

The Pursuit of Christian School Sustainability

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WESTMINSTER
CHRISTIAN SCHOOL

Background

Westminster Christian School opened its doors in 1978 with 25 students in prekindergarten, kindergarten and first grade. With only two teachers, Westminster began its Kingdom work in Christian schooling. The impact of Westminster began to steadily grow. In time God led the school board to expand the school to include middle and upper grades. In 1996 Westminster Christian School rejoiced in God's goodness as it celebrated its first graduating class. Over the past 20 years, Westminster has continued to expand its athletic, arts, and academic programs while extending its ministry to more and more families. Today Westminster serves students representing a broad socioeconomic and ethnic diversity coming from over 80 different evangelical churches in the greater Fox Valley area.

As of June 2014 I was appointed to be Westminster's new head of school. It is my joy and privilege to serve this school community. Undeniably, God has sustained this school and there are many blessings to count. Yet, as with any Christian school, significant challenges exist at Westminster that must be confronted boldly, and chief among them are the questions surrounding the financial sustainability of the school.

What Did I Do?

Confronting the issue of financial sustainability within a school requires action on multiple fronts. As with many important issues, the challenges are interwoven and impacted in many areas of the school organization. My priorities, and the substance of this project, centered around challenges related to tuition, advancement, admissions, and our educational programs. Before tackling any big challenge as the new head of school, I determined that it was critical to establish some overarching leadership priorities that would guide my decision-making. It was important to develop a clear baseline, or standard, that others could reference to understand any initiative or idea that I promoted and/or implemented. These three priorities are listed on every Administrative Team meeting agenda, and I refer to these principles consistently in my work with

the Board and with our school families.

<p>Westminster Christian School's leadership team will...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Foster learning at the highest level possible◆ Strive to be better than we once were in every facet of school life◆ Utilize every opportunity internally and externally to share and advance the mission of the school. (i.e. Nurturing Intellect and Faith)
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This framework provided the necessary touchpoints to evaluate, assess, and communicate transparently and freely with the board, administrators, teachers, and families.

During the first semester at Westminster I committed to listening well, affirming often, and asking as gently and strategically as possible, “Why is [insert topic] done or structured this way?” This process seemed to provide safety for my new colleagues to speak freely and grow in their trust of me. Additionally, it allowed them a little time to acclimate to and wade into some unfamiliar waters.

At the end of that first semester, I provided a “What if...” presentation to the school board. Based upon what I had observed and learned in that first semester and drawing upon past experiences and knowledge of other schools, I sought to inspire the Board with a greater vision of the impact Westminster might have in the lives of the students, families, and greater Fox Valley community. It was important to supply the board with a taste of what could be, by God's grace.

It was not long after that when I shared with the Board a list of risk indicators. Evidence suggested Westminster was teetering on a precarious point in its history. Some of those indicators were:

- 1) Need for educational vision and direction: Four years prior to my arrival, one of Westminster's board members stepped into the vacant head of school position. As a tremendously successful businessman, he ably led the school for two years and into a position of no debt. During the third year he stepped down to return to his business. His replacement only remained Head of School for that year. That fourth year Westminster functioned without a head of school. This time of transition resulted in Westminster merely holding form and not showing evidence of significant forward movement.
- 2) Enrollment decline: After an enrollment plateau for several years, Westminster has been experiencing a decline in enrollment in the past 2-3 years. I believe a school that is not moving forward is, in fact, moving backward. Westminster's enrollment numbers seemed to bearing this out.
- 3) The financial balance was precarious: By God's grace, Westminster had no debt and was able balance its budget. This is a blessing most schools do not currently enjoy. Yet, recent indicators (including enrollment numbers) suggested more challenges were on the horizon.

