

Casting a Collaborative Vision for Christian Education

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Background

Northeastern Wisconsin Lutheran High School is a small high school of 130 students in grades 9-12. Established in 1976, our school will turn 40 next year. With an association of 12 churches, 5 supporting Lutheran elementary schools, 4 free-standing Lutheran preschools and many individual supporters throughout our region of the state, we have a rich history of helping families prepare Christian leaders. In the past seven years we have added an international student program, athletic offerings in the areas of football, track & field and golf, established a 1:1 technological environment utilizing iPads, built up our wireless infrastructure and implemented a security system along with a new website and marketing efforts. We also just completed a 3 year capital campaign entitled **Partnership in Ministry**, that allowed us to greatly reduce our overall debt and address campus needs in the classrooms and by repaving the parking lot. Efforts to grow the school through this association and our supporting schools has had limited results, however. As a result, I set out to “re-brand” NEW Lutheran High in an attempt to grow the school by capturing the attention of a larger segment of our local population.

Casting the Vision - A Collaborative Effort

Even before this project became a reality, there was a group of passionate Christ-followers sold out for Christian education that had been working on a vision for high-quality, sustainable, Christian schools in our area. This group, with representation from our local supporting schools, both Lutheran and non-Lutheran, has been working to create a plan that would unite our churches and schools to streamline operations, to create a system that would promote stewardship of resources and to create a branding message that allowed

for a stronger sense of pk-12th grade identity and loyalty. This group of incredibly dedicated people is called the **Dream Team**.

As I shared my project with our Board of Directors at NEW Lutheran High School, it became apparent that our efforts on the Dream Team fell in line with what we wanted to accomplish in the re-branding project. With that in mind, the Dream Team was charged with creating the Strategic Plan for NEWLHS, which includes the re-branding initiative.

What Our Community Knows About Lutheran Schools

As part of a fact-finding effort, the Dream Team commissioned the Strategic Research Institute (based out of St. Norbert College in nearby DePere, WI) to conduct a survey of our metropolitan area for the benefit of all of our Lutheran Schools.

In late 2014, Executive Director Dr. David Wegge, along with two other members of his team, created a general survey to better understand the factors that influence how families make decisions regarding school selection for their children.

The survey included 400 families with school-aged children ages 13 or younger. Of these families, 100 of them were from supporting schools and churches in the association. The other 300 were randomly selected.

The findings of the survey, which had a margin of error at the 95% confidence level, were used to provide us with:

- An appraisal of brand awareness and image
- Factors that influence school selection
- Barriers for families choosing Lutheran schools
- The importance of finances in the selection process
- Possible messages that would be used to attract families

Dr. Wegge and his team provided us with invaluable information in this process. His professionalism and guidance throughout allowed for a tremendous tool to be utilized to help our cause.

Through prayer and much discussion at the Dream Team level, the results of this survey were used to take the next steps in the re-branding/visioning process and were shared with our Board of Directors, the Dream Team and other local Lutheran church and school leaders. In a heavily entrenched Catholic area, these findings were important to identify as we moved forward. It also affirmed that, by far, finances plays the most important role in families selecting a school for their children. As I learned from Jim McKenzie and Zach

Clark, families will pay for, what they perceive as tremendous value for their children. Crafting a branding message and then delivering on the message is critical for our success.

What Our Community Of Support Thinks

As you might expect, as a team of volunteers with full-time jobs and families, getting together on a regular basis has been a challenge for the Dream Team. However, we had renewed energy and focus when we discussed my inclusion in the Van Lunen program. Our emphasis shifted to the re-branding effort for NEW Lutheran High School.

It was decided that we should enter into a process whereby we would gather opinions and feedback from loyal supporters of our school through focus groups.

In the fall of 2015 we began the planning of our focus group work. Two members of our Dream Team had experience with a professional organization called Leede Research. Mrs. Christine Rassmussen was assigned to work with our group and what she required of us was to find 8-12 individuals per group that had knowledge of and affinity to NEW Lutheran High school.

One member of our Dream Team, Mr. Joe Bergner of Imaginasium, offered up his office space as a place to conduct the focus group meetings. Joe's office worked great as there was a large conference room that we could utilize for this purpose. Joe also was able to set up a system whereby the meetings were all videotaped so that members of our team could see firsthand the responses to different questions and images that were shared as a part of this process.

