

“Growing Excellence: A Plan to Battle Stagnation”

Presbyterian Christian School; Hattiesburg, MS

Presbyterian Christian School has grown considerably in the past five years. In fact we will have over forty-five more students this coming school year than we had this past year, growing from 362 to the currently registered 410 students in grades seven through twelve. PCS is blessed to be considered an excellent school in our area. As we grow however, how do we not just maintain our current level of success, but increase and take our excellence to the next level? This is the topic of my applied school project, and I have put into writing my plans in three areas: facilities growth, academic achievement, and spiritual formation.

Our secondary school is still fairly young, having graduated just our 10th class, and our high school campus is only nine years old. Most of the schools we play and are in the Mississippi Private School Association with have been schools for approaching forty years. We have a lot of catching up to do, but are on a good path toward providing the quality academic and athletic facilities that we need to continue and improve our competitiveness. We also are considered one of the top academic programs in the state of Mississippi, but we can do better. PCS attempts to be a quality Christ-centered school in our everyday practice, but again we can do more and we can do better. I believe the fact that we are blessed to be a top-notch academic program, a competitive athletic and co-curricular program, and that we truly attempt to do all this from a biblical perspective makes us a one-of-a-kind school in the state of Mississippi. However I also believe that we can improve and become better in all areas of our school.

**Chip Jones, Secondary School Principal
221 Bonhomie Road; Hattiesburg, MS 39401**

“Growing Excellence: A Plan to Battle Stagnation”

Presbyterian Christian School; Hattiesburg, MS; Chip Jones, Secondary Principal

Presbyterian Christian School is a private, independent, Christian school of 900 students in Hattiesburg, MS, which is the fourth largest city in the state. PCS is one school, but is currently located on two campuses. The elementary campus (500 students) has K5 through 6th grade and is housed at one of the local PCA (Presbyterian Church in America) churches in Hattiesburg. Grades 7 through 12 (400 students) are located at the secondary campus, about a ten minute drive from the elementary. The secondary campus is located on a twenty-three acre tract of land that was donated to PCS and developed over the past ten years.

PCS is blessed with a great reputation in our community, primarily because of an excellence record of spiritual impact, academic achievement, and athletic and co-curricular success. Therefore the school’s enrollment has increased dramatically over the past five years. For example, our graduating class sizes have increased from 20-something to 30-something to 40-something to the current 60-something, all just in the last five years. This, though, does appear to be where our graduation class size is leveling off, with 60-something classes for the next four or so years.

As our class sizes have grown, we have “maintained” our excellent record of spiritual impact, academic achievement, and athletic and co-curricular success. As we’ve heard Jim Marsh say, excellence is being better than we were before; and according to basketball coach, Rick Pitino, “excellence is the unlimited ability to improve the quality of what you have to offer.” Now that our class size is leveling off, I feel that **we must take the next steps toward excellence**, and not just “maintain” where we have been. I’m afraid we’ve become satisfied with where we are and are in danger of becoming **stagnant**. We must be willing to move past being good in order to get to great.

In this project, I am outlining three areas of needed growth and improvement on the secondary campus, of which I am principal, in order to help Presbyterian Christian School reach the next level of excellence and impact in our students and in our community.

1. Facilities Growth Plan
2. Academic Achievement Growth Plan
3. Spiritual Formation Growth Plan

1. Secondary Campus Facilities Growth Plan:

Our secondary campus is only nine years old. Because of our rapid enrollment growth, several additions and expansions to the original building have occurred over those past nine years. However there are still several more important and needed projects to consider and fund in order to: a) make room for further growth that is coming from our elementary campus, b) enable us to continue to compete with other schools in our area for students, and c) keep pace with the other schools with whom we compete athletically in the AAA division of the Mississippi Private School Association.

The additions/changes/improvements that I envision to our secondary campus include:

- We need six additional classrooms to handle increased class sizes coming from our elementary.
- **Current status of this immediate need: Though we need four of these classrooms by this coming fall, there is no current building project to meet this need. Therefore, we will meet this immediate need by bringing in temporary, modular-type buildings for classrooms until a permanent structure can be added. We have ordered these temporary classrooms and are making plans to get them set up, wired, and equipped before the start of**

school. At some point when our debt is lessened even further and some needed renovations at our elementary take place, these additional classrooms will be built, hopefully within the next two years.

- A new field house to include football-adequate locker rooms, a weight room, coaches' offices, and video viewing area is badly needed on our secondary campus.

