

Who We Are

St. Lawrence Academy's Path to Discovery



Of all holy works, the education of children is the most holy.

ST. THEOPHAN THE RECLUSE

VAN LUNEN FELLOWS
APPLIED SCHOOL PROJECT REPORT
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I. Introduction

Over 25 years ago, St. Lawrence Academy was founded as a school because a number of concerned parents at a small Orthodox Christian parish decided they could no longer, in good conscience, allow their children to be educated and formed by the public school system. This is the common origin of many Christian schools. As with so many others, St. Lawrence Academy grew from a handful of kids in one classroom to a K–12 school in under ten years.¹ Yet, over the course of those 25 years no formal strategic plan had ever been developed. There are a number of reasons for this. However, it is mainly due to the fact that St. Lawrence Academy has always been a small parish school identified as a ministry of St. Lawrence Orthodox Christian Church; thus, it has always been both church-led and church-sponsored, its direction and financial stability being reflected in the needs and means of the parish community. As the saying goes, “A failure to plan is a plan to fail.” St. Lawrence Academy, by the mercy and grace of God, has managed to exist for over 25 years. However, the world is much different than it was 25 years ago. In the world of the 21st century, where the rate of change is continuously increasing and the existence of Christian schooling is becoming increasingly tenuous, planning is not only prudent—it is essential.

¹ St. Lawrence Academy is now a K–8 school

Purpose and Background

The purpose of this project was to clarify our school (or institutional) identity. In November of 2016, our Board of Trustees retained D. Bruce Lockerbie of PAIDEIA, Inc. to lead us through a strategic planning process. Although St. Lawrence Academy had been in existence for over 25 years, a strategic plan had never been done. At the time, as a new Head of School, I was blessed by the development of a personal association with Bruce Lockerbie and received counsel from him in several areas of school leadership. It became clear through our dialogue that if St. Lawrence Academy was to remain a viable and vital institution for another 25 years, it needed to realistically and strategically consider its future.

We began the process with preparations for conducting a SWOT analysis. However, on the recommendation of Bruce Lockerbie, we first needed to clarify our school identity—from our beliefs, history, philosophy, and culture to our values, vision, and mission. *Who are we?* This was the question that needed to be answered. So began St. Lawrence Academy's path to discovery.

When returning from a journey, others often ask us about our fellow travelers, as well as what we did, learned, and the difference the experience has made in our lives. What follows is the travelogue of our journey.

II. What We Did

Elements of the Study

In our effort to clarify and articulate our school identity, we selected two main areas of focus for our study: institutional attributes and student outcomes.

There were several institutional attributes we identified and explored to develop the picture of who we are as a school:

- Orthodox Christian beliefs, particularly as they are expressed in the Nicene Creed²
- School history
- School culture, including rituals and traditions
- Ministry status, particularly in its connection with the vision and mission of the sponsoring church community
- Core values
- Mission
- Philosophy of education
- Curricula and instructional methods

² This is the statement of belief articulated by the Church Fathers at the First Council of Nicaea in 325. It does not include the *Filioque*, which first appeared in the Nicene Creed in the Western Latin-speaking part of the Church during the 6th century.

When considering student outcomes, we identified and explored two particular elements:

- Vision, particularly as expressed in our portrait of a graduate
- Expected school-wide learning results (or ESLR's), including academic and personal growth outcomes, as well as discipleship-oriented outcomes such as servant leadership, growth in virtue, and understanding of the Orthodox Christian faith

Participants in the Study

The Head of School, with the cooperation and support of the St. Lawrence Orthodox Christian Church Board of Trustees, initiated the process of clarifying and articulating our school identity as a prerequisite for launching a strategic planning process. A committee, called the Vision Team, was formed for the purpose of designing, planning, and executing the study. The committee was comprised of a number of key leaders from both the school and parish communities, including the Head of School, the parish priest, the chairman of the Board of Trustees, and the adult & youth choir director. In addition to being key leaders, those selected also possessed expertise in areas pertaining to the study.

Another key figure involved in this process was Deacon James Hughes, the co-founder and former headmaster of St. Michael's School in Santa Rosa, CA. Dn. James now serves as an Orthodox Christian education consultant, whose focus is in designing curriculum based on a distinctly Orthodox Christian philosophy of education.

In addition to these primary participants, teachers, parents, students, alumni-parents, alumni, parish members, and local community members were also involved in the study.

Process and Tools Used in the Study

As mentioned above, we selected two main areas of focus for our study: institutional attributes and student outcomes. The process utilized entailed research, document review, and dialogue that pertained to these two main areas of focus. In particular, having undergone a vision and mission renewal process in 2014, we wanted to examine our current vision and mission statements to see if they truly reflect who we are. The impetus for this inquiry was motivated by discussions I was having, as the Head of School, with our Board of Trustees about all I was learning through my participation in the Van Lunen Fellows program.