Christine's focus group discussions were centered around five main themes:

- Understanding imagery of NEWLHS and other local high school's
- Identifying strengths and weaknesses of the current name
- Evaluating four potential new names
- Identifying "moods" of potential new images and names
- Understanding the impact of changing the school mascot and/or colors

In the session tied to understanding imagery of NEWLHS and other schools, the groups were asked to use one-word to describe the school. The results were mixed but the words selected for our school were positive and ones that we would want associated with our community.

In evaluating names, there was one clear winner. Strengths and weaknesses of each name were listed but in the end, another helpful thing that came from the meetings was that all of our groups felt that our current name needed to be changed.

Joe, a graphic artist by trade, and co-owner of Imaginasium advertising firm, created the “mood” boards for the attendees to respond to. Joe did an outstanding job but the results were varied due to the fact that the people in attendance thought a name would help before a look and feel were to be created.

Finally, almost all of the attendees thought that it would be wise to keep our mascot (Trailblazer/Blazer) and the colors of maroon, white, black and silver. The rationale was to keep a connection to the alumni, families and supporters who have loved the school for the first 40 years of its existence.

A final piece that we tagged onto this experience was to send out a brief survey with the basic themes to an additional 100 people that are in our friend groups. Each Dream Team member send out a survey to several different people that were either loosely connected or not connected at all to NEWLHS. This survey was also shared with the entire Board of Directors and all members of the NEWLHS faculty and staff as well.

Re-branding As Part Of A Strategic Plan

The Dream Team took all of the information gathered from local meetings, surveys, focus groups and individual conversations and has formulated a plan. This proposal is now being revised to account for communications and relationships with our local Lutheran supporting churches and schools.

As this plan unfolds, it is clear that we all want to reach out to other evangelical Christian organizations. If we rely solely on Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod entities, we are all quite confident that we will die a slow death. The body of Christ is rich and diverse and, we believe, there is a big need for Christian schools to exist. By approaching church leaders and inviting them to be a part of this new school/association, we believe that we are living out our calling of making disciples of all nations. There is much to be thankful for and, if we can get to the point of working together for the good of God’s kids and seeking and listening to God’s will, I believe we will experience something truly remarkable!

The re-branding component of this plan is still in play. The high school needs a facelift and a new name to freshen up the look and feel of our program to appeal to different segments of our community. The question is, who will join us in this adventure?

The Transition Plan

When this becomes a reality, there will be a need for clear & consistent communication with many different stakeholders - alumni, congregations, faculty and staff, alumni parents, Lutheran Synodical leadership, local media, prospective and current families, etc. To guide us in this process we will rely on experts that have either gone through a transition similar to this (Alan Freeman - Concordia Academy of Baltimore, MD) or who have a wealth of marketing and communications experience (Gretchen Jameson - Concordia University Wisconsin, Ryan Bredow - Lutheran High School Association of Greater Milwaukee, Joe Bergner - Imaginasium). We will not attempt to 'reinvent the wheel'. We will instead focus on getting the help we need to make this a successful process.

The Initial Proposal And The Early Adopters

We are very excited as our #1 supporting school has approved (at the Board of Education level) the exploration of a merger/association. This is wonderful news for us and it helps us to see the potential of a city-wide partnership with many different organizations involved. In late June, 2016, two Dream Team members will share the proposal with the Board of Education at Green Bay Trinity Lutheran School. The Board President will also be attending the Board of Directors meeting at NEWLHS in July for further clarification and discussion surrounding the proposal.

Our plan is to also include our #2 supporting school in the early discussions to gauge their interest and to include them in the communications. Involvement from this school is critical to long-term success.

Results And Conclusion

At the beginning of my experience with the Van Lunen program, my mind immediately went to a re-branding for my school. However, God has stretched me greatly to think bigger and bolder for Him. The passion and persistence of the Dream Team, the leadership and guidance I receive from my Board of Directors, the strong expertise being shared by my consultants Zach Clark and Joe Bergner & the encouragement from Dr. Hahn and the rest of the faculty at Van Lunen, in addition to my incredibly supportive group, the Wild Stallions (Dalles, James & Jason) of the Amazing Greys '15-16 has led me to understand that we must dream big when it comes to God's Kingdom and the calling we have to help young people grow. I am excited to see this project progress and I am confident in knowing that the Lord is directing our path for the sake of His kids.

Thank you for the opportunity to share and for the unique program being offered at Van Lunen - it's life-changing!