- a. \$275,000 to \$300,000 was given away annually for tuition assistance prior to the school year. This is money given away in hopes that it will be raised during the school year.
 - b. Years of data suggested Westminster had not developed a robust list of giving partners.
 - c. Tuition was set to cover only 75% of the cost to educate a child.
 - d. Westminster's financial health was based, in part, on a large and expansive fee-based model for all things beyond the basic educational program. Educational costs to parents were much greater than the published tuition costs. This has been a point of frustration to many families.
 - e. Over the years Westminster had fostered a culture of discount and affordability. Meanwhile, the impact of its mission was devalued and diminished. Cost, not value, became the critical factor in decision-making.
- 4) Lack of identity: Westminster has operated at a subsistence level. Though out of debt, there is little to nothing left over in the budget to pursue innovation, growth, or improvement. I believe this is palpably felt within the community. There is a lack of a compelling identity of Westminster Christian School.
- a. This can be best symbolized by the fact that when I arrived, no noticeable school sign on the building and no distinguishing markers identified the school. Only a small sign below the church marquee/sign by the side of the road indicated our hidden gem. In my first semester, I made sure to re-brand our letterhead with a new logo and purchase a large backlit sign with logo installed on our tallest building to be seen by two very busy streets nearby.

Thankfully, the school board understood the issues before us. It was clear that a great deal of work needed to be done in a number of areas. Yet, the board agreed with me that the most obvious first step needed to be centered around the true cost of education. We could no longer allow tuition levels to so heavily underfund the work. A Vision Committee was put together to dig deep into potential changes surrounding tuition, fees, discounts, and tuition assistance.

It is at this juncture that I was blessed to learn from the leaders, advisors, and consultants within the Van Lunen program. One of the first sessions I attended dealt with the new economy facing Christian schools today. In particular I was struck by the need to deal honestly with the cost of education. It was the spark and clarity I needed to help lead the Vision Committee. Each subsequent session crystalized the need to establish and communicate exceptional 'value' within our school's educational experience. These sessions affirmed the need to address more than just the financial data to pursue measures that would strengthen the sustainability of the school. New

advancement efforts, admissions strategies, and curricular improvements would need to be undertaken while at the same time addressing issues surrounding the real cost of education. Upon returning from my first summer session at Van Lunen, the Vision Committee and I met to begin the formulation of a multi-year plan to generate increased financial health and capacity.

Tuition: Addressing the Real Cost of Education

It became quickly apparent a critical first step to take was to increase tuition income and do it in such a way our community would understand and value.

The following decisions of this committee were made:

- 1) Increase Tuition to More Costs: We determined to raise tuition to a level that would increase the coverage of real educational costs from 75% to 88%. While a greater percentage is the long-term goal, this increase was a strong step in the right direction.
- 2) Create an Inclusive Tuition model. Clubs, athletic participation, plays and musical participation, other extracurricular opportunities, family admission costs to home games, and more were wrapped up in the published tuition. It is a fairer representation of the true costs of education, and we believe it will help sustain and grow participation in activities.
- 3) A percentage of the tuition received will be applied to the Tuition Assistance fund. We desire to see $\frac{1}{2}$ of the total financial assistance given to families be covered through tuition dollars.
 - a. This lessens the amount of Tuition Assistance money to be raised annually. We intend to raise enough to 'flip the script' and have all tuition assistance money available prior to making financial aid commitments for the year.
 - b. This opens up the opportunity for our Director of Advancement to pursue givers for true advancement and development initiatives, not simply for scholarship money.
- 4) A multi-year plan is underway to address further financial changes in this area. The board and I will be working through issues of staff discounts, multi-child discounts, further tuition adjustments to cover 100% of true costs, stricter management of tuition assistance, and managed enrollment and staffing. The goal, as challenging as it seems, is to make these strategic moves while fostering greater and greater strength within our programs and school experience.

For approximately four months on a weekly basis, the community received from me a written message affirming the work of Westminster Christian School. Within those messages I sought to share systematically the current challenges facing Christian schools nationally and locally. It was my intention to share the value and importance of a Westminster education. I attempted to build slowly, but surely, the case that Westminster is on the threshold of some very exciting times.

Yet, to realize the potential of these opportunities, courageous steps need to be taken. The tone of these letters always reflected positively, yet transparently, on the opportunity, hope, and benefit to Westminster's immediate needs and long-term strength in ministry.