****Current status of this immediate need:** Our current locker room space is totally inadequate for our needs, and we need to move our weight room (currently in a classroom) because we need that classroom to help handle our increased numbers. Plans have been drawn and our School Board has approved the building of a field house near our football stadium. This field house will include space for two locker rooms, coaches' offices, training room, weight room, restrooms and shower facilities for the athletes, and public restrooms. While this facility will not be ready by the start of school, we believe it should be finished sometime this fall, hopefully before the end of football season.

- There have been Board-level discussions this year about the future location of all or part of our elementary school to the secondary campus. Our elementary campus is in a high traffic area that will only get more congested in the coming years and the campus itself needs renovation and updating. If the entire K5 – 6th grade remains there, additional facilities will need to be built to handle the growing numbers. On the positive side, our current elementary location provides great visibility in the community as a recruiting tool.

****Current status:** While final decisions have not been reached, the School Board has stated that it would like to keep a school presence in the current elementary location. My best guess is that the 5th and 6th grades will be moved to the secondary campus in the coming years (requiring additional facilities here), and keeping the K-4th grades in the very visible current elementary location, which would limit the amount of expansion required on that campus.

- In recent months, the Tatum family, who donated the original twenty-three acres for the secondary campus, has given us permission to develop parking areas underneath the power lines that are adjacent to our property on the north side. In recent weeks, the Tatum family has indicated that they might be willing to donate additional acreage on the south side of our campus for our growth and expansion.

****Current status:** These two developments have accelerated the decision-making pace in regard to campus changes and expansions. A site plan is being quickly developed, showing our ideas of how the additional acreage to our south might be used if given.

- We are moving forward this fall with plans for a feasibility study to see what our potential could be in regard to a capital campaign to raise needed funds for our facilities expansions and renovations.

****Current status:** Approval has been given by the Board to receive bids and proposals from two different companies in regard to conducting a feasibility study this fall.

- Expansion/renovation of two current classrooms on the end of the academic building to add space for science lab areas.
- The building of a new and separate lunchroom/cafeteria/banquet room with a commercial kitchen.
- The conversion of our current multi-purpose cafeteria/auditorium to a full time auditorium.
- Expansion of the backstage area of our auditorium for additional storage and for a “fly” area for multiple backdrops.
- Addition of a softball field and at least four tennis courts, which would require a redesign of a significant portion of our current parking area to a currently unused green space area adjacent to the academic building.
- The building of a practice quality gymnasium as a second gym facility on the high school campus.

****Current status:** These six parts of my facilities plan are long term projects and do not require immediate attention.

2) Secondary Campus Academic Achievement Growth Plan:

a) Academic Program

The Lord has blessed PCS in the area of the academic preparation of our students. However, I would like to see us do the following in order to improve that area of our program:

- Improvements in faculty salaries and benefits need to continue in order to recruit and/or retain the best teachers and staff possible. Also we need to increase budget amounts for faculty/staff development and continuing education opportunities.

****Current status:** Our base salary was increased by \$1,000 for the 2007-08 school year, and our 401K program is set to increase from a 1% match to a 3% match for 2008-09. Our already strong faculty will be made even stronger by the new faculty coming to join us this fall. Several of the new group of teachers told us that our compensation package was comparable to what they were making at other public schools in our area.

- Currently our department heads, who are several of our most excellent teachers, serve in that capacity without much additional responsibility and for no additional pay. I would like to give our department heads an additional planning period and a stipend in order to increase their leadership role within their departments and to have them help me as principal in overseeing, observing, and evaluating the teachers and curriculum in their departments more effectively.

****Current status:** This idea has been discussed administratively and I believe can be included in the 2009-10 budget process and implemented in the fall of 2009.

- We must continue to make improvements in instructional technology and increase our technology training opportunities.

****Current status:** We have almost completed the addition of ceiling mounted projectors into each classroom so that faculty may easily show Powerpoint presentations, websites, internet searches, etc. in their rooms. This also sets the stage for the addition of interactive boards to several (and eventually all) of our classrooms. We plan to have several of these in place by the start of school in August.

- We want to offer dual credit opportunities to our students so that they can earn college hours as they take certain courses for high school credit.

****Current status:** We have entered into an agreement with our local Christian university to offer selected courses for dual credit. Because two of our teachers would, in essence, become adjunct college faculty, as they teach these selected courses our students would receive high school credit and college credit/hours at the same time. This coming fall (2008) we will be offering Calculus, Algebra 3 / College Algebra, and United States History for credit both for graduation from PCS and on a college transcript from William Carey University.

- Our grading scale needs to be reviewed and our weighting system for honors and Advanced Placement courses re-evaluated.

