



A Journey Within: Strategic Initiatives to Drive the Future

Kevin Kaemingk, Superintendent
Valley Christian School System
Cerritos, California

The final outcome for the project was to create 3-5 Strategic Initiatives to direct the work of the Board of Directors for the next 2-3 years. Valley Christian Schools is a Pre-School through 12 school system at the South East corner of Los Angeles County. With 1300 students you would assume the school is very successful; however, since 2002 the school has declined from 1500 students to the present 1300. Without serious intervention, the school's future is at risk of a long and slow demise.

The Van Lunen Fellows program and applied project came at exactly the right time. The Board of Directors has been searching for a more meaningful tenure for board members and a measurable sense of accomplishment. In the last three years the board has begun the shift to a policy governance model akin to the Carver Model of governance. The five strategic initiatives the board agreed on will lead to a much healthier school.

The Project Focus

A strategic plan to guide the development of Valley Christian over the next three to five years was the focus of the project. Valley Christian Schools is a school doing average to good work, with no true identity or driving purpose. Over the last 5 years the Board of Directors of Valley Christian Schools has been seeking out their purpose in identifying the goals and directions for the future of the school.

Located at the Southeast corner of Los Angeles County the school is at a historic crossroads. The reformed community it has served since 1935 continues to shrink so questions about who will serve on the board, who will attend and who will financially support the school must be answered in the near term.

For the past five years the school has shrunk from a high of 1550 students to just over 1300 students in pre-school through twelfth grade. However, there is no shortage of potential students in a county with over eight million inhabitants. Key questions about why the enrollment is shrinking along with increasing demand must be answered.

Board members have also been searching for the answer to what their roles should be. A school once run by 1 administrator with 120 students (1935) has seen no significant governing changes in 74 years. The school administration had grown to include a superintendent, four principals, a director of development, a director of admissions, a director of business operations and a pre-school director.

For the past four years the board has researched philosophies of governance and the role of the board. They settled on policy governance (i.e. Carver Model) and have assigned themselves the major task of creating and implementing a strategic plan. Therefore the Van Lunen Project came at the perfect time.

The Board of Directors and Superintendent had not always focused on the financial picture so a large part of the planning focused on setting financial goals and improving reporting mechanisms.

Methodology

The entire process, which ultimately included seven steps, was guided by the Strategic Planning Steering Committee appointed by the Board of Directors. The committee included four board members and the superintendent. One of the board members had led similar processes for Ernst and Young and was assigned as chairperson.

The Eight Steps included:

1. Review of Data (September, October 2008)
 - As a school we had collected several student surveys, parent surveys and the staff, administration and Board of Directors had completed a number of SWOT analyses during the previous three years.
 - Information from the most recent school accreditation reports for the high school and K-8 systems were also analyzed.
2. Stakeholder Meetings (October, November 2008)
 - A number of stakeholder meetings were conducted with board members, administrators, faculty and staff, parents, students, local pastors and donors.
 - The stakeholders were asked to envision what they needed from Valley Christian Schools.
3. Merging the Data (December 2008)
 - Following steps one and two the Strategic Planning Steering Committee met several times to create a report synthesizing the results for the Board of Directors.
 - Enrollment, Church and Financial Data were added at this time.

4. Board Workshop (January 2009)
 - A thirty page PowerPoint of the results was presented to the board.
 - Board members met in small groups to come up with preliminary goals based on the report.

5. SMART Goals (February, March 2009)
 - The Steering Committee met several more times to refine the goals.
 - Similar goals were framed together minimizing the number of total goals.
 - A time frame for completing the plan was created.
 - The Goals were made SMART
 - i. S = Specific
 - ii. M = Measurable
 - iii. A = Attainable
 - iv. R = Realistic
 - v. T = Time Sensitive

6. Field Tested (April 2009)
 - The goals were field tested on board members, administrators, faculty and staff, parents, students, local pastors and donors.
 - Revisions were made and the goals were finalized.

7. Board Approval (May 2009)
 - The goals were presented to the Board of Directors and approved in May, 2009

8. Communicating to Stakeholders (Fall 2009)

Project Results

Goal One: By 2009/2010 develop a plan to address cash flow and debt issues.

Goal Two: By 2010/2011 develop a plan to measure faculty success in academic excellence, servant leadership and love of students.

Goal Three: By 2011/2012 the VCHS student technology experience will match the VCMS experience.

Goal Four: By 2011/2012 design and implement a curriculum that defines and articulates a Reformed Kingdom Perspective.

Goal Five: By 2011/2012 develop a comprehensive compensation philosophy that attracts and retains a highly rated faculty.

Analysis and Commentary

Five thoughts come to my mind as this project wraps up.

- Much of the information needed for the creation of strategic planning was at our finger tips. We had been collecting it for years, particularly as part of the accreditation process.
- We have begun the process at the administrative level of significantly changing what and how we report to the Board of Directors. Previous reports had been long, written dialogues. To meet the needs of the Strategic Plan we have changed to much more visual, number-dominated reporting.
- Committee meetings have taken on greater significance and enjoyment now that the purpose of meeting and the goals are set by the strategic plan.
- Institutional inward looking also causes the leader to look at his own practices and make adjustments to how he operates.
- The job descriptions, goals and purposes of each administrator have become much more clearly defined as a result of meeting the goals set forth in the strategic plan.