It was November of 2015 that I sent a video to our community announcing the tuition changes for 2016/2017. The overall increase was 11-12%. It was accompanied by a letter from our board president further explaining the purpose and benefits of the change. Over the next four months we were very intentional to set up several town hall meetings for our community, invited parents to come to coffee conversations around this announcement, and solicited any form of conversation families would wish with me. Simply stated, I sought to put myself in front of the community as much as possible to be ahead of questions, problems, and build a level of confidence in the plans ahead. Today I praise God that our reenrollment of existing families is at 92% which is within 1% to 2% of any typical year.

Curricular Program, Advancement, and Admissions

Families will only pay a higher tuition if they value the education as highly or more highly than the tuition bill. The educational experience at Westminster must always be our focus. School is meant for students. None of our financial advances matter if we are not primarily seeking to be excellent and exceptional within the educational experience. Therefore, within the last year we have developed a robust faculty mentoring program, taken initial steps in building Professional Learning Communities, revised our recruitment and hiring strategies, added AP classes to our program, restructured our chapel program, enhanced our discipleship program, added to our performing arts program, and are in discussions about changing the daily schedule for middle school and high school students.

We continue to evaluate and change practices within our admissions/recruitment process. We are steering away from Open Houses to more personal outreach methods. This includes a stronger system of follow-up with inquiring families, the utilization of satisfied Westminster parents to engage inquiring families, and personal meetings with the principals to discuss specific goals/needs parents have for their children. Additionally, Westminster's social media presence has increased dramatically with great involvement from the community. Finally, Westminster has begun to advertise and promote within the larger community more aggressively.

In Advancement we have worked hard to develop a compelling message and shared vision for the future growth and strength of Westminster. After taking some time to revise and reimagine Westminster's Strategic Plan, the school has begun to shift the community's thinking away from fund-raising to pay our bills or the "gap" to imagining the future opportunities that lay within reach. Since February of 2016 Westminster has been gaining valuable insight and structural advice from Zach Clark to help us build upon the momentum being established.

What Did I Learn?

This initiative was a tremendous learning experience for me. Raising the school's tuition significantly in the first two years of my tenure was not something I expected to do going in. Yet, I have no qualms that it was the right and most substantive first step to take for the viable future of the school. Among the many lessons learned are these:

- Need for vision: A tuition increase is merely a step in a forward direction. A school leader needs to know and communicate the journey and the destinations along that path. Without a vision, the value of Christian education is clouded or lost in the mind and heart of the school community.
- Need for board unity and clarity: This process provided focused conversation about long-range planning and priorities. I experienced the blessing of a supportive board ever ready to take bold next steps. We grew in our appreciation for one another, and it has inspired a commitment to develop the board/head of school relationship more fully and effectively. We are bringing in a Van Lunen consultant, Henry Contant, in June to lead us in this process.
- Be bold: In retrospect, I wish we had gone for an even greater tuition increase. We still have a gap between real cost of education and tuition charged. This leaves us with the future challenge of gradual, but meaningful, increases in tuition to close that gap. If anyone were to ask my advice about something like this, I would say to make wise plans based upon what you think is best...and then take another step or two in faith.
- Difficulty to remove discounts: We still haven't done it. We all agree that discounts are a problem and need to be curtailed, if not removed altogether. Yet, this is one change that continues to tug at our school board's heartstrings. It will take time to address this, but I am confident that we will take on this topic and make the necessary changes in the near future.

I entered the Van Lunen program knowing that Westminster needed to address financial sustainability issues. Many of the specific problems were apparent to me. Yet, it can be overwhelming to begin the fight to find answers and realize the challenges grow exponentially with every move. I praise God that I could engage in my project in the context of the Van Lunen program. The challenges of this initiative have led to further questions and further challenges. Yet, these issues fall into the greater pattern of leadership challenges sketched out in our various sessions. I am able to see and understand the bigger pattern and respond confidently.

This project has set the board and me on a unified course toward school growth, improvement and long-term sustainability. Advancement and admissions are driven to maximize the effect of this tuition change. Principals and teachers are motivated to provide innovative and meaningful learning experiences. It has established a clear commitment and vision for our

community to embrace. Our school has taken a step that compels us to keep asking the question, “Is this our best?” Families who entrust their children to us deserve our best. Our students deserve our best. More importantly, our great God deserves our very best!

I am humbled that He would choose me to engage in this exciting, difficult, and very meaningful work within His Kingdom. To God be the glory!