

Taking Brentwood Christian School to the Next Generation

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How can a Christian school sustain its mission beyond the tenure of the current long-standing leadership and school board into succeeding generations? Brentwood Christian School's biggest challenge for the decade ahead is to create systems that will survive the transfer of leadership and will sustain the school's commitments to doing and teaching everything in an excellent way within the Christian worldview and staying affordable for average church members.

The primary means of attacking this project has been to initiate a strategic planning process:

- To create strong consensus about the meaning of the school's mission and vision
- To explore barriers to the mission's survival in the next generation
- And to initiate a plan to build the mission into the school's systems and culture

Just as the school board approved this approach, news that rocked the school community threatened to decimate our school board. Keeping the school board "on board" became the first order of business and delayed the strategic process until the spring semester. Guided by an experienced consultant, substantial progress was achieved in six sessions. Completion of the plan will require the involvement of a larger segment of the school community this fall.

Taking Brentwood Christian School to the Next Generation

How can a school sustain its mission beyond the tenure of the current leadership and school board into succeeding generations?

Project Focus:

As head of school for thirty-five years from 1974 when Brentwood Christian served only PK-1st grade with about 100 students, I have seen God's hand at work in growing the school to a full preschool, elementary, and secondary program with 750 students. He has blessed us to move from a corner on a city block to 44 rolling, tree-covered acres with three classroom buildings, two gymnasiums, three playgrounds, and a sanctuary shared with the Brentwood Oaks Church of Christ, which is the school's parent organization.

The dream which has fueled the last 35 years of growth has been to support average Christian families in their efforts to raise their children as faithful Christians by providing them with an excellent Christ-centered education. As head of school I have helped to forge a new path for BCS, and other Church of Christ schools, in writing curriculum and guiding teachers to teach and mentor with a consciously Christian worldview. A parallel commitment has been to keep the school affordable for average Christian families.*

The biggest challenge for the decade ahead is to transfer leadership to the next generation in a way that will sustain our two-fold commitment to doing and teaching everything in an excellent way within the Christian worldview and staying affordable for average church members. Creating systems that will make this transfer smooth and successful is the focus of this project.

Project Process and Methods:

Accomplishing this challenge is a far greater task than can be accomplished in a year of focused attention. The primary means of attacking this project has been to initiate a strategic planning process:

- To create strong consensus about the meaning of the school's mission and vision and a deeper understanding of what it means in daily practice
- To explore barriers to the mission's survival in the next generation
- And to initiate a plan to build the mission into the school's systems and culture that includes foundational steps to assure the mission's centrality in the future, such as spreading institutional knowledge more widely in the school community and addressing weaknesses identified through the strategic planning process

**For context, average family income in Texas for a family of four was \$59,808 in 2006.*

Just as the school board approved this approach, news that rocked the school community threatened to decimate our school board. Brentwood Christian School is a direct ministry of the Brentwood Oaks Church of Christ and has no independent corporate identity. The school board has operated since 1974, when it was re-formulated to provide for the expansion of the school, as if it were independent except for a very limited list of activities. The church eldership required the board to obtain their permission to borrow money, to change use or use new portions of the campus, or to change the structure of the board, and it required that all school employees must be active members of the Church of Christ. The eldership also retained the right to review any decision of the board, but it had not exercised that right apart from those basic commitments. Last summer, however, the eldership overturned a board decision which did not involve any of those commitments. The board asked the eldership to re-consider. The eldership agreed to a re-hearing but did not change its decision.

This decision for the first time brought the board face-to-face with its true position as a committee that did not have final authority in any area of governance, a fact that had not been understood by most board members or any of the school parents. Many of the most effective board members questioned the value of spending their time in a position where much time, research, and effort could be overturned by a group which they believed was only tangentially involved in the life of the school. Board members were very angry and questioned the value of strategic planning when their work could be overturned by the eldership. Keeping the school board “on board” became the first order of business.

A series of one-on-one meetings between the board chair and the leadership of the elders led to a meeting of the full board with the full eldership and the school president. This meeting was pivotal. Each board member and each elder introduced himself and spelled out his history with the school. Many of the board members and elders had never met each other. What became clear through the introductions is that both board members and elders had deep history and investment in the school. This common ground created an opportunity for beginning dialogue and reassured board members that strategic planning could get underway.

By God’s grace, the strategic planning process got underway, albeit a semester later than anticipated, guided by the services of an experienced consultant. The board chair assembled a core committee composed of two elders, six board members, two faculty members, and the school president. Substantial progress was achieved in one two-day weekend to launch the effort and four all-day sessions, establishing agreement on the mission, delineating anticipated barriers, and composing the first stages of a plan draft.

Concurrent with the strategic planning initiatives, we have taken other steps to faithfully transfer leadership to the next generation. Chief among these steps has been to create a new position of business manager to take a big load off my plate, to upgrade our accounting systems to the size of the school, and to spread the financial knowledge more widely in the school community. Currently, no one but me understands the interactions of all our financial operations and how it is possible to keep our tuition affordable and maintain quality. The new business manager will begin in mid-July. Another initiative

the board has almost completed with my assistance has been to re-write the board handbook to clarify and focus on board-level policy, removing administrative policy. This has pared the board policy book by more than fifty percent. I am beginning to develop a comprehensive administrative handbook to cover the necessary items no longer covered by board policy. I will not explore all these initiatives in any detail, but will confine this report to the strategic planning process.

The first two core committee sessions were devoted to the examination of the mission and vision for the school. The third and fourth sessions explored the reality of the blocks, barriers, and contradictions that might prevent the realization of the vision. The fifth and sixth sessions formulated key steps necessary to pursue the vision statements and to address the potential blocks, barriers, and contradictions.

Project Results:

Vision Statements – Brentwood Christian School:

0. Belongs to God (Foundational to all other vision statements)
1. Inspires all students to love God and serve him
2. Provides a Christ-centered and nurturing environment for students to discover and develop their God-given talents
3. Equips students with a strong academic foundation based on a Christian worldview
4. Is affordable to average income families and is financially sound
5. Expands its influence internally and externally

Potential Blocks, Barriers, and Contradictions

1. Failure to depend on God and recognize his providence and leading
2. Failure to do succession planning
3. Failure to address governance issues that surfaced in the fall controversy
4. Failure to address funding issues
5. Failure to address a business model and other circumstances that hinder full enrollment
6. Difficulty of finding qualified teachers who are members of the Church of Christ
7. Failure to address communication needs in a changing technological environment
8. Failure to address demographic and social changes, such as a changing neighborhood, new Christian schools nearby, and changes in the Christian community
9. Failure to provide adequate resources, i.e., technology, equipment, facilities, etc.

Next Steps to Take the Strategic Vision to Reality

The core committee decided it is time to involve a larger segment of the school community. Key initiatives were set out to support the vision statements, and each initiative was assigned to a chairman, who will assemble a Vision Focus Committee to study the initiative and propose a plan to address it. Most of the barriers that were identified were assigned to one of these committees. Those that did not fall under one of these committees were assigned to additional chairs. The committee chairs were asked to

assemble a committee in coordination with the school president and attend training by the consultant during August. Each committee will schedule meetings over the next three months under the guidance of the consultant and the school president, and the consultant will consolidate the work into a report to the board and administration for its approval.

Vision Focus Committees

1. Develop a mission-focused leadership transition plan (Also address potential barriers No. 1-2) – Marquita Moss*, president.
2. Involve faculty to develop a plan to accomplish vision statements one and two – Becky Stewart*, senior faculty member.
3. Develop a system of training and feedback to enable faculty to be proficient in teaching and writing curriculum in a Christian worldview (vision statement three) – vice president for education and elementary principal, Libby Weed.
4. Continue systematic assessment of academic programs (vision statement three) – Libby Weed.
5. Create a plan to broaden and deepen the development program to accomplish strategic vision number four (Also potential barrier No. 4) – Brian Jackson*, board development committee.

Other Strategic Committees

1. Address governance issues (Potential barrier No. 3) – Royce Clark*, board president.
2. Address steps to full enrollment (Potential barrier No. 5) – Karen Withem, admissions director.
3. Address need for pool of qualified teachers (Potential barrier No. 6) – Jared Lee, secondary principal.
4. Address communication needs (Potential barrier No. 7) – Jay Burcham, board member
5. Provide analysis of demographic and social changes (Potential barrier No. 8) – Jay Burcham.
6. Address adequate resources (Potential barrier No. 9) – David Taylor*, board member.

*Indicates that this committee chair served on the core committee. Others did not.

Analysis and Commentary:

The school board believed that having representation by the church elders on the core committee would be vital to the board's confidence that the hard work of strategic planning would be rewarded with the approval of the elders. Thus we were gratified that two elders were appointed to the committee. However, after the second session, those elders did not attend any more sessions. Instead, one of the board members, meanwhile, had been ordained as an elder, and they deferred to him. We were all wary that this might be a step backward toward the board's fears. On the contrary, I believe it made it possible for the group to explore the contradictions and limitations, as well as the strengths and blessings, involved in the current governance model and to conclude that priority steps should be taken to work toward a better model.

One of the most remarkable realizations that developed during the first two strategic planning sessions is that the core committee shared a deep level of consensus on the school's core values and vision for the future. This was the period of time spent in "the dream room." Even during the next four sessions in which the reality of barriers, obstacles, and contradictions were explored and strategic directions were mapped out, that consensus on mission and vision held firm. If anything, the discussion of a wide variety of views, concerns, ideas, and proposals not only encouraged a healthy and creative environment for mapping out a strategy to pursue the mission/vision, it also deepened the team's understanding and commitment to the vision.

At the same time, much work is yet to be done, and I see two major problems with the way the core group viewed the completion of the work.

First, it is unclear if the core committee realizes the danger of turning the completion of the plan over to committee chairs and committee members who have not participated in the initial process. My original proposal was that the consultant would coordinate all stages of the process, with my assistance, and then pull it together with a proposed draft of a plan for the board's consideration. The core group seemed to think that its work was done except for those group members who were assigned to recruit and chair a committee. Uninitiated committees could fail to carry through on the work or, lacking a clear understanding of their assignments, could take the next steps in divergent directions.

Second, the board chair assigned the coordination of the work of the new committees to me. One of the points that became clear during the core committee's work is that our administration is understaffed. Currently, I am also completing the quiet phase of a \$4.5 million fundraising campaign without the help of a development director, and the public campaign begins in August. Also, I will be bringing the new business manager on board. I question whether I will be able to handle all my responsibilities and serve as the point person for both the campaign and the strategic planning committees.

In my view, my next step is to bring the core group to see that we must return to my original proposal for the completion of the plan if the core group's work is to bear fruit in a good plan that actually is put into practice.