

Project title: Helping the Baby Reach Adulthood
Lisa M. Kuzma, Director
Olney Christian School in Philadelphia, PA
Consultant: Henry Contant

History:

In 2010, a team of people from New Life Philadelphia Church began to meet in order to pray and consider if God wanted to plant a school in the Olney section of Philadelphia. Team members had participated in a variety of ministries that took place at the church for children and teens. The most notable example of these ministries was the New Life Afterschool Program. For fifteen years, the Afterschool Program had sought to be a safe place where small groups of children could learn about Christ, receive academic support and have fun. While successful in many ways, there was a chronic sense among the staff that the interventions were coming too late to make a meaningful difference in the lives of the children. In particular, the academic deficits already present in children were overwhelming. In a city where as many as fifty percent of ninth graders will not go on to graduate high school, there seemed little hope for a good outcome for many of these students. A school would address underlying issues in a way that the Afterschool Program could not.

Surveys of neighbors and discussions with area leaders confirmed that families were hungry to have a safe place where their children could excel academically and personally. In Philadelphia, a grave injustice is that the block your family lives on determines the quality of the school that you attend. The neighborhood schools for a low income family are disproportionately failing schools (as designated by the Pennsylvania Department of Education). Having the heart but lacking the resources to provide a better alternative, families feel trapped. A Christian school in an adjacent neighborhood was doing all it could to address the need but in 2010, they had one hundred students on their waiting list.

After watching God do a number of miraculous things in the planning stages of the school, Olney Christian School officially opened in the fall of 2012 as a K-2 school. Today we are a K-5 elementary school with plans to continue to expand through eighth grade.

The Need

Starting a school has been a great adventure, an adventure that attracted a certain type of board member and donor. The first sessions of the Van Lunen fellowship helped me to identify that our biggest needs as a school were, in large part, a reflection of the fact that the gifts, talents and passions of this initial group of supporters were not necessarily a good match for continuing to grow as a school.

In terms of governance, our first school board functioned primarily as a launch team. By necessity, they were active in all parts of the school and wore innumerable different hats. As the director, I was coming with the requisite gifts and talents to run a school but without any real experience or training in elementary education. The board and I needed to better define our roles.

In the early months of fund development, we received several large donations from givers who enjoyed investing in new projects and ideas. They were enthusiastic about providing the “seed

money” needed to start a Christian school in a low income neighborhood. They played a significant role in the birth of the school.

However, in order to sustain the “baby’s growth towards adulthood”, we need a donor base who are committed to our mission of making a private school education accessible to those who could not traditionally afford it. Of sixty-eight current families, only one family pays full tuition. Fifty-three percent pay only forty percent of the total tuition rate or less. Our school will always be reliant on the generosity of others in order to meet our budgetary needs each year. We need to build a development strategy that reflects that fact.

Proposal

While there was so much that I wanted to implement after the first sessions of the fellowship, the needs outlined above and the input of our school board led to a proposal with a two-pronged emphasis: board development and fund-raising. Implementation came in two phases:

Phase one: Helping the school board to transition from a problem-solving launch team to a strategic board of trustees. This phase involved three key emphases:

1. Better definition of roles.

My role. The ship analogy that Henry Contant used in his presentation on “Governance and Decision-Making” provided a great visual for the type of changes that we needed to make. The board needed to move to the crow’s nest of the ship and embrace their roles as guardians of the future of the school. As director, I needed to better define what my “on deck” daily activities and one year priorities should involve.

Better defining my role involved making two transitions. One, to lead from my God-given strengths and gifts. Two, to commit my time to the executive leadership functions that only I could fulfill.

Reading the Strengths Based Leadership book provided by Van Lunen, taking the strengths finder test and discussing the results with my coach and in small group discussions were revolutionary for me. I have found freedom in the knowledge that different types of leaders can be effective leading a school. I have better defined my role as director according to my unique gift set. Recognizing that working out of my relational gifting and training as a counselor provided the strongest sense of flow led to the creation of a faculty mentoring program this year. I meet with every faculty member twice a month for thirty minutes. Our only point of discussion is how they are doing personally and spiritually. I was also able to use the strength finder test results to better help the board understand why I preferred to do student discipline myself instead of hiring a dean of discipline to ease my workload.

As a new, small urban school, we are very understaffed in administrative, clerical and support staff positions. Prior to joining the Van Lunen fellowship, I was stretching myself and my time to meet a wide variety of needs. My time at Calvin College helped me to realize that a greater percentage of my time needed to be spent on executive leadership tasks. As a result, we applied and were accepted to be a training site for the National Association of Hispanic Elderly (NAHE). We train NAHE approved individuals in job skills and language skills. In return we receive forty hours of

classroom and clerical support. The board also approved the hiring of a part time business manager for the 2016-2017 school year.

The board's role. Our consultant for this year was Henry Contant. He led the board thru a discussion of board roles when he joined our December board meeting via Skype. He helped to solidify a shift towards focusing the board on the future and freeing me to invest more deeply in the day to day operations. I know that a complete shift will take time but I knew that we had made significant progress when recently, I inadvertently tried to pull my board president into a day to day decision. His response was: "I completely trust your decision".

The transition from a present focus to a future focus was further cemented at a board retreat in March. Our board president used materials and training provided by Henry to help lead the board thru an analysis of our strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT). The fruit of the SWOT analysis is a strategic plan that now governs new board initiatives.

