented new construction, but an old public school building accommodated the expansion up to 2007. With all academy buildings aging, the academy needed a strategic plan for modernization and to accommodate ongoing growth.

With the participation of trustees, parents, students, faculty, staff and community leaders, the academy's mission statement was reviewed and affirmed, institutional core values were identified, and a comprehensive strategic plan was developed addressing four primary areas:

- I. Facilities: Renovations and New Construction
- II. Finances: Management and Development
- III. Faculty: Recruitment, Retention and Development
- IV. Focus: Developing and Maintaining a Biblical World View in all Areas of Academy Life

Walter Grubb, Headmaster
The King's Academy
202 Smothers Road
Seymour, TN 37865



PROJECT FOCUS

As a boarding/day school that has endured one hundred twenty-eight years, The King's Academy has a remarkable story. Several similar mountain schools and church schools have completed their usefulness and faded into history. However, due perhaps to the resilience of East Tennessee farmers and the faith of supportive church leaders, the academy has operated continuously on the same site since the school was organized in the spring of 1880.

Ties with local Baptist churches became a natural relationship in the school's early days. Affiliation was extended by the Southern Baptist Convention's Home Mission Board in the early 1900's, and, in 1932, the academy became an official member of the Tennessee Baptist Convention family. Today, the convention's 3,000 churches elect the academy's 21-member Board of Trustees and provide approximately 13% of the academy's annual operating budget through its Cooperative Program.

The academy's relationship with its sponsoring convention of churches has not always been positive. Criticisms of small enrollments and of high costs per student have led to periodic confrontations and challenges. Due to its perceived "drain" on funds, serious convention efforts to terminate its relationship with the academy occurred in 1959, in the 1970's and in 1992.

A tightening of academy operations in the mid-1990's led to a renewed focus. Enrollment began to climb and old facilities were renovated. The relationship with the convention began to warm as confidence grew.

Following several consecutive years of enrollment growth, convention relations were the strongest in history. However, new challenges emerged. Academy facilities were being pushed to their limits. Decisions had to be made about how to use the school's 67-acre campus to accommodate future expansion. As the academy struggled to shift from surviving to thriving mode, questions not before asked had to be answered:

- How large (or small) does the academy want to be?
- What are the most important *new* facilities needed? What are the priorities? What needs to be built first?

- How can trustees, alumni, and local leaders be motivated to support unprecedented expansion?
- What programs need to be added? ...deleted or changed?

With the endorsement and support of the Board of Trustees, the academy engaged in the strategic planning process to answer those questions as well as others. The focus of the strategic planning process was to provide guidance and direction for the decision-making that needs to occur today and in the next ten years of academy life.

PROJECT PROCESS

In late July 2007, the academy's Board of Trustees voted unanimously to engage in the strategic planning process. There had been several conversations about planning for the future in prior meetings of the Board. One board committee initiated preliminary work on a campus master plan. The administrative team had also talked much about the need for careful planning. However, definitive affirmation of this process was needed at the Board level before proceeding with a planning model. That vote established that affirmation.



A mountaintop retreat for trustees and senior administrative personnel seemed to be a good place to start the strategic planning process. The Smoky Mountain log cabin resort facilities of Brothers Cove, whose owner is a parent affiliated with the academy, were reserved.

The retreat was held September 24-25, 2007. Lodging was provided for all in luxury log cabins. The setting was peaceful and inspiring, and the academy's food service staff prepared excellent meals throughout the event. Spouses were encouraged to attend, and alternative activities were planned for them during the work sessions.

To facilitate the work sessions, Dr. Bob Agee, President Emeritus of Oklahoma Baptist University, and his associate, Larry Stewart, were selected. The two of them have facilitated strategic planning programs and consulted with numerous churches, schools, colleges, and other non-profits around the world on capital campaigns and in matters of trusteeship and governance.

Following his retirement from OBU, Dr. Agee returned to live in Jackson, Tennessee. He has become quite active in Tennessee Baptist Convention life, and thus was already very familiar with the academy.

Dr. Agee uses a strategic model that he has personally developed. He has a very good understanding of Baptist polity and the unique relationships between Baptist churches and their educational institutions. As a school that is sponsored our state Baptist convention, our school benefited from his experience and expertise.

By request, Dr. Agee spent the first sessions (Monday evening) talking about governance issues and the role of trustees. The second day was focused on the strategic process.



Dr. Agee's model incorporates the following steps:

- (1) Evaluation of Statement of Mission and Purpose. The Board carefully reviewed the academy's mission statement that had been developed and adopted by the Board in October 2002. The Mission Statement was affirmed with no changes.
- (2) Development of a Vision Statement. In the interest of time, we did not spend much time on this point, with the intent of working on it more later.
- (3) Core Values. In small groups, sample values were identified. They were then discussed by the whole group.
- (4) Needs Analysis. The small groups listed five most important external needs in the world the academy should address in the future. The groups then listed the five most important needs within the academy that should be addressed.
- (5) Strengths. The academy's strengths were identified and discussed.
- (6) Weaknesses. The academy's "soft points" were identified and discussed.
- (7) Opportunities. The groups listed opportunities for expansion of services or improvement of performance.
- (8) Threats. The groups identified obstacles that must be overcome for the academy to achieve and grow.

