

## **STOP, LOOK and LEARN**

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### **Background**

Grand Crossing is located nine miles south of Chicago's downtown area. It was considered a sorry place to wait for a train, according to the Lutherans settlers in this vicinity. The German Lutherans who lived in the neighborhood attended a nearby church that was later destroyed by fire. On July 18, 1888, five Lutheran men met, organized and incorporated "Die Deutsche Evangelish-Lutherische Gemeinde zu Grand Crossing, Illinois and on September 2, 1888, a constitution was signed. They purchased three lots on Dorchester near 76<sup>th</sup> Street and a small frame church was built; which also served as a school. In January of 1889, the school opened with fourteen students enrolled. St. Paul Lutheran School was established on Chicago's far southeast side.

Over the years this small school has housed as many as one hundred students. It was tight but manageable. However, during the 2016-17 academic year, the school only had an enrollment of 60 students. This is concerning to me as the school leader, because I am looking ahead and questioning our sustainability. In the past few years, our enrollment has decreased due to parent job loss, and underemployment; which contributes to families' inability to pay tuition. Additionally, there is a serious lack of awareness of St. Paul Evangelical Lutheran School's existence in the community. I believe this plays a major part in our declining enrollment.

Job loss and underemployment are two factors beyond my control. But, the lack of a viable presence in the community is within my limit. So, I met with the board members of St. Paul Evangelical Lutheran School of Christian Education to propose a strategic marketing plan. The board agreed. I needed to find out what was working and what wasn't through a needs assessment. I used the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis for my results.

### **St. Paul Lutheran School's Strengths**

#### **Internal**

1. Faith Base (Pastors actively involved)
2. Rigorous Curriculum (S.T.E.A.M.O, Hands-On, and Cultural Enrichment)
3. State Recognition
4. Literacy Coach

5. Diverse Learners Consultant
6. Title 1 (afterschool tutoring)
7. Lower Student/Teacher ratio
8. Real World Application Experiences
9. Safe/Discipline Environment
10. Chapel Ministry
11. Parent/Alumni Evangelism
12. Generational Families

### **External Strengths**

1. Service Driven (Evangelism, Partnership with Senior Living Facilities, Praise Dance Ministry)
2. Chicagoland Lutheran Education Foundation (Partner)
3. Donor Relationships

St. Paul Lutheran School communicated these strengths in our **Mission Statement** below:

St. Paul Evangelical Lutheran School exists to bring children to know Jesus Christ while providing a high quality academic education in a safe, disciplined environment promoting social, mental, physical and spiritual growth.

I learned that we were mission minded and marketing a commodity that was no different from any other faith based school. We were not unique.

### **Weaknesses**

#### **Internal**

1. Limited Space /No Gymnasium
2. Ancillary Classes (Human Capital)
3. Extra Curriculum Activities

#### **External**

1. Limited resources

St. Paul Lutheran School's weaknesses were beyond my control to a point. I couldn't do anything about the brick and mortar. I was limited to what I could offer in ancillary classes and extra curriculum activities due to financial constraints.

I learned that bells and whistles aren't needed to tell your story.

## **Opportunities**

### **Internal**

1. Students
2. Parents

### **External**

1. Alumni/Friends Campaign
2. School Partnerships
3. Principal/Community
4. Advancement Coordinator
5. Chicagoland Lutheran Education Foundation

St. Paul Lutheran School was missing some key opportunities to tell its story. One of being a community of faith based learners, who are unique in making academic gains through hands-on problem solving approach. Parents are involved in their child(ren)'s development and meet regularly with their teachers and principal.

I learned that the students and parents needed to tell St. Paul Lutheran School's story.

## **Threats**

### **Internal**

1. Teacher loss (retiring/or better pay)
2. Building infrastructure

### **External**

1. Charter Schools
2. Aging Community
3. Economy (Tuition Based School)
4. Funding

The threats are real. Teacher retention is a problem. Due to current enrollment and limited finances, it is hard to retain teachers. The St. Paul Lutheran School building is old and in constant need of repair. This is a strain on our budget.

There are new charter schools in the area with new construction and have the "shock and awe" appeal that St. Paul Lutheran School lack. The Grand Crossing community once was a vibrant area with young families, but is slowly becoming a community of grandparents.

The economy has played an important factor with our parents' ability to pay tuition. Why pay tuition for an aging building with limited resources when the new charter school is free?

