

From Strategic Initiatives to Strategic Plan



Unity Christian School serves 330 students from Pre K – 12 on two campuses in Chilliwack, British Columbia, Canada. A faltering economy, a plethora of local school choice (both public and private) and a declining provincial student demographic have led to decreased enrolment. The UCS Board has developed a number of significant strategic initiatives in the areas of facilities, fund-raising and promotions, but the school lacked an overall strategic plan to ensure that all initiatives were connected to the school's central vision and goals.

The Board recognized the importance of developing a strategic plan to formally articulate a vision and core values, and to synthesize existing initiatives with new ones ensuring overall convergence with our mission, vision and values.

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BACKGROUND

Unity Christian School, located in Chilliwack, British Columbia, is a 42 year old school whose mission is to “Assist students in developing their God-given potential to enable them to join the in the work of building the Kingdom of God.” Unity Christian is led by an eight member board, the Principal and two Vice Principals. Unity Christian faces a variety of critical challenges, including facility / capital needs, academic quality, competition from other Christian, private and public schools, fiscal sustainability and affordability.

Unity Christian is well known for its commitment to integrating faith and learning, dedicated and high quality faculty, broad program offerings and extracurricular activities and a committed community of parents, alumni and donors.

Unity Christian seeks to position itself for long sustainability and growth. Amidst the diversity of educational choices available to Chilliwack area parents, Unity Christian offers a distinctive approach to Christian education. Unity Christian is blessed with a long track record of success and a foundation for being the preferred school in the community. In order to chart a multi-year path to realize its potential in the community and best serve its student learners, Unity Christian engaged David Medema of Pondera Advisors, LLC, a Grand Rapids, Michigan based leadership consulting firm to design and guide a strategic planning process.

The outcomes of this strategic planning process included:

- A shared vision to guide Unity Christian’s development over the next 5 – 10 years;
- Clear measures by which Unity Christian can evaluate the degree to which it has achieved its vision; and,
- Accountability for implementation of the plan and its priority outcomes.

The UCS board accepted the need to develop a strategic plan to achieve the above outcomes and agreed to support my work on this plan through the Van Lunen Center. UCS had already committed to a full scale school review process for the spring of 2011 through the Society of Christian School of BC. This is an extensive school review which includes input from all stakeholders via online questionnaires along with a two day site visit by a review team (comprised on experienced educators form other BC Christian schools).

Concern was expressed about engaging in the school review and the strategic planning process simultaneously thereby potentially overwhelming stakeholders with the opportunity to provide input. A decision was made to have the strategic planning process follow the school review process by two weeks. Statistical data from the school review process would be available to the

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strategic planning team and although the input was gathered for a slightly different purpose, it proved valuable indeed. Because of the availability of this data the strategic planning team gathered additional information from a narrow band of stakeholders; namely, staff, board and education committee members.

The UCS board decided to maintain its existing mission statement but to add a vision statement and core values as part of the strategic planning process. The board then struck a strategic planning committee consisting of board members, administrative staff and a teacher from each campus.

The planning committee reviewed available data and met with Van Lunen consultant, Dave Medema for a weekend 'retreat'. Dave facilitated the discussion during retreat sessions and our vision, core values and strategic goals emerged. Following these sessions Dave and myself drafted the strategic plan – which can be viewed in its entirety on the school website at unitychristian.ca. The plan contains the following elements:

Mission Statement:

Our Unity Christian School Community is firmly committed to assisting its students in developing their God-given potential to enable them to join in the work of building the kingdom of God.

Vision Statement:

Unity Christian school, offering a distinctive approach to Christian education, will be known as the leading school in Chilliwack. Unity Christian students will reach their unique academic potential as Unity Christian strives to offer a wider variety of course selections and service learning opportunities and builds stronger extracurricular programs in fine arts and athletics. Underlying the student learning experience will be the Unity Christian Graduate Profile that guides student development of faith, intellect, talents and character as they move through the PreK-12 structure. Unity Christian will utilize exemplary 21st century teaching methods by a staff of life-long learners who seek to continuously improve their own skills.

Unity Christian will be an inclusive community that engages students, their parents, alumni and the broader community in support of the learning enterprise. Unity Christian will accommodate diverse learning styles and needs and welcome students from diverse backgrounds and abilities.

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Unity Christian will strengthen its community ties by integrating learning with service, deepening its relationships with local churches and pastors and by more effectively communicating who Unity Christian is and its distinctive approach to education.

Finally, Unity Christian facilities will support and encourage student learning by being state of the art and consolidated to one site.

CORE VALUES

Dedication of our all to God

The Unity Christian curriculum, pedagogy, assessment practices, policies, procedures and extra-curricular activities will faithfully reflect the Lordship of Christ over all.

Community

Unity Christian seeks to engage students, parents, employees and alumni in the enterprise of learning, all focused on the same outcome of learners equipped with faith and prepared to serve the school, the community and wherever the Kingdom needs them.

Grace

Unity Christian seeks to transform the life of each student, where each one's experience is recognized; story is heard; and potential, talents and abilities are discovered and nurtured.

Acceptance and Inclusiveness

Unity Christian welcomes families and students of all Christian traditions as well as those who demonstrate a sincere interest in the Christian faith. Unity Christian seeks to include within its community those students with special educational needs, who possess varying learning abilities and come from diverse racial / ethnic backgrounds.

Challenge

Unity Christian seeks to engage, challenge and instruct students in ways distinctive to each, according to their unique academic potential and learning style.

Discernment

Unity Christian believes in the importance of students who are critical thinkers and able to engage our culture through a lens of faith. Therefore, the Unity Christian community seeks to be a safe but not sheltering place.

SCORECARD

The Unity Christian scorecard identifies those benchmarks and measures by which it will define “success” and evaluate the degree to which it achieves its vision and strategic priorities. The scorecard includes goals and strategies relating to:

1. Educational Excellence
2. Fiscal Health
3. Stakeholder Engagement and Satisfaction
4. Meeting the Unity Christian Graduate Profile

The plan identifies strategic goals in each of these four areas. Goals contain measurable outcomes, timelines and identify champions work on the goal proceeds.

The board is committed to reviewing strategic goals regularly and to holding the champions responsible for progress, recognizing that goals and timelines may need adjusting from time to time. The board is equally committed to keeping the strategic plan current and relevant.

During the planning process we talked about developing a ‘tag-line’ for the school – a catchy short phrase that encapsulates who we are. The board has engaged a process for the development of this tag line and hopes to have this in place for by the fall of 2011.

Commentary on Learning:

During the development of our school’s strategic plan I have developed a heightened awareness of several factors:

- Bringing people together to discuss core values and articulate goals renews commitment and energizes action – this type of discussion should be ongoing in school communities and I’d like to reflect on ways to engage a broader section of our school in this type of dialogue
- A skilled facilitator is key to a successful process
- Having strategic goals refines people’s focus and it helps board members focus on the big picture rather than micro-managing the day to day affairs of a school