Although the retreat schedule was a bit rushed, the program was perceived to be hugely successful in (1) building relationships among the trustees, (2) raising trustee awareness of their governance and fund raising roles, and (3) jump starting the strategic planning process.

One concern regarding the retreat was the fact that not every trustee attended. In the days following the retreat, evidence of involvement and ownership in the strategic process tended to wane. In spite of some very strong statements by Dr. Agee and Mr. Stewart, some trustees continued to appear to be comfortable as “observers” of the process.

Following the retreat, the administrative team began to prepare academy faculty, staff and parents for their roles in the strategic planning process. The board action was announced and the rest of the academy family was told that their participation was important and necessary.

Eleven focus groups were conducted in December and January. These meetings were designed to elicit responses to the same questions that were addressed at the Board retreat. The following groups were all invited and encouraged to attend focus groups designed particularly for them.

- (1) Faculty, Grades K-8
- (2) Faculty, Grades 9-12
- (3) Support Staff
- (4) Parents of Elementary Students
- (5) Parents of Middle School Students
- (6) Parents of High School Students.
- (7) Student Leaders

To make sure every member of the academy family was encouraged to have input into the strategic planning process, questionnaires were mailed to every employee and every parent encouraging them to complete a questionnaire if they could not attend a focus group. With so many TKA boarding students from overseas, a special questionnaire was designed for international parents and emailed it to them with a personal note. Finally, questionnaires were mailed with cover letters to selected community leaders.

The sessions for employees were stimulating and very productive. Of course, they were pretty much a captive audience. Attendance at the parent focus groups was disappointing. The quality of the input from those who attended was high, but the number of people attending was low. The timing of the meetings (mostly in December) was probably a negative factor.

A Strategic Process Steering Committee was formed to pull all the data together and generate a strategic plan draft for submission to the Board of Trustees. This committee of fourteen consisted of:

- Headmaster, as Chair/Facilitator
- Board Chair
- 3 Additional Trustees (Executive Committee Members)
- Upper School Head
- K-8 Principal
- 3 Teachers
- 1 Parent of Boarding Students
- 1 Alumnus and Parent of Day Students

1 Parent of Elementary Students

1 Parent of Elementary, Middle and Upper School Students



The Strategic Process Steering Committee met numerous times throughout the winter and early spring. All the data collected from the focus groups and surveys was provided to the committee members in a ring binder. Additionally, members received statistical reports, enrollment data, attrition/retention studies, boarding trends, financial records and fund raising data. The committee went on an extensive tour of the campus facilities and grounds.

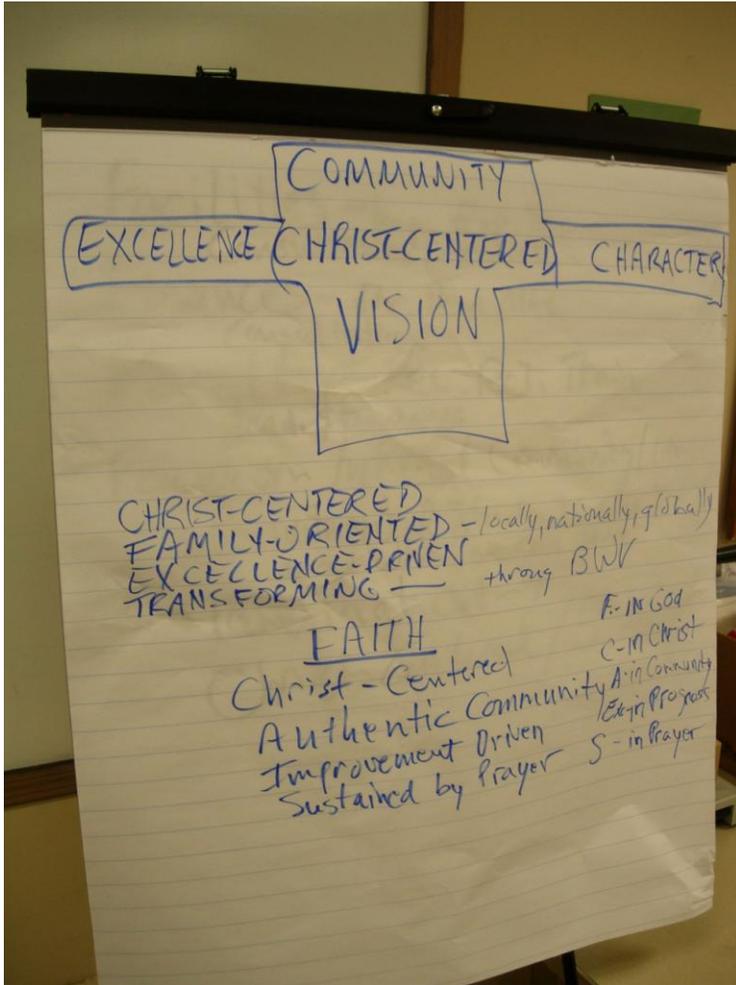
The committee members were divided into subcommittees in which they analyzed and discussed the data collected.

