

Discovering God's Plan for our Schools

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The Challenge

When I approached the Van Lunen Center with a project proposal, the board of Niagara Association for Christian Education (NACE) and I knew that we needed increased definition around what we would strive for and accomplish as schools in the foreseeable future. Over about a decade, the schools had come through some rather difficult times financially and with respect to enrollment. Plans about how to run the schools into the future were limited to pursuing the best available strategy to address immediate challenges and to keep the schools viable. While this approach made for a nimble posture and had some good outcomes, it did not take into consideration plans further than a year into the future, and it became frustrating for many involved. In short, NACE needed a longer-term view... a strategic plan.

Necessary groundwork

Determined to come through the Van Lunen Program with a strategic plan in hand, I set about to put in place a timeline to complete this project with my school community. Consulting with Van Lunen faculty and educational and management resources, it became apparent that a necessary step in the process of completing the plan was to re-affirm and commit to the schools' mission and vision. This was a discouraging discovery and setback as I knew both of these needed time and work. The board of NACE and I knew, however, that we were ready for this step, as we had already worked through some visioning activities and some preparation research. There was an expressed desire to 'refresh' our guiding statements.

Setting the stage

Striking a small sub-committee to ponder new vision and mission statements and recommend new words to guide our schools was an exciting and invigorating project. Made up of current parents, teachers, principals, and even a prospective parent, we spent time learning about what these statements would ideally accomplish and then reviewed hundreds of survey responses from our students, parents, staff and supporters.

After two months of work, this committee had two draft mission statements and two draft vision statements to present to the board.

At an annual visioning meeting of the board in November, I facilitated a number of preparatory activities intent on laying the groundwork for a strategic plan development process. This involved a review of the association and school histories including the good, great, bad and awful times. The board received the draft mission and vision statements, adjusting, combining,

and wrestling with what would ultimately serve us well. Finally, they spent some time developing a list of individuals in our community who would be well-suited to stand on our strategic planning task force.

Together, we were ready to begin the work of discovering God's plan for NACE.

Discovering God's plan for NACE

Following the experience and blueprints recommended by Dr. Alan Pue in "Rethinking Strategic Planning for Christian Schools", twenty-four highly committed and equipped individuals agreed to invest deeply over a short time period to help "uncover what God's plan for NACE". This theme remained front and centre throughout the process: If we would focus on our own hopes and dreams, we would undermine God's better and more perfect plans. Diligently bathing the process in both prayer and praise, we began to study and learn together what our schools' unique strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats were, listening to staff and front-line teachers, and examining the current environment in which the schools operate. From our work, four themes emerged ready to be developed into specific initiatives. Smaller groups met to develop multiple ways in which to move forward on each theme, and two months later came back to gather the entire collection of initiatives into an overall plan. This set of initiatives was presented to the board for information and later for adoption.

The Plan

About to be approved, the NACE strategic plan has four focus groups: 1) Build Clarity, 2) Grow Deeper, 3) Grow Further, and 4) Equip Staff, Families, and Schools. These areas collectively have 33 initiatives that are to be pursued over the next five years. Some strategic initiatives are

already underway and will have immediate and direct impacts. Others will take some time to implement and are as substantial as changing the schools' and association's name and admissions frameworks. The initiatives altogether, though, form a more cohesive approach to launching NACE into the future in a deliberate way.

Other outcomes

Beyond the obvious plan now in hand, there have been a few extra unintended outcomes.

The board, administrators, and staff have an increased understanding of who we are and what we hope to do. There is a new sense of excitement about where we are going, a boldness about pursuing a new vision, and an engaged group of community members who have reconnected with our schools in a way that would not have been possible in any other way.

Finally, as a Director, I have been encouraged beyond measure by the passion and energy that our taskforce and board injected into their work. Their excitement about where NACE is going has been infectious and a true gift for me in my work. I cannot imagine a better preparation for carrying out the plan than experiencing first-hand their investment into it.

What I learned during the process

One of the key things I have learned in this process is that when you approach a school supporter with a specific task and let them know why you think they are specifically gifted and able to help the schools grow, they will not only feel honoured by the 'ask' but diligently follow through with their work.

I learned that a deep and analytical look at who you are as an organization with your board and invested stakeholders is a gift to everyone involved, enabling a clearer view of the future.

I have learned that even those who you know to be highly equipped and experienced in strategic planning or visioning projects are often willing and able to learn more. I was humbled by the number of people involved along the way for whom this experience was one of their favourites not only in process but in outcomes and effectiveness. I learned that I have something of value to teach even those who are gifted and experienced, even though I still have much to learn.

I have also learned the incredible value of taking the time to select the right people. Dr. Alan Pue talks about ‘chemistry’ as a necessary qualification to be on a planning task force. That chemistry; to be able to respectfully dialogue, discuss, and disagree; is essential to the smooth and successful development of a strategic plan.

I have learned to schedule more time for discussion even when I’m afraid that the time allotted is too long because when engaging passionate stakeholders, you will always run out of time.

The difference that this project made at NACE

This project may signal a turning point for NACE. In fact, NACE may not be known as NACE for much longer. Ultimately, the work invested in setting the stage provided a great deal of clarity for not only the board but for my work. Our new mission statement works well and provides a focus where there previously wasn’t. The unintended outcomes listed above were wonderful surprises along the way.

The most salient difference this project has made is the injection of confidence and encouragement to set in motion a plan with realistic goals, timelines and means to move forward and to become what God has intended us to be.