

Recruitment and Retention of Junior and Kindergarten Students

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Amazing Greys - 2016



The School

At Grace Lutheran School, we strive for educational excellence. Our credentialed teachers are committed to a quality standard of learning and achievement in all aspects of school life. We place a strong emphasis on scholastic excellence in a Christian atmosphere that encourages spiritual, personal and social growth. Small class sizes of 20-24 students ensure teachers are able to provide the individual attention children need. While we stress the fundamental, core academics and Christian character development, we also believe offering the 'education extras' are fundamental in ensuring our students receive "Learning that Lasts." From as early on as Jr. Kindergarten, all students through eighth grade receive both music and Spanish instruction by specialty teachers as part of their regular weekly curriculum. In addition, art and physical education are part of all students' weekly curriculum and are also taught by staff with specialized training in these disciplines. As technology continues to be a growing element of our daily lives, it also is part of our educational process and all children are given weekly computer skills instruction ensuring they are well prepared for using technology with discernment in their high school years and beyond. Beyond including the classroom educational extras, Grace Lutheran School offers exceptional extra-curricular activities that enable students to have a well-rounded learning experience. Our athletic program offers students an opportunity to learn lessons in sportsmanship, teamwork, goal setting, competition, and overcoming adversity, as well as winning and losing while maintaining behavior consistent with Christian character.

Our goal is to produce confident, ethical, Christian young people equipped for the challenges of life. We encourage children to develop a sense of self-worth, as well as sensitivity to the feelings and needs of others.

Intended Project

The school was founded in 1982 and was located on the church campus. By 1995 it had outgrown the church facility and a vacant public school site was leased to meet the growing need to accommodate more students. At that time the school continued to grow and at its peak there were four to five kindergarten classes each year. Over the past 12 years, there has been an ongoing decline in church membership as well as an overall decrease in the number of school age children in the Huntington Beach area. Consequently, the number of young students coming to our campus reflects the current demographic for the church, the Ocean View School District and surrounding areas. For the past five years we've had one or two kindergarten classes. This year we had one kindergarten class with twelve girls and one boy in it. I am concerned that this coupled with other issues, may be growing trend that threatens the viability of the school. Initially my project was going to be research and data collection on kindergarten-aged population in our area and recruitment and retention of new students, specifically at the junior-kindergarten and kindergarten level. We have always relied on word-of-mouth as our main source of advertising, and it is challenging to determine exactly where to begin to use additional methods to effectively promote the school. Under the guidance of Jim McKenzie, we have begun revamping the school's website, and using social media and other sources of advertisement to make our community aware of the school and all it has to offer. In addition, the school is offering incentives to parents who refer new students to Grace. The administrative staff and school board spent a good portion of the last nine months focused on finding methods for promoting the school.

My perspective of the history of Grace Lutheran School

In 1995, the school moved to from the church campus to a public school site rented from Ocean View School District in Huntington Beach, CA. The church was flourishing at the time and the preschool was bursting with kindergarten ready students and nowhere to put them. The move provided the church with the opportunity to grow the school allowing them to add additional classes for kindergarten and first grade. At its peak enrollment, Grace Lutheran School had five kindergarten classes and two of most grades through fifth grade. Later a middle school was added and the school went from preschool through eighth grade. In 2007, the school relocated a second time to a rundown school site that had a multi-purpose room that the old school lacked. Over \$1,000,000 was spent by the church in renovations to the new site and rent increased to \$250,000 with a three to five percent increase per year. The intention was to plant a new church on the

school campus that failed miserably. The planted church broke away from Grace as the parent church within a year and moved to a new location. Grace was left with substantial debt, a fractured church, and the size of the congregation was reduced to half and continues to dwindle. Having the school located three miles from the its parent organization created additional challenges and church appeared to lose sight of the school at times and the principal was left to manage on his own for the most part. His administrative staff included himself and the school secretary. The job was dauntingly stressful from teacher and student recruitment and retention, facility management, curriculum development, to event planning, fiscal accountability, student discipline, parent communication, staff development and so much more. Many things were done in a fly by night fashion and there were always cracks in the “dam”. The principal lived in survival mode, and no professional or curriculum, or site development occurred. The principal was left to manage on his own, always on alert putting out “wildfires” before they caused major damage to the school. Every once in a while the church or school board members would swoop in to cause a ruckus and then disappear for long periods of time.