Institutional Core Values seemed to generate the most interest and enthusiasm in the group. However, the SWOT Analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) and Needs Analysis (Internal and External) data were thoroughly mined. Given the committee's thorough exposure to the breadth and depth of this information, the member's efforts were then focused on organizing and prioritizing the data.

Soon, the committee was identifying the major goal areas reflective of the information gathered. Four major themes emerged:

- (1) Facilities. Good stewardship calls for maximizing the use of existing facilities. However, new facilities are needed to accommodate growing enrollment and expanding programs.
- (2) Finances. Money has always been an issue for the academy, and will probably continue to be a concern. The academy must maximize every dollar, and seek additional and/or alternative sources of funding.

- (3) Faculty. Good teachers, dorm parents, administrators and coaches are very important in the success of any school. The academy must make every effort to recruit top quality faculty and to retain them.
- (4) Focus. The academy's uniqueness is related to its Christian mission. Every effort must be made to be pervasively Christian in every academy program. A biblical world view must permeate all that is done.



The committee added specific goals to these four main areas and submitted a nine-page strategic plan draft in the quarterly meeting of the Board of Trustees April 22, 2008, where it was unanimously approved.

Following the board meeting, a period of time was allowed for comments and feedback. At the conclusion of that time the committee met again to consider some of the facilities priorities within the plan.

PROJECT RESULTS

The most evident result of the project was the production of a comprehensive strategic plan for the academy. It is rightfully viewed as a dynamic document, subject to change and adaptation as circumstances may vary.

The academy's Mission Statement, adopted in October 2002, was reviewed and affirmed verbatim:

The King's Academy is a Christ-centered day and boarding school reaching local, national and international students of all socioeconomic backgrounds, educating and preparing them academically, emotionally, physically, socially and spiritually for the twenty-first century.

A very significant part of the strategic planning process was the identification of the academy's core values. They are:

Christ-Centered in Vision

Christ-Centered in Character

Christ-Centered in Community

Christ-Centered in Excellence

On a Foundation of Christ-Centered Faith

Each of these categories represents additional values. For example, to be Christ-centered in character means people will act with integrity, compassion, etc.

The King's Academy's Strategic Plan is a very ambitious document. The price tag for the buildings that are called for in the academy's future is in the tens of millions of dollars. While such a venture can be intimidating, the academy finally has a road map to give focus to its work.

ANALYSIS AND COMMENTARY

Although I had originally intended for my project to be the development of a campus master plan for my school, it became evident during the early Van Lunen Fellowship meetings that our campus master plan would need to be preceded by a comprehensive strategic planning process.

To my knowledge, our school had never engaged in a systematic strategic planning process. It had also been twenty-five years since our school was been involved in a capital campaign. Thus, the strategic planning process became the focus of my 2007-2008 Van Lunen Fellow Project.

What we now have is a document that will aid us internally in program direction and budgeting. It will help us in the community as a communication piece with our friends and neighbors. It will help us with potential donors as it reflects serious thought and communicates an organized community poised for the future.

I am confident the strategic planning *process* will prove to be as valuable as the strategic planning *document*. Engaging the various academy publics in the thorough evaluation of academy programs and facilities and involving them in a study of academy strengths, weaknesses, etc., will, I trust, generate a greater sense of ownership among them all.

It became evident in the process that our school has many strengths that are often taken for granted in the course of day-to-day activities.

As with any process in which large groups of people are involved, it helps to do a lot of talking when engaging in the strategic process. People must be brought "on board" with the process, and that may take some longer than others to grasp what is going on.

And while all that talking is going on, it helps to have independent consultation available to give direction to the process and keep things moving. A lot of time can be

wasted if the process gets off track. A final reason to involve consultants is that an objective third party can move things along when the going gets tough.

I am grateful for the Van Lunen Fellows program for the stimulus it has provided me in moving my school to the next level. While we may not be “there” yet, I believe I have new tools to help get us there. This was a new venture for me, and I have therefore relied heavily on the information received from the excellent Van Lunen Fellows training.

I am thankful for the support, encouragement and expert consultation provide by Kiki Johnson, Vice President and Senior Consultant, Carney, Sandloe and Associates, Boston, Massachusetts. From the beginning, I found Kiki to be very knowledgeable and experienced in strategic matters. She has been very available and responsive. I had several conversations with her, and we exchanged numerous email messages.

Special thanks go to Jim Marsh, my Van Lunen faculty mentor. His gift of encouragement is infectious. I know it isn't easy, but He makes it look easy.

I will forever be indebted to Yvonne Ferwerda of the Van Lunen Center staff for her inspiration of organization, and to Shirley Roels, Van Lunen Center Director, who is the visionary driving force without whom none of this would have happened. Shirley inspires me and my fellow Van Lunen Fellows to be superlative as Christians in our professional and personal lives.

Finally, I am grateful to my Board of Trustees for allowing me to participate in the Van Lunen Fellowship program, my administrative team who picked up the load in my occasional absence, and the rest of The King's Academy family for making our school the unique home that it is.

Thank you, all. I have learned much from each of you.

