

Expansion and Growth: Starting in our Preschool

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Van Lunen - July 2015

The Adventure Began...

“For I know the plans I have for you declared the Lord...” The plans that God had for me were very different from the current path that I was on. In June of 2014, I accepted a call to Bethlehem Lutheran Church and School in Lakewood, Colorado. They were looking for someone to lead and grow their Early Learning Center (ELC). I have a heart and a passion for preschools and growing programs excites me! So, we packed up the house, our seven pets, my two kids and off to Colorado we went, to start our new adventure!

New State, New School, New Team... What Did I Do?

Bethlehem Lutheran School had been looking for an Early Learning Center Administrator for five years. The staff was very welcoming and they were craving guidance and direction! I had a number of goals coming into this new organization:

- * Not to make dramatic changes the first year
- * Build relationships and trust
- * See and experience their existing programs, instead of just doing what I wanted
- * Evaluate the needs of the staff and the program

My first and most important goal was to build relationships with my staff. They are the core of running our program effectively and I needed them on my side! I needed to establish and build trust. It was important for them to know that I was not there to accomplish my own personal agenda, but that as a team, we would make changes that were best for the program. I had only been in Colorado for a week and a half before I had two days of staff training with my new staff. Not a lot of “getting to know you” time

and school started the next day. We had monthly staff meetings scheduled, but I needed another way to get to know my staff and for them to get to know me. We had M&M's (monthly meetings). This was a monthly one-on-one fifteen minute meeting with every staff member. This allowed for us to get to know one another, build trust, share joys and concerns, and also a time for me to pray together for my employee. This time was valuable and aided in building the relationships with each one of my employees.

Growing the Program

When I interviewed with Bethlehem, there was one key goal they had that truly excited me; they wanted someone to take their program to the next level and to help grow it! When I arrived, they had four classrooms that were not full. A three's classroom, a older three's/fours classroom, a four's classroom, and an older fours/fives classroom. Growth does not happen overnight; it takes a plan, a quality program, awesome teachers, and happy parents. One of the first changes that I did make within the ELC was to allow parents to pick the schedule they needed, if it was available. This was a change from the typical Monday, Wednesday, Friday or Tuesday, Thursday schedule that was offered. This allowed for flexibility and accommodated our families personal scheduling needs. When I arrived to Bethlehem, there were 87 students registered in August 2014. We experienced consistent growth and by February 2015, we had 124 students in our program. It is now May and for the 2015-16 school year commencing in August we only have 8 spaces available in our preschool. It is time to find another space for a classroom!

When I arrived, Bethlehem was also going through the final stages of a large building project. Due to the expansion, Kindergarten would be moving to the main elementary level over Christmas break, which provided an additional classroom in the ELC. The question being asked was, "What is the biggest need in the preschool to fill that classroom?" The principal was pretty set on adding another four year old classroom, with hopes that this would provide additional students for Kindergarten and eventually lead to expanding to two Kindergarten classrooms. After a survey of our current

families and documenting the number of inquiries that we received from prospective parents, I proposed that we open a two year old classroom. The boards in charge approved the expansion of a two year old classroom in October with an opening date of February 2, 2015. Our main goal was to get the word out to our families. Happy families tell other families! We advertised the new class in our church bulletin and most importantly found a number of community venues where we were able to share who and what Bethlehem had to offer. Cider Days is an annual event that celebrates Lakewood's agricultural heritage with an entertaining mix of live performances, activities and tasty harvest treats. We set up a table and had a paper hat craft (that won 1st place for best craft among all vendors), fake cows for kids to milk, and lots of information about our program. We also had an information table at a local MOPS group fair. It is important to get out and have a presence in your community! Ultimately, the number one promoters of our program are the families that are currently attending. They will sell the program for you!

With only four months of preparation time, as a team, we renovated the classroom, hired teachers, went through the licensing process, promoted the program and enrolled new students. A month and a half prior to opening, our new two's classroom was full and a wait list was started. We opened, as scheduled, on the 2nd of February, 2015.