For many years, there was not a great deal of support or oversight. The former principals were not adept at creating a unified staff with a clear vision. Eventually a superintendent was hired to oversee both preschools and the school. This was the beginning of major improvements for the school. The new superintendent created and trained an administrative team from existing staff. The team created and implemented new processes and procedures that helped to establish common goals and expectations in every aspect of the school and campus. Chapman University began donating computers to Grace. The computer lab went from outdated mismatched equipment to relatively new computers, equipped with the newest operating systems and educational programs that were beyond many staff member’s technological savvy. Every classroom became equipped with new technology and student computers. The staff was trained in the use of technology in the classroom and in current educational practices. The teachers no longer functioned like independent contractors. They became unified in all areas with a common language and educational goals.

My History at Grace Lutheran School

I began my career in education twenty-one years ago, in 1995, as a teacher’s aide in kindergarten at Grace Lutheran School. I eventually went on to complete my college education and earn a teaching credential in special education. I worked with many principals over the years. A

superintendent was hired in 2006, who had a clear and growing vision for the school. She insisted on a greater level of church oversight and involvement. She established an administrative team, and I became the Director of Students and Teacher. My title was eventually changed to Principal. The superintendent and I worked closely together to lead the school. Eventually the school could no longer afford a superintendent. In 2013 the position was eliminated and her duties fell to me. Over the next three years, my job doubled in size as the two job descriptions were blended into one. I was Head of Schools, supervising the school directors/admin team, overseeing the preschool and acting school principal. Over all, there are fifty school employees, 340 students in preschool-eighth grade, an equivalent amount of parents, the School Advisory Committee (school board), the church executive team and the church council. Being head of school is like balancing on the head of a pin while standing on one foot. Maintaining school stability relies the willingness of a multitude of factions to partner to make certain achievable goals are set and supported that embrace the mission and vision of the school.

Current Positives

I believe the current school culture is our strength. The staff, parents and students are committed to maintaining a climate that is positive, supportive, cohesive, and holds everyone accountable. During the past several years, I have worked closely with all members of the community to resolve issues promptly by investigating thoroughly, bringing involved parties together and speaking the truth in love. As a result, there have been no outraged or concerned parents addressing the school board about anything.

Another asset is the Administrative Team, which was handpicked and trained by the former superintendent. Every member of the team has been at Grace for ten or more years and is highly dedicated to its success. As a group, they ensure that the day-to-day operations of the school run smoothly. They also achieve the impossible by stepping up when life becomes extraordinarily challenging. An example of this is the last week of this school year. The school hosted a reception on Sunday afternoon for the preschooler that died, which was attended by 600 people. Monday morning at 7 a.m. the team was at school preparing for the kindergarten promotion which was held at ten a.m., the eighth grade graduation was held on Tuesday afternoon, Thursday was the last day of school and our final assembly of the year, and Friday they hosted a beautiful end of the year catered luncheon. While this week was extremely challenging, there are several similar weeks through the course of every school year. Each event is more successful than the last.

Church support of the school has become more and more evident. The pastor leads the chapel team, selects a theme for the year, and gives most sermons. The assistant pastor teaches middle school Bible classes two days a week. The principal is part of the church executive team, the school board, and church council. Each of these groups meets monthly to address concerns and plan for the year.

Other strengths of the school are dedication to ongoing improvement to student education, communication, the school facility, and bridging the gap between the school and church. Another strength of the school comes from a core group of six teachers who are dedicated to the school and plan on being at Grace until they retire.