Funding is always stressful. Each year we have to come up with new and creative ways of fundraising, soliciting and retaining donors, and still be accountable for student learning and academic achievement.

I am learning that “I can do all things through Christ which strengthened me.” Philippians 4:13.

I took a closer look at our current marketing strategy. We have a website that is up and running, but in need of a makeover. Our Facebook Page and Twitter account are works in progress.

We used billboards, bus stop ads, radio ads (Half price schools.com), direct mail marketing, attended school fairs, and hosted back to school community events. All were typical marketing 101 strategies, but yielded little results.

I didn't understand why we were getting such dismal returns on investments. I sought help from Jim McKenzie. I shared my quandaries and my marketing objectives, which were to:

1. Develop a strategic plan to increase school presence/community awareness
2. To increase student enrollment

He suggested that I do the following:

- Revise current website - to create an online presence for St. Paul Evangelical Lutheran School.
- Overhaul Facebook - to use Facebook to advertise strategically to new families.
- Word-of-Mouth – use current families to make referrals to your school.

Two of the three suggestions I could facilitate on my own (Facebook and word-of-mouth), but St. Paul Evangelical Lutheran School shares the website with the Church. I will collaborate with the Church Pastor on the website revisions.

I learned from Mr. McKenzie I had to become a transformational thinker. In order to do that, I needed to create a new vision/mission statement. I needed to know what parents wanted for their children and how a future St. Paul Lutheran School graduate will contribute to society.

### **New Vision Statement**

Your child will come to know Christ through Pastors and teachers who are believers. His or/her mind will be challenged by new educational experiences; problem solving some of the world's most difficult dilemmas and create solutions that will someday change the world.

### **New Mission Statement**

Your child will understand what it means to follow Jesus and to grow as God's child. Each child has an opportunity for one on one instruction with their teachers and an instructional coach that will PUSH (**P**ush, **U**plift, **S**ocialize, and **H**ands-on) their academic limits. All children are

unique and learn differently, and every child is seen, heard and flourishes at St. Paul Evangelical Lutheran School. We are creating today's leaders through faith, family and education.

Next I needed to know my targeted audience.

- Parents of School Age Children (3yrs – 14 yrs.)
- Current Parents
- Early Childhood Centers
- Neighborhood Churches
- Community Organizations
- Alumni

I revised St. Paul Lutheran School's Facebook page, organized a Parent Ambassador Club, became a more visible presence within the community, and started hosting weekly open houses for prospective families.

### **How is it making a difference?**

We were marketing as if we were a commodity; "affordable tuition, with dedicated teachers, and high academic standards." What made us different? We were one of many private schools with similar mission and vision statements.

I started using the flanking approach as suggested by Jim McKenzie. That is, I cannot compete with the public or charter schools, but I can make a students' educational journey more interesting. We are a S.T.E.A.M.O. (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, Math and Oracy) school. This gives me leeway to offer some unique instructional experiences. I started telling our students' stories via Facebook. St. Paul Lutheran Schools' social media responses have been tremendous. Some of our postings have reached over 1,000 people, and we have 332 likes. This has been a huge boost in St. Paul Lutheran School's visibility, along with prospective student and potential employment leads.

I've implemented St. Paul's Parent Ambassadors Club. The purpose of the Parent Ambassadors Club is to promote and attract potential new families for St. Paul Lutheran School. There were twenty parents invited to the initial reception party that I hosted. Unfortunately, the day of the reception Mother Nature decided a snowstorm was warranted. Five brave souls and one board member made the reception. We discussed what brought them originally to St. Paul Lutheran School, what they liked about the school, and what could be improved upon. We talked about the challenges and advantages of being a small Christian school. We brainstormed marketing strategies and student recruitment. There was plenty of food and good conversation at the reception and a firm commitment by those five parents to act as ambassadors for St. Paul Lutheran School. The following months, St. Paul Ambassadors have brought in four potential leads.

St. Paul Lutheran School currently belongs to the local business association. I started attending the meetings and networking with community leaders. I wanted St. Paul Lutheran School to be known in the area and a viable asset within the community. I have had business leaders to reach out to our school about starting partnerships.

In conclusion, Facebook, the Parent Ambassadors Club and my networking within the business association have increased our presence on social media and within the community. Currently, we have improved our re-enrollment by 19% over last year's data. We are seeing positive results from our efforts and will continue to monitor and increase St. Paul Evangelical Lutheran School's awareness.