

Strategic Planning IS a Good Thing

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What did I do

Coming to a new school and my first head of school position posed many challenges and opportunities. Our school had been serving students for 36 years upon my arrival, and there were many great things to celebrate and promote. There were also some things that needed immediate attention, and I came in to the Van Lunen Fellows program after a whirlwind first year not knowing which immediate issue to tackle. Trying to address problems simultaneously was going to be a huge challenge, but probably a necessity, and after much discussion with Bruce Heckman and Peter Meerveld, we determined that a new strategic plan was in order, and could help MCS figure out where they wanted to go and make some steps on how to get there.

In an effort to get as much community feedback as possible, we held separate meetings with parents, teachers and the School Ministry Team (SMT) to conduct a SWOT Analysis. These meetings were held in January and Feb 2014. No administrators participated in the parent or teacher SWOT, but we did join in with the SMT. We compiled the data from the 3 stakeholder groups and sorted the data in to similar categories. Our next step was to host separate follow up meetings of Parents, Teachers and the SMT, with the goal of narrowing the categories to 4-6 main strategic initiatives. Those meetings were held in Feb/March 2014 and we came up with 6 strategic initiatives for 2014-2019. Our final group of meetings were in March/April/May 2014 and we collectively came up with strategies to meet and implement the initiatives. Due to some unforeseen circumstances, the original timeline we set was not met and we were unsuccessful in finalizing our chart with the timeline, responsible parties, and performance measures for the

strategic initiatives before summer break. That process is ongoing, and the goal now is to have it completed by August 2014.

What I learned

There were many valuable learning nuggets from this school year and my Van Lunen project. The biggest take away I had was that if you do not plan to strategically plan, you will miss the timeline you should have set. Every school I know has gone through some kind of strategic planning process, and Mountain was no different. In our case however, it appears that the tyranny of the urgent took priority over long term planning. The most recent strategic plan that I could find was from 2010, however it was only a shell of a plan that did not get implemented, and most of the focus over the past 5 years was in the area of accreditation, not long term strategic planning. There were no plans for sustainable funding, salary increases, facility upgrades, curriculum, technology, staff development, teacher evaluation or church/school relationship bridge building. The planning process for these things should have been started years before I arrived, but the school was running, and in some ways ran well from an external perspective. However, because there was no plan to strategically plan, the busy-ness of school operations ate up all the hours of each year. This is a real and significant challenge that all administrators deal with and try to overcome.

I learned many other valuable lessons during the project. After several meetings and follow up meetings, I learned that getting a group of people to agree on something is hard! Our effort to collaboratively plan and get consensus was time consuming. Even when the group was small with the SMT, many hours were spent tweaking and making last minute changes just to get everyone to agree. Just the tweaking delayed our timeline by 2 months.

Navigating the church school relationship during this year proved to be fulfilling and frustrating at the same time. From all stakeholders perspective, this year was the most positive in

terms of support from the church. We had very strong support from the church, and the senior pastor sent out an email to everyone on his distribution list saying wonderful things about our school. To my knowledge this has never happened, so we rejoiced and appreciated this specific effort to promote our school. While we had great, positive comments from the pastors, elders, and community members, it did not translate in to any additional financial support for the school. The good this year far outweighed the bad, but in the same way the school did not plan to strategically plan, the church did not either with regards to the school. The strategic planning for the church appears to be missing any thought to the school as a ministry of the church or part of the overall mission of the church. The church realizes some of this, and has made significant efforts to include the school more often.

Another key take away was in the area of communication. There were several things we did at the beginning of this year that came up during the planning meetings in the Spring. We made some changes in our curriculum, homework policy, and project policy. Unfortunately, we did not communicate those changes in a way that was received in the way we had planned. The end result was several follow up letters, meetings, and playing catch up with our parents and teachers. During the SWOT analysis and strategic planning meetings, communication was listed as a key area under several of our initiatives. We learned the hard way to effectively communicate on the front end, as we paid for miscommunication for the entire school year.

The final learning opportunity for me was that good decisions for the organization can be a big challenge. There were several things that needed to happen, and several changes we wanted to communicate but were unable to for various reasons. Sometimes even when you know what needs to be done, doing it will either take much longer than you want, or may not get done at all given your current situation. In some cases we had to operate from the perspective of

not having the luxury of waiting an extra year or two to make a change or implement a new idea/program even if it would have been more easily accepted by the teachers and parents.

What is Different at Mountain Christian School?

The biggest change is that the relationship with the church is more positive than in recent memory. The church leadership, including elders and pastors, have expressed privately and publicly their support of our school, its teachers and administrators. Another change that was recently finalized was the promotion of my assistant principal to Principal. This move will allow me to focus more time and energy in areas of fundraising and sustainable funding. Finally, we made changes that were easy to justify but difficult to implement due to underfunding and no strategic planning for many years prior. These changes included purchasing more curriculum and technology resources than in the previous 10 yrs. combined, increasing professional development, introducing project based learning and technology integration, hiring teachers with subject area expertise, expanding our course offerings, and raising salaries for all teachers. The most challenging difference from this year and project was that so many changes have created some uneasiness with teachers and parents.

Final Thoughts

This school year and the Van Lunen project have been challenging but good for Mountain Christian School. Hindsight is always 20/20 and there were times we asked the question: “Why didn’t we do this years ago?” In some ways, the project forced our hand to think longer term than we had in many years. By engaging the parents, teachers, and school ministry team in the project, it helped everyone think outside the box of operating one year at a time. Maintaining the status quo does not work and Mountain Christian School wants to serve the Kingdom and the kids for many years to come. Strategic planning IS a good thing, it’s just not easy.

Mountain Christian School
Strategic Initiatives
2014-2019

1. **Quality Education** - Offer a rigorous, Christ centered program that challenges all students through prayerful choices of curricula, resources, and faculty.
 - PK-8 Curriculum Map/Scope and Sequence for all subjects
 - Recruitment, Retention and Development of Exceptional Teachers
 - Biblical Worldview Integration in all subjects
 - Education of the whole child - Mind, Body, Spirit.

2. **MCS Family** - Nurture excellent relationships with:
 - Teachers and Students
 - Parents, Grandparents, and Friends of MCS
 - Alumni

3. **Missional and Cultural Alignment with Mountain Christian Church** - Maximize opportunities for collaboration with Mountain Christian Church to advance His Kingdom. Love God, Love People, Serve the World
 - Core culture shared between Mountain Christian Church and School
 - Collaboration with MCC in areas of Annual Alignment, Worship Arts, Biblical Worldview Integration,
 - MCS participation in local and International church initiatives.

4. **Tell our Story** - create a clear and compelling brand to effectively communicate the value of an MCS education.
 - MCS Distinctive's
 - Advertising/Marketing plan to communicate the MCS distinctives

5. **Financial Strength** - Prudently plan for the future by developing a financial plan that focuses on long term sustainability and growth.
 - Sustainable funding
 - Scholarship support from individuals, businesses and/or churches
 - Grants and Foundations
 - Online giving options
 - Enrollment growth
 - Inclusion in future MCC campaigns

6. **Future Innovation Initiatives** - Mountain Christian School will prayerfully seek opportunities to reach as many students as possible.
 - Homeschool Partnership
 - Feasibility study for mergers, acquisitions, high school partnership
 - Online Classes
 - Pre-K/Childcare
 - Summer Programs