Current Challenges

Grace employs sixteen full-time teachers for the elementary/middle school and one part-time teacher. Twelve are classroom teachers and five are specialist. During the past several years, the State of California was not hiring many new teachers, and class sizes in public school were 30-36 plus students. This worked to Grace School's advantage in two ways. Parents unhappy with class sizes brought their children to private schools and teachers were thrilled to have jobs even if the salaries were much lower than public school teacher salaries. California has since changed its view on class sizes and the hiring freeze has ended. The cost of living in Orange County is very high, the average one-bedroom apartment rents for \$1,200-1,400 a month. A new teacher's salary at Grace starts at around \$36,500 per year. There are no benefits or retirement plans for any member of the school staff. Southern California Public school salaries for first year teachers are in the neighborhood of \$52,000 per year. One teacher, who left last year to work in public school, doubled his salary because he was given credit for the six years he was at Grace. He also receives health insurance and a pension. This is very enticing. We are not a Missouri Synod school and so none of our teachers receive any of the benefits of a called teacher. Additionally, state laws are changing. In order to maintain exempt status, employees must earn twice the minimum wage or they must receive overtime pay if they work more than eight hours a day or forty hours per week. I have never met a teacher that only works forty hours per week. This state made decision impacts school sports, dances, science fairs, overnight fieldtrips and the viability of the school in general. Grace Lutheran School will be unable to maintain salaries as the California minimum wage moves towards \$15.00 per hour in the near future. Teachers starting salaries will be \$30.00 an hour,

which is the equivalent of \$50,400 per school year to meet this requirement. That is substantially more than our veteran teachers make after ten years of employment.

Having to train new teachers year after year is challenging as well. First year teachers require a different type of supervision and mentoring. The continuous churning over of staff members stalls professional development, implementation of a long-term vision and negatively impacts the school community as a whole.

Another problem facing the school is that the school district has yet to present the school with a lease to negotiate and/or sign. Without a long-term lease in place, it makes it difficult to plan for the future. About \$60,000 of maintenance and improvements need to be made, but without a long-term lease in place it would be fiscally irresponsible to move forward with new carpeting, ball walls, ceiling fans, air conditioners, or upgrades to the wired and wireless internet. This is the third year we have functioned without a long-term lease so the school is at the mercy of the school district and functioning on a wing and a prayer.

Lastly, new student recruitment has been remarkably low. This year we were barely able to live within our budget with 225 students. To date there are 202 students enrolled at Grace for the coming school year which is about \$140,000 less income than last year.

My administrative team and I have been working with Jim McKenzie to address our antiquated website by making it more up to date and effective at bringing inquiring parents to the school campus. It is still a work in progress, but has hit a snag. Unbeknownst to the admin team, the church took the website remodel out of the school's hands. This is one of those times when the church swoops in, makes a ruckus and leaves. There was no communication from the church team about new websites or consideration given to the fact that we were working with Jim (which the church team had been informed of). Jim was also working with the school's Director of Admissions to help us become adept at using social media for advertising. This is generating some new awareness of and interest in the school. However, it is too soon to determine its level of effectiveness.

Necessary Endings

Throughout the 2015-2016 school year, I was feeling the weight of these mounting problems. The lease, student recruitment and teacher retention issues were of major concern to me. I discussed all my concerns openly with the school board, church executive team and church council. I even presented them with a budget for the coming school year that was \$127,000 in the red to help them

understand the level of my concerns. For the most part, I was met with comments like “God will provide,” or “How are you planning on handling these problems of yours?” I knew there were too many very serious issues on the table and felt they were greater than my ability to find solutions on my own. Coupled with mounting personal issues related to aging parents, I began to feel very weary and hopeless. From my vantage point, I could see no solutions to these problems.

Persistent thoughts began in January. For several months, I tried to ignore them, but they woke me in the middle of the night or would invade my quiet time until I had to pