

“Vision-Casting for ACS”

A Van Lunen Center Project

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The 2014-15 school year was the celebration of a significant milestone for Allendale Christian School. Opened for the first time in September 1915, the 2014-15 school year was the 100th year of Christian education at ACS. The theme for the 100th year was 'Rooted in Christ for 100 years.' This has certainly been the case at ACS. Staff, parents, and the community have a strong understanding of what it means to serve the Lord and to offer education that is Christ-centered. A school cannot last for 100 years without a solid foundation. For a number of years, the mission of ACS has been to "provide an excellent education that will prepare students for service in God's Kingdom." As I started the year-long Van Lunen Center in the summer of 2015, my focus was on the Accreditation process that our school was starting with Christian Schools International. ACS was mission-driven and I felt like we were heading in a great direction, and the accreditation process would support that. However, as I participated in the summer Van Lunen sessions, I became more and more aware that ACS needed much more than just a great mission – we needed a clear VISION that would guide the start of a second century of Christian education. A mission statement brings focus to what the organization stands for, but a vision statement gives direction to decisions and gives clarity for the future. I became focused on providing Allendale Christian with a clear vision, a focused description of what we want our graduates to look like, and to flesh out the core values of our school.

During the July 2015 session of the Van Lunen Center, Henry Contant was presenting about Governance and Decision-Making. The presentation was extremely valuable in regards to how a Board should run and how decisions are made. One slide jumped out at me, and was the impetus to this project. The focus of the PowerPoint slide was to determine how Board decisions are made. The list included factors like finances, enrollment, Principal's influence, parental complaints, staff requests, and mission statement. As I mentioned before, ACS has a mission statement that a couple people have memorized and can be found on our website and other promotional documents. I also realized that we certainly have made decisions in my short time at ACS based on many of those other factors. The next slide suggested that mission statement and strategic plan should be the most important factors in making decisions. As ACS had begun the accreditation process the previous spring, we were creating a strategic plan. However, the slide that followed provided the gap that I needed to fill. It stated, "If we agree about who we are (MISSION) and what kind of future we prefer (VISION) then the STRATEGIC PLAN provide the path between the two." I realized that in my time at ACS I had not found a clear vision statement. It may exist somewhere, but it was not obvious to me and certainly had not been promoted. Thus began the process to introduce a clear vision statement, as well as other documents that provided a picture of the future that we prefer at ACS.

I know that it is my responsibility as the leader of Allendale Christian School to establish a clear vision, but also to invite others to help develop this. The most important stakeholders that I wanted to include in this process were the Board of Directors and the ACS Staff. Without buy-in from these important groups of people, the vision would be Brian's vision and not the vision of the ACS community. However, I did not want to present my thoughts without preparation. The very first thing that I had to do was to bring clarity to the difference between a mission statement and vision statement. I had conversation with mentors and others in school administration, and found that the definition of what mission and vision were varied by the person. Interestingly, I found that some Christian schools had mission statements that were nearly identical to the vision statements at other Christian schools. It was clear that the distinction between these two important parts of an organization was a struggle for more than just me. I finally found the most clarity in an article called, "A collaborative process for developing

Mission-Vision-Strategic Action,” presented by an organization in Australia called Equipping Christian Schools. When discussing Mission, this article focused on a school’s mission being the “DNA” of the school and the reason why the school exists. The part that I needed the most clarity about was the Vision of a school. The article states that the vision is “what you see in your mind’s eye before it exists.” Once I had clarity on the meaning of both of these key statements, I set out to find examples that I thought were well-written, clear, and similar to what the mission and vision of ACS were. I am glad that I prepared myself in this manner, because one of the first questions I would be asked by Board members was what the difference between mission and vision actually was.

To begin the process of creating a vision statement for Allendale Christian School, I spent many hours scouring the internet and looking at a variety of mission and vision statements from other Christian schools, public schools, and other organizations. One interesting by-product of this search for mission and vision statements was that I began to notice the organizations that actually had these statements posted in their place of business. As I waited at the doctor’s office for my son’s appointment, I noticed that Spectrum Health’s mission was “to improve the health of the communities we serve.” Their vision was very specific in that, “by 2020, Spectrum Health will be the national leader for health.” Below those statements, they also clearly posted their values of “excellence, integrity, compassion, teamwork, and respect.” The mission, vision, and values certainly drive an organization like Spectrum Health, and I know that they will do the same for Allendale Christian School. Through my research of a number of Christian schools, I created documents that had samples of vision statements from various schools and lists of Core Values that schools had on their websites.

The first group that I wanted to be a part of this process was the ACS Board of Directors. If the Board is present to protect the mission and purpose of the school, it was critical to me that they had a role in creating the vision and defining what they hoped to see in graduates of ACS. This was important enough to me to suggest to our Board chair that we spend multiple Board meetings on the topic of Vision-Casting for ACS. At our October Board meeting, I brought focus to the Mission Statement of ACS. It is written on every Board agenda but, unless attention is brought to it, it blends in with everything else. After a reminder of our Mission and an attempt, I handed out the document with many sample Vision Statements from other Christian Schools. I gave the Board members 5-10 minutes to circle words that caught their attention, cross off words that they thought were not necessary, and write thoughts and questions. After this was complete, we had a great discussion about what the Board members were passionate about and what each saw as a vision for ACS. Many Board members had circled similar ideas and really focused on the following ideas:

- We need to focus on each student’s unique potential
- We want students to be active and ‘engage’ the world; not passive
- We want students to continue growing in their faith, and be passionate about serving God.