What Did I Learn?

Coming into an established school as a new leader, I learned the importance of creating a team! From the first staff meeting, relationships were being created and, in many cases, mended. Many of the teachers had worked together for many years and had been without direct leadership for a number of years. We worked on creating a team that focused solely on benefited our program in order to keep personal agendas at bay. I also learned that there is value in not making immediate changes to an organization, just because there were things that had worked for me in the past. There were a number of programs that I was very skeptical about, but I had to give them a chance and see for myself if these programs worked or if they would need to be modified or eliminated. I was pleasantly surprised by many things that I initially thought would not

work. Maintaining a positive attitude and trusting my staff to execute these programs, not only fostered an atmosphere of teamwork, but also helped us to shape our ELC into the best that it can be!

I also learned the importance of evaluating the needs in your school, church and community before taking action. It is crucial to take the time to listen to what your families needs are. We were receiving phone calls weekly asking if we offered a program for two year olds. Document the need! It is also important to evaluate the other available programs around your school. What do they offer? Compare tuition, available schedules, curriculum and other relevant components of their programs. Finally, solicit feedback from your families. It may not always be what you want to hear, but that is the only way to truly make changes for the better and improve relationships with your families and allow them to feel heard.

I also learned the importance of a Leadership Team! I was the new addition to the team and it took some time to build trust. Our Leadership Team is the core of our school and has great responsibility for how things run. Our team likes to make 'intentional' decisions and sometimes the decisions are tough ones to make, but necessary for the health of the church and school. We were recently faced with one of those tough decisions that involved a member of our team (Necessary Endings), and as difficult as it was to make the necessary changes, our school and team will only benefit. We meet weekly and also have quarterly meetings off campus. This allows us to grow as a team, so that we can lead the organization.

Positive Outcomes

Our Leadership Team recently made the decision to take the next important steps to continue to lead our church and school in the right direction. We will begin our Strategic Planning on June 1, 2015. The last strategic plan was done 11 years ago. It is now time that we realign our vision so that all of us can zero in with laser focus on what God is calling Bethlehem to take on in this world. Our desire is to move forward in the same direction as a united community. We have invited Paul Mercier, a Consultant/Executive

Coach and Governance Consultant, to provide guidance to our team. He helps to guide organizations, including churches and schools, through the strategic planning process.

The Strategic Planning will help clarify:

- a. Who and what we are, what we do now, and why?
- b. What do we want to be and do in the future, and why?
- c. How do we get there?

We will work through Five Phases of Plan Development and Implementation:

Phase One: Build the Team

Phase Two: Clarify the Message

Phase Three: Build Out the Plan

Phase Four: Communicate and Engage

Phase Five: Deliver and Monitor

The future is exciting for Bethlehem Lutheran Church and School and we are headed in the right direction! It takes a team of leaders who have the desire and vision to build a program that is focused on sharing the amazing love of God with the community that surrounds them. I am excited to be a part of it!

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Van Lunen "Blue Thunder" - July 2015



What I did:

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- * Not to make dramatic changes the first year
- * Build relationships and trust
- * See and experience their existing programs, instead of following my personal agenda
- * Evaluate and determine the needs of the staff and the program
- * Expand by filling classrooms and adding an additional classroom

What did I learn:

Coming into an established school as a new leader, I learned the importance of creating a team! From the first staff meeting, relationships were being created and, in many cases, mended. We worked on creating a team that focused solely on benefited our program in order to keep personal agendas at bay. I also learned that there is value in not making immediate changes to an organization, just because there were things that had worked for me in the past. There is importance of evaluating the needs in your school, church and community before taking action. It is crucial to take the time to listen to what your families needs are.

Positive Outcome:

Bethlehem Early Learning Center continues to thrive and grow. We will continue to work together as a team, so that we can provide a loving, caring and Christ-centered program for our families. We are taking the next steps to continue to lead our Church and School in the right direction through a Strategic Plan beginning June 1, 2015.