****Current status:** Our grading scale is fairly stringent and our weighting system for students taking honors and AP courses is conservative. Some parents are concerned that this combination is putting our students at a disadvantage for college acceptance and scholarships. Therefore we are undertaking this summer a review of our current grading scale and weighting system to make sure that they are a good balance of academic integrity (to make sure our grades are not too inflated) and fairness (to make sure that our students have good opportunities at the college level).

b) Testing Program

Our school has been blessed with great test scores on the PSAT and the ACT. As our class sizes have doubled in the past two or three years, our test scores have fluctuated some, but have remained relatively the same. We have begun doing several things which hopefully will increase our overall testing scores and get us out of the status quo:

- The PSAT is given in October and the score that students make in the fall of their junior year is what the National Merit scholars program is based upon. We have started giving the PSAT also to our 9th and 10th graders as practices for the real testing to come during their 11th grade year.

****Current status: In place.**

- To prepare all our students for this important test, we have given our English and Math teachers test preparation materials and asked them to include some test prep problems and exercises in class and/or for homework with the normal requirements of their curriculum. One result of these first two parts of our plan is that the median score of our current juniors who took the test this past October was the highest in four years.

****Current status: In place.**

- I mailed a letter earlier this past fall to the parents of our juniors and sophomores who had previous PSAT scores within striking distance of National Merit range giving them some important information and to encourage their student to do additional preparations for the upcoming test.

****Current status: In place.**

- I want the school to pay for our English and Math teachers to actually go and take the ACT on a Saturday morning. This would hopefully give them the same testing experience of their students and enable them to better prepare their students for this important test.

****Current status: Not in place yet, but hopefully by the fall.**

- We need also to make better use of two ladies in our community who already teach test prep courses. In addition to publicizing after hours courses that they are teaching, I would like to figure out a way to get these ladies before all our students and teachers so that all our folks could take advantage of their expertise and not just the ones who have the time and money to take an after hours course.

****Current status: Not in place yet, but hopefully by the fall.**

3. Secondary Campus Spiritual Formation Growth Plan:

While our school has a good reputation as a Christian school, I am concerned that our students do not have enough opportunities to grow spiritually. I would like to see us do the following.

- Increase the number of Bible class credits for graduation.

****Current status: In order to accomplish this, our school would have to move from six periods to seven periods per day. We tried to make this work financially and practically for 2008-09, but couldn't get it done. We will aim for 2009-10.**

- Hire a campus chaplain, whose job it would be to develop additional spiritual growth opportunities for our faculty and students, and to better organize, plan, and carry out our chapel programs and service opportunities that already exist.

****Current status: I almost had this position in the school budget for 2008-09, but it didn't work out in the end. It is a position that I believe our school needs desperately, so I will be aiming to include it in our school budget for 2009-10.**

- Have a yearly spiritual emphasis time.

****Current status: We had "Big Rick" Hughes, who has been speaking to schools in our association for over thirty years, speak to our students in April for three days of spiritual emphasis. Rick said our students were well-**

mannered and attentive during his talks, and we got feedback from both students and teachers that was generally positive about our first spiritual emphasis time.

- Have a senior retreat each August.

****Current status:** I am working toward having a one-day retreat for seniors this coming August.

- Have additional training, using outside speakers, for faculty to learn how to better implement philosophically and practically a Biblical worldview and Christian teaching in the classroom.

****Current status:** While I regularly include this in my responsibilities during staff development and faculty meetings, I would like to bring in some outside experts to supplement what I do and to bring a different perspective to the same topic.

4. Summary:

I appreciated this opportunity to put in writing my ideas for improvement that had been floating around in my mind and that had been a part of my mental vision for the school. Over the course of the year, I expanded my original thinking of just a facilities and a testing plan for the school to also include the general academic and the spiritual formation aspects of school improvement. This, it appears to me, made my plan more well-rounded and included all the needed areas that help form the image of the school's excellence in the minds of our families and community.

However, it also added two areas that are harder to quantify. It is easier to know when a building is built or when test scores go up than when there is spiritual and/or academic growth. Part of what I learned and been reminded of is that growth in excellence is a process and is usually not an overnight or immediate occurrence. Many parts of what I've written about and that have been implemented will not have known impact for possibly several years. But there is still plenty here that will be known soon enough to make sure that we are taking proper steps towards growing excellence.

In addition, I've been reminded of just how many people have to be involved to make a plan like this come to fruition. From board members to administrators to faculty and staff to parents to grandparents to interested people in the city, a comprehensive plan for growth truly takes a "community". It also takes a faithful Lord to provide the "time, talent, and treasure" ingredients that are needed to accomplish the goals. Teamwork, partnership, hard work, and faith are essential elements for success.

The Van Lunen Fellows Program has been a true blessing in my life. The training that I have experienced and the people that I have met have and will continue to make me a better, more effective Christian school administrator. Thank you so much for the opportunity to have been a part of the inaugural class.