The tools used in the study include the following:

- Interviews with current parents, alumni-parents, alumni, students, parish members, and local community members
- Surveys of current parents and parish members
- Review of current and past school documents
- Research in various philosophies of education, including comparing findings to other Orthodox Christian schools in North America
- Vision Team discussion sessions, some of which included Dn. James Hughes

Once this process of inquiry was completed, the Vision Team documented the results and conducted follow up meetings for further discussion prior to articulating what we believe, based on the study, to be a distinct school identity that represents who we are as an Orthodox Christian school.

III. What We Learned

Results of the Study

In regard to institutional attributes, particularly our beliefs, ministry status, and core values, results of the parent and parish member surveys showed that our current understanding of and views on these institutional attributes remain consistent with the intent of the founders of the school and

the direction the school has taken throughout its 25 year history. The top five priorities cited by parents for sending their children to the school were: (1) Orthodox Christian formation, (2) positive moral environment, (3) character and quality of the faculty and staff, (4) nurturing environment, and (5) academics. (These are listed in order of importance according to the data.) These priorities were further confirmed by the interviews and review of school documents.

Reflecting on the results of our research, the Vision Team noted how the school's beliefs and core values were closely aligned with those of the parish, which should be the case with a church-sponsored school.

Our findings further confirmed that both the parents and parish members consider the school a ministry of the church itself, not a separate entity that is merely related to the church legally and organizationally.

The Vision Team, through its research and in dialogue with Dn. James Hughes, spent a considerable amount of time clarifying and articulating our philosophy of education. While there is still much work to be done in this area, our main conclusion was that the way we educate in the school should be directly modeled on the way the Church educates the faithful. In brief, the liturgical services of the Orthodox Church provide us a model for how we should educate, while the experience of life in the parish community

provides us indicators of what our school culture should be like. Thus, our philosophy of education finds its origin in the Church.

In regard to student outcomes, we had similar results to those related to the institutional attributes. In a meeting between the Vision Team and representative stakeholders³ from the parent body and parish membership, we utilized an anonymous feedback exercise⁴ for getting responses to the following question: What should a St. Lawrence Academy graduate have learned and experienced while a student at the school? The top three responses were: (1) spiritual formation, (2) character development, and (3) academics. The implications of the results suggest that both our vision of what a graduate should have learned and experienced while a student at the school and the mission of the school to fulfill this vision should give particular attention to spiritual formation, character development, and academics, with the teachers and school culture providing the context in which this takes place.

In reviewing our documents, we realized that our current vision statement is not a description of a portrait of the graduate based on the above priorities. Rather, it is a more detailed articulation of our current mission

³ This was a purposefully selected demographically diverse group.

⁴ Participants wrote responses on post-it notes and placed them together on a designated wall in the room.

statement and goals. As I learned through the insights of Jim Mckenzie, consultant and Head of School at The Rock School, “Vision should always be defined in student outcomes.” So one of our priorities is to create a “student-centric” vision statement with specific outcomes. Likewise, we’ve determined that we will have to modify our mission statement to better reflect how we will fulfill our vision.

Through this study, we discovered that our expected school-wide learning results have not been well defined or articulated formally. Our ESLR’s should proceed from a student-centered vision. Once defined and articulated, they will need to become a visible and consistently communicated part of our school culture and environment, with artifacts, activities, and programs that will keep them at the forefront of the minds of the teachers and students.

IV. The Difference it is Making

Discovering who we are as a school has given us a foundation and a framework with which we can creatively and strategically approach building the future of our school. Having now a vision and direction for continuing the journey, we are approaching ideas and initiatives related to the school’s design, culture, communication, and financial support with clarity and hope.

Designing who we are

Besides the preparation this study has given us toward moving forward with a strategic planning process, through our exploration of institutional attributes and student outcomes, we've been able to identify a number of related attributes that are not only part of the school identity, but are also essential to both the promotion and protection of the school.

1. *Distinctives*. There are a number of distinctives that set us apart from other schools in our local area, as well as some which set us apart from other Orthodox Christian schools. We are now in the process of exploring and clarifying what these distinctives are and how they impact the perception of our school. Our goal is to articulate these distinctives in order to know for ourselves how they represent and influence our school, and to then see how they can be utilized in branding and marketing.
2. *Discipleship vs. Mission*. Through the results of this study, we were able to determine that we are a discipleship model school. This led us to examine our admissions policy and to seriously weigh the impact the influence of non-Christian students and families have had on the school culture. While this may come at a cost to us financially through loss of tuition revenue, we believe that it is more important to provide

our children a learning environment that is safe and beneficial to their growth as Orthodox Christians.

