

## **Developing the Long-Term Strategic Plan for ICS**

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### *Introduction*

When applying for the Van Lunen Program and learning it included an applied school project, it seemed obvious that it was time to work on really developing the first major, independent capital campaign in the 34 year history of the school. The school was prepping for growth but we really didn't know where to start with a capital campaign. I had been at ICS for 3 years, 1.5 as the Head of School. The school had gone through a major culture change, and it was time.

Then last July while sitting at the Prince Conference Center engaging in the teaching of the first week of the Van Lunen Center (VLC) I realize that though I wanted to jump headlong into this, I was getting ahead of where we needed to be. The VLC faculty kept referring to the school's strategic plan that flowed out of the mission. ICS had just adopted a new mission statement that was driving us in many ways. But a strategic plan? That was something we simply didn't have. That's when I shifted gears and decided it was time to develop a comprehensive strategic plan for ICS.

### *Background*

Intermountain Christian School began in 1982 as a ministry of the Evangelical Free Church of Salt Lake City. It quickly grew to 300 students K-12 in the first five years of existence. The school moved to the current property at the foot of the beautiful Wasatch Front on the eastern edge of the Salt Lake valley in 1992. Since that time, enrollment stagnated and fluctuated between the mid-200s and mid-300s. The enrollment model is covenantal/discipleship in nature. There are over 50 churches represented in the student body. ICS is the ONLY Preschool-12<sup>th</sup> grade, fully accredited, interdenominational Christian School in Salt Lake. There are two main Catholic High Schools, a system of Catholic elementary and middle schools, four small (<120 PS-8<sup>th</sup>) Lutheran schools and some very tiny, unaccredited Christian Schools scattered throughout the valley that are less than 30 students. ICS is VERY unique.

That said, the school stagnated in growth numerically and fell into some ruts culturally since the late 90s. Academics were strong but retention rates were mostly in the 78-82% range which did not reflect a strong endorsement from families. When I became the Head of School in January, 2014, we started to pursue a new culture as well as improved quality. This caused a great deal of turnover. Most of that turnover needed to happen, but it happened sooner than any of us anticipated.

The Center for the Advancement of Christian Education (CACE) began working with ICS in the summer of 2014. That was incredibly helpful but I was still missing the necessary leadership skills to take ICS to the next level, especially given the newer faculty and staff. God blessed the school with very well-qualified teachers, administrators and staff, but we needed a unified plan to carry out God's vision for our school in its unique place in Utah.

### Process

We began the strategic planning process on an evening in November led by Jim Marsh in which we invited about 50 key stakeholders from the ICS community. The group was composed of parents, board members, faculty, staff and administration and friends of ICS, both new and old. The group was organized into nine tables. Each table was led through discussions and then shared those results with the larger group. The groups discussed and shared three general areas pertaining to ICS:

- Challenges
- Dreams
- Questions

The group left with an overall optimistic tone and excitement for the future. But it wasn't just rooted in an emotional excitement. One of the biggest developments out of this process is the understanding of what impact the strategic planning process had on Westminster Christian Academy during Jim Marsh's career there. When he explained that they went through this process in his 2<sup>nd</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, 22<sup>nd</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> years and in between this became his job description it's like a lightbulb went on for our school.

In the past at ICS, strategic planning really flowed out the accreditation process led by AdvancEd/Northwest rubrics. Ironically, we're actually prepping for an accreditation visit this coming November. But given our emphasis on our new mission statement our new administrative team was finding ourselves confused why we were determining our success and the future of God's school based on standards established by relatively "secular" organizations. They were good considerations but they

certainly didn't reflect completely who we are or who we feel God is calling us to be. The strategic planning process led to this more.

Another value this process embraced was collaboration. In digging through some paperwork of my predecessor, I found a document titled, "A Strategic Plan for ICS, 2009". However, upon finding it, I asked some longer-term faculty and staff, our school board and even the person who was the Vice Principal at the time and none of them knew anything about it! As far as I could tell, the previous strategic plan was developed by either the previous leader by himself or with the input of just a couple others. Then very little was done with it...and a leader can get away with that if only a couple people even know of a plan's existence! The beauty of this plan is that between the first gathering in November and the people making up the strategic planning task forces there were nearly 70 people involved in the process. When you add in another 20 or so faculty members from whom we solicited feedback as well as others from CACE and in the community the total number of people involved in developing what will be our guide for the next five years comes to around 100 people. The buy-in is important.

After the November meeting, the leadership, with the help of Jim Marsh and in conjunction with the school board, came up with six priority areas around which we developed task forces:

- Academic Program
- Enrollment Growth, Marketing and Communications
- Financial Sustainability
- Mission and Core Values
- Governance and Decision Making
- Facilities and Ownership

We found people to lead each group and assembled strategic teams of leaders, board members, faculty, parents, friends and even two students!