Another interesting perspective that came from the discussion was that our vision may not be exclusive to students. We do need a vision for students that we “can see in our mind’s eye,” but it may be valuable to have a vision for staff and the school community as well. If vision drives decisions, a vision that involves more parties will only bring more clarity to decision-making. After the meeting, I was tasked with creating a vision statement or statements that organized the thoughts of the Board.

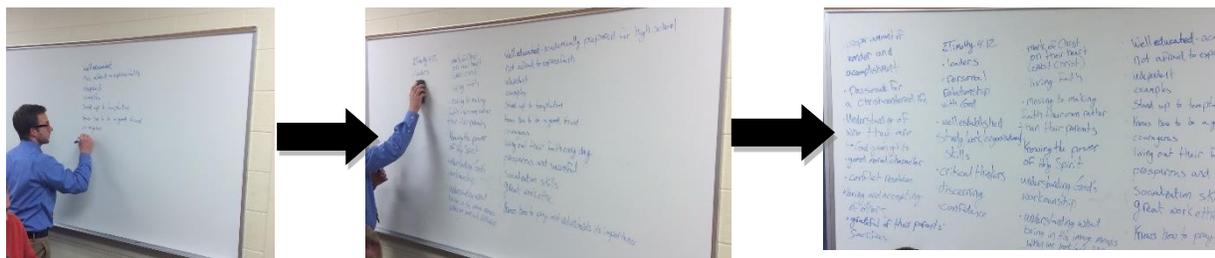
My initial goal was to have a vision statement that was one line and easy to memorize, but when I reviewed the thoughts of the Board, as well as my own thoughts, I knew that was not likely, however, it still needed to be somewhat brief. My ultimate goal was to make sure the current mission statement, or

any future version of it, was something that all staff and Board could memorize. After I created a proposed vision statement, the next step was to get feedback on these proposed statements. I created a survey on Survey Gizmo that I sent to the staff and Board members. The survey asked the following questions and requests:

1. Please give feedback regarding our current mission statement.
2. Should our vision statement include just students, students and staff, or should it include students, staff, and community?
3. What do you think of the proposed Vision Statement?
4. Please provide five characteristics that you hope to see from every graduating student at ACS.
5. Do you believe that the current Core Values (listed in survey) of ACS are adequate?

The most convincing response from the survey was that 80% of teachers and 70% of Board members felt that the vision needed to include students, staff, and the school community. The support was positive for the statements that I had created, and I requested and received feedback on how to improve the statements further. I took the feedback in to consideration and made necessary tweaks to the proposed Vision statements.

Once I was comfortable with the progress of the Vision Statements, I compiled the list of characteristics of an ACS graduate and awaited a conversation with the Board on the same topic. These characteristics became the topic of another Board meeting. The Board members were asked to prepare for that Board meeting by making a list of desired characteristics of their children or grandchildren at ACS, for when they graduated and moved on to high school. It was an awesome conversation and I really appreciated seeing the passion that the Board members had for preparing disciples of Christ at ACS. A teacher who is interning for administrative purposes wrote the characteristics on the Board as the discussion unfolded. Below are snapshots of what happened over the course of the meeting.



After the Board meeting was finished, I compiled the responses of the Board, along with the lists provided by the teachers in the survey, and my own thoughts. My goal was to look for characteristics that were repeated multiple times and create a list of the top ten characteristics of a graduate of Allendale Christian School.

The last part of my project that I wanted to accomplish was to bring more clarity and depth to the ACS Core Values. Our tagline that goes with our school logo says, “Academically Prepared, Called to Service, and Spiritually-Equipped.” These are a play on the A-C-S letters and represent the Core Values of Allendale Christian. Through the Board and Staff surveys, the feedback was very positive that the three Core Values listed on our logo were adequate, without needing any more added. My goal was to explain the Core Values a little more in a way that could be displayed on our website and in other promotional material. I wanted to include Bible verses to show that the Core Values of our school were deeply rooted in scripture.

In late March, ACS completed a one-year Accreditation process with Christian Schools International. We were strongly recommended by the site visit team for full accreditation. They spoke highly of the new vision, characteristics of a graduate, as well as the fleshed-out Core Values. One thing they commented on, though, was that there was not yet purposeful alignment between the new Foundational Statements and the existing mission statement. This feedback was confirmation to me that I needed to revisit the mission statement. This had been something that I had pondered for the last few years, but this was the push I needed. The surveys that I had sent earlier in the year did ask for feedback on the current mission statement (“Provide an excellent education that will prepare students for service in God’s Kingdom.”). I went back to the drawing board and took the feedback from staff, Board, and the Accreditation site visit team and wrote a proposal for a new mission statement, one that gave more detail to an ‘excellent education’ and aligned more closely to the new vision. The mission statement proposal that I brought before the staff and the Board was that ACS exists “to equip students academically, spiritually, and socially to gratefully serve God in all aspects of life.” Another survey showed that more than 85% of the staff and Board were in support of the new mission. There will be final approval at the May Board meeting.

After the process was complete, the following are the new Foundational statements that will help lead ACS going forward:

<u>Mission Statement:</u>
To equip students academically, spiritually, and socially to gratefully serve God in all aspects of life.
<u>Vision Statement:</u>
<p>At Allendale Christian School...</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. We see students who are eager to grow in their faith, who love to learn, and who are being equipped to reach their full and unique spiritual, academic, social, and physical potential in order to engage and change the world for Jesus Christ. 2. We see faculty and staff members who possess servant hearts, are passionate in their calling, committed to growth, model Christian behavior, support each other, and are excited to help students grow in their faith and reach their God-given potential. 3. We see a community that has a strong commitment to Christ-focused education, prays for and supports each other, and is passionate about promoting the mission and vision of the school.
<u>Characteristics of an ACS Graduate:</u>
<p>An Allendale Christian School education will encourage graduates to be...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Prepared for academic success in high school and beyond. - Equipped to be effective communicators that think critically and write and speak thoughtfully. - Able to see and to cultivate their God-given abilities. - Confident that God loves them as His unique and valuable masterpiece. - Prepared to become mature disciples of Christ. - Prepared to discern the world through the lens of scripture. - Able to confidently share their faith and the gospel with others. - Concerned for their fellow man and eager to show Christ’s love to others. - Servants within their community - Prepared to stand up to temptation - Thankful to those who provided them the gift of Christian education.

ACS Core Values:

Academic Excellence that is Christ-focused

At ACS, students are provided a Biblically-based, excellent academic program that will prepare them for high school and life-long learning. Staff members have a committed relationship to Christ and are highly qualified to teach in their placement. We teach from a Biblical perspective and give God the glory for His blessings to our school.

And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Colossians 3:17

Called to Service

At ACS, students are taught the importance of serving others. Christ is our ultimate model of service and love in our relationships. Servant leadership is an important part of the ministry of our school, and students will learn about and be given the opportunity to live in service to God, so that they may positively impact their community and the world for Jesus Christ.

Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. 1 Peter 4:10

Spiritually Equipped

At ACS, students are presented and study the gospel in order for them to better understand God's word. Faith nurture and the ability to discern the world through the lens of scripture is a focus so that students are spiritually equipped to exhibit a Christ-like character and glorify God in all they do. We desire students to know and be confident that they are saved.

⁶So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, ⁷rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. Colossians 2:6-7

This project was extremely valuable for myself, and hopefully will be valuable for Allendale Christian School going forward. One important thing that I learned through this project was the importance of community. When you are Principal in a small school, there are many responsibilities that come with the position. However, this project continued to remind me of the importance of the Board and the staff in the process of preparing students that are prepared to serve in God's Kingdom. The most important stakeholders must be dynamically engaged in the mission and vision of the school. Their involvement in reviewing these foundational statements creates a sense of shared ownership and encourages participation. Another thing that I learned is that it is much easier to make decisions when guided by a clear vision statement. As I mentioned, Allendale Christian is in the middle of an accreditation process with Christian Schools International. To evaluate all the surveys and conversations with stakeholders in order to create the School Improvement Plan would have been extremely difficult without the completed vision, characteristics of a graduate, and focused core values. In fact, the vision for the school and the graduate led us in the creation and phrasing of some of our key School Improvement strands. This goes back to the PowerPoint from Henry Contant, when he asked what was guiding the school's decisions. We now have a Vision Statement and other Foundational Statements to guide our decisions. The third thing I 'learned' is more a feeling than anything else. Having key statements created and in front of me has given me a fresh sense of confidence in my position as Principal. I feel that the road map has become clearer. The decisions that the Board and I make are based on a focuses and shared set of principles, and there be more confidence in those decisions.

The presence of the Vision Statement, Characteristics of an ACS Graduate, and well-defined Core Values, will have many long-term benefits for ACS. This coming summer, I intend to start a long-

term review and update of the ACS Policy Manual and important documents. There are many areas that are lacking, including clear job descriptions. I will be creating job descriptions for teachers and staff as a part of this process. These descriptions will now be able to include key elements of the Vision Statement and what we see as important for our faculty and staff. There will be many examples over time of how the Vision Statement and clear Core Values will impact the policy and document review process. Second, I believe that having these important statements as central to the decision-making process will help eliminate some gray areas in Board and Principal decision-making. The number of factors that creep in and influence decisions will be smaller as there is a vision to guide us. I am excited to see the positive benefits that will come with a clear Vision Statement, a list of desired characteristics of an ACS graduate, and focused Core Values rooted in Biblical principles. As I use my God-given leadership abilities to serve others, a significant goal for me is to improve any organization where I am employed as much as I possibly can, with God's guidance. I believe that this project has allowed Allendale Christian School to be in a much better place than it was a year ago, and will continue to provide it strong guidance in to the future.