3. *Programs.* The inquiry into our school identity has provided us several ideas for new programs that would support the mission of the school. Presently, we have an instrumental music program and a youth choir. We already have under way plans for a school gardening program. However, we would also like to develop discipleship-oriented programs that encourage spiritual growth and servant leadership, including community service and outreach programs. In addition, we are currently developing a professional development program for the faculty; our goal is to have weekly sessions together that will include curriculum design, dialogue about instruction and our educational philosophy, and soul care.
4. *School environment and spaces.* For the next school year, we will be making extensive changes to the classrooms that will better reflect our educational philosophy and methods of instruction. Our facilities are quite limited and limiting; however, we know there are aesthetic and practical improvements that can be made to our available spaces that will enable a more purposeful and practical approach to their organization and use.

Being who we are

Knowing our school identity helps us to know our part and what we are called to do as leaders and teachers in the school. As we learned from Jim McKenzie, the vision-driven teacher knows what the end goal is, enabling him or her to creatively and passionately teach toward the achievement of that goal. This develops motivation, enthusiasm, and a desire to truly make an impact in the lives of our students. At the same time, the teacher is striving to be a model of the message we are conveying to our students about Christ and His Church, being witnesses to the Truth and the joys of living the Christian life, and providing an example of servant leadership for the sake of others.

Likewise, our students benefit from a vision-driven approach to their own education, character formation, and spiritual growth. We are making it our goal to help them understand and embrace this vision, with the hope that they will grow into mature Christians and seek out the ways in which they are being called to contribute to the life of the parish community as members of the Church. This extends to the impact they can have on the local community through service projects and outreach expeditions. Thus, our school culture will be intentionally built upon our vision and become the living embodiment of our school identity.

Communicating who we are

Through this study, we've been able to develop ideas, metaphors, and vocabulary that will help us to clearly and creatively communicate who we are to parents, parish members, supporters, and prospective families. During the current school year we developed a new website which will increasingly reflect our school identity through its text and images. We've also increased our internet presence through social media such as Facebook and Instagram. In the next year, I will also be writing a monthly blog focusing on our school and the broader Orthodox Christian school movement.

Having a clear, well-articulated school identity is also providing us direction for our marketing and branding efforts. This is an area that has not received much attention in the history of the school, primarily because the majority of our students come from the parish membership of the sponsoring church. However, through my experience as a Van Lunen Fellow, I've come to understand the connection between branding and recruitment and development. In this sense, image matters.

Supporting who we are

The idea of "funding the mission of the school" was a new concept to our board prior to my involvement with Bruce Lockerbie and the Van Lunen

Fellows program. Up to that point, our income was mainly through direct church support, fundraising events, and tuition⁵. Now that we have a better picture of who we are and where we are going as a school, we are looking at the roles of enrollment and development in funding the mission, as well as some innovative approaches to creating alternative revenue streams.

1. *Enrollment.* As mentioned above, we have determined that we are a discipleship model school, which puts certain restrictions on admissions that affect enrollment. At the same time, we are beginning to see growth in our church membership, with young families coming in that are considering enrolling their children in the school. We anticipate this trend to continue. In one case, we had a family move to our area to join the church because of the school. We see in this trend the possibility of growth for both the parish and school, and are exploring unique ways of marketing the school that would also include the parish. A further limit to enrollment is our facilities. Our current classrooms will hold a maximum of 15 students; with only 4 classrooms this brings our maximum enrollment capacity to 60 students. At present, we still have room to grow in the K–5 grades.

⁵ Since the cost of living is so high in our area, we typically only bring in approximately 50% of tuition per year and our tuition rate is far below the cost to educate. Church support is our main source of funding.

2. *Development.* Thanks to Bruce Lockerbie, Dave Hahn, and Zach Clark, we have gained a real understanding of the importance of donors in funding the mission of the school. Through what we accomplished with this study, we will be able to more confidently bring our mission before potential donors. We see a number of opportunities in the next year for approaching potential donors, utilizing the strategies I'm learning through the Van Lunen program.
3. *Curriculum development.* Clarifying our school identity has opened up a number opportunities to us for creating alternative revenue streams. As a church-sponsored school with a unique philosophy of education, we are in a position to develop curricula that would benefit both Christian schools and Christian home-schooling families. This in itself may not prove to be a major source of funding, but the exposure could potentially help us with marketing, enrollment, and development.

V. Conclusion

This study has been an essential step in moving forward as a school. We have learned that in many ways we are very similar to the school that was founded 25 years ago. Yet, we also see that we are changing in ways

that align us more with the teachings of the Church, provide our students with opportunities for integrating more fully into the life of the parish community, and prepare them to enter confidently into the world beyond their home, the school, and the church. We have discovered that there is a creative and innovative aspect to being a small church-sponsored school. Most importantly, we have discovered that who we are as a school can proceed from the teachings and life of the Church—indeed, the school is the Church.

In knowing who we are, we can embrace the vision that is before us. We can proceed with strategic planning that reflects this vision, supports our mission, and helps us to grow toward sustainability. Our path to discovery has brought us past several milestones. We now look forward to the next 25 years as we continue on our way.