In February, Jim Marsh returned to train the leaders and the school board and then meet with the task forces to help them understand what they were taking on for the next few months. Throughout February, March and April, the groups met 2-4 times and came up with proposals of various strategies for their particular priorities.

In April we gleaned feedback from our faculty and also from the CACE fellows who know us well.

Again, Jim Marsh helped assemble these reports into a cohesive document with a consistent format. We met with our administrative team (Head of School, ECE Director, ES/MS Principal and HS Principal) for an entire day to thoroughly analyze what was proposed by the task forces and come together on a unified plan.

We proposed a draft of the plan to the school board in May that included 6 priorities, with each priority having 3 to 7 strategies. There were 1 to 4 initiatives under each strategy. We are currently in the process of gleaned final feedback from the school board, the task forces and the administrative team by June 17. At the June 28 school board meeting we FULLY anticipate having an approved long-term strategic plan for the ICS!

### Looking Ahead

#### *Academic Program*

The strategic plan is concentrating on strategies involving curriculum mapping both horizontally and vertically that will make for a more cohesive academic experience including trying to determine what REALLY makes up an ICS diploma. We also plan to more intentionally plan biblical integration and pursue technology integration. Finally, we plan to implement both an academic support program for struggling students and a program specifically for gifted students.

#### *Enrollment Growth, Marketing and Communications*

There has been much progress on this front in recent years at ICS so the task force developed that further by encouraging us to really tell the compelling ICS story and better maintain a database for marketing purposes. We will also be working on a more intentional social media campaigns with platforms that extend beyond Facebook. Finally, we will establish a diversity (racial, socio-economic) task force that will concentrate on ways for ICS to better reflect the kingdom of God in Utah.

#### *Financial Sustainability*

Much progress has also been made on this front but much more needs to be done. We hope to re-establish a finance committee and pursue the eventual milestone of tuition covering 100% of our expenses. We also are putting mechanisms in place to avoid adding to unearned revenue and pursuing the paying down of current unearned revenue (robbing from next year to pay the current year expenses) as well as establishing a 15% reserve. Finally, we have a goal to expand charitable giving

which will be important to implement everything in the plan! We're not certain all this can happen in a five-year period but we're establishing the goals nonetheless.

### *Mission and Core Values*

This group did a fantastic job of developing specific core values and philosophy of education out of our mission. We will continue working to finalize those documents and really start using them. They also have recommended establishing a board subcommittee to study whether ICS should remain covenantal/discipleship enrollment model or become more missional in nature. Finally, we hope to develop programs that specifically help students clarify their identity Christ as well as develop relationships in the broader (beyond ICS) community to deepen the impact of the school.

### *Governance and Decision Making*

The work of this group exposed the need for us to educate the ICS community on the role, function and structure of the school board. Also, we need to continue to educate the school board itself on what its proper function is. The task force recommended that we come up with a list of talents/skill sets of people we would pursue having represented on the school board. Finally, and this is the big one, ICS will be developing alternative governance models that will consider alternatives to being a ministry of the Evangelical Free Church.

### *Facilities and Ownership*

This task force has probably been the most exciting one to see develop, not because it's produced great documents, but because the group is more interested in action and less interested in discussion! They are READY TO GO! It became obvious by looking at net growth percentages of 14% the last couple of years that we are almost maxed out in our current facilities. With all classes full, we cannot expect to have more than 400 students. But the decision has been made to maximize space on our current campus and look for off-campus property to develop outdoor athletic facilities (soccer fields, possibly baseball and track). This has even uncovered the potential of a 7+ acre property to be donated by a major corporation! We've also determined we will pursue building a performing arts center that will double as a sanctuary for the EFree Church. This will better allow the campus to be shared, ownership to be clarified and the school to really develop as a school. The goal is to undertake a building project of a performing arts center, classroom expansion to double classroom space and expand our current gymnasium in a 4-5 year window. We estimate this to be a \$8-10 million capital cost including achieving some other financial goals (using the Dave Hahn method of capital campaigns learned in VLC in Arizona).

Needless to say, we are fully expecting to be working VERY closely with Zach Clark in the coming years. In the meantime, we are also planning for temporary growth beyond 400 students in the next 1-3 years and doing temporary improvements to maximize the experience of our current students.

### *Conclusion*

Aggressive? Absolutely. Timely? Couldn't be better. Can I do it on my own? Not at all. Humanly possible? Not really. Big God? Nope, ENORMOUS God who we believe has been guiding this plan all along. We're doing everything we can to provide impactful, exemplary, life-changing, and very unique Christian education in the Salt Lake valley. Our mission is that ICS is a Christ-centered learning community that equips and inspires students to thrive in God's world. This valley needs it badly. This mountain of work (aka strategic plan) is the next step towards pursuing that mission.

I don't know where I'd be personally or where ICS would be organizationally without the guidance of the Van Lunen Center. I will be eternally grateful for the contribution made to Christian education in Utah.