2. Creation of a nominated pool of candidates/Expansion of the board to 5 to 7 members

In September, the last member of the launch team stepped off the board, leaving us with only four members. While this generated some anxiety for me, I did my best to embrace this as a great opportunity to add members who would bring different gifts to the board. God graciously brought a woman who was stepping off of another school board to be our secretary soon thereafter.

The idea that Henry presented in July of creating a pool of candidates who we thought could be potential board members in the next three years seemed so wise to me. As a result, we developed a two-page document called "Board at a Glance" to introduce potential board members to the school and to life as a board member and began recruiting.

On May 24th, we voted in two new members to the board to expand our total number to seven. Two other members are working to produce a board handbook. The handbook will serve to continue to add definition to general and specific roles and responsibilities of members.

3. Work with Board President to increase the effectiveness of our board meetings

Our board meetings often ran late into the night and tended to get bogged down in problem solving. The first improvement that we made was to change the timing and content of my director's reports. My reports now go out five to seven days before a board meeting. Board members are asked to bring one thing that they were excited about and one thing that they would like more information about/were concerned about. We no longer review my report item by item. The second improvement has been to move towards the use of a consent agenda.

4. Other phase one initiatives

Three other projects are underway: 1. We have begun to invest in time-limited task forces, especially for middle school and fund development. 2. We are investigating the possibilities of a virtual advisory board. 3. We have hopes of a board calendar for the 2016-2017 school year.

Phase two: Leading the school in the development of a more sustainable fund-raising model.

Phase two began in the midst of Phase one and will continue thru the summer and beyond. This phase also involves three key emphases:

1. Development of materials

Zach Clark's presentation "Advancement and Fund Development" was the catalyst for the creation of a graduate profile that would help us to better define the vision of our school to potential donors. Beginning with staff training in August and continuing thru the board retreat in March, we have worked this year to develop a vivid picture of what the eighth grade fulfillment of our vision will look like in terms of academics, character and life skills. The categories that were developed have also led to the reworking of our report cards for fourth and fifth grades. They also impacted our core values and that change is reflected in an updated school brochure.

Jan Druyvesteyn provided additional coaching during the spring that reaped two results. First, we are close to having a mission and vision statement that "sing". Second, we have a strong commitment to the power of story. We are working towards being able to tell the story of the school thru written, verbal and electronic media. One portion of this is the creation of a "Look Book". Henry introduced us to this concept and suggested contacting my Van Lunen cohort for examples. As a result, we have a viable rough draft and hope to complete a final draft by June 17. Concurrently, our board president is working to create a two-minute video of our story.

2. Restructuring of my time to allow for routine visits with current and potential donors.

The work of this initiative correlates with redefining my role as director, especially the focus on executive leadership. Leaving the summer sessions of Van Lunen, I realized that I needed to spend more time investing in fund development. I needed to do this in a way that didn't add to my schedule without subtracting somewhere else. A primary need was to develop a day to day life as a school that was not so dependent on me being in the building. Better defining my role as explained above has gone a long way. Additional staff and volunteers, like the women from NAHE will help. We also made a mid-year decision to compensate the additional responsibilities that our administrative assistant had assumed. We are contemplating promoting her to assistant director. I was able to negotiate using office space in another quieter part of the building so that I would have time every week to focus on my executive responsibilities.

3. Creation and implementation of a fund-raising strategy that focuses on one-on-one and small group meetings.

Opportunities to interact with Zach after his presentation at Calvin College and later by phone reminded me that God has stored up the abilities and resources for doing this type of fundraising. I served on the staff of Campus Crusade for Christ for fifteen years, raising my own support by "growing real relationships with people, helping them see what God is doing, and then challenging them to have the impact that only they can have." (Zach).

With many events, like our fall fundraiser, already in motion when I returned from Calvin College we could not make some of the drastic changes that I would have liked to make. However, we did do a number of things that helped improve our focus. We created a calendar of fund-raising initiatives across the school year. We scaled down our school fundraisers to two events. We hired

a development associate to support the development work five hours each week. As a result, we have raised \$25,000 more than we did last school year.

Future plans include a summer filled with meeting individuals and small groups using our newly developed materials. We intend to start with our small one time givers and ask them to convert to monthly givers in order to begin to create a more predictable and steady income flow. Our board president has been encouraging the board to get their development feet wet by beginning to tell the Olney Christian School story. We have also brainstormed churches who might be interested in “adopting a school” (a Jan Dryvestan idea) and have plans to make contact with a number of congregations over the summer.

Conclusion

Olney Christian School is radically different as a result of being included in the Van Lunen Fellowship. We have hope of becoming a well-established school in Philadelphia that fights for academic justice and brings good news to our neighbors well into the future. Although we concentrated on the two initiatives outlined above, we have benefitted in many other ways:

- As a result of reading The Soul of Your Leadership and absorbing Bruce Hekman’s passion for healthy spirituality, I get up at 5:00 most mornings to start my day at Jesus’s feet.
- I meet regularly with my assistant pastor and a counselor friend to gain the support that Christine Metzger steadily coached that I needed.
- The material on “Necessary Endings” helped to govern personnel change this spring.
- Jim McKenzie’s presentation on “Marketing our Christian Mission”, led to holding educational consultations instead of tours and focusing on inviting people into the building.
- We gained some needed traction in educating families and students about the nature of bullying as a result of Jay Ferguson’s presentation

And the list does not stop there. I know that we will benefit for years to come from the resources and training we received and relationships that have been built. I am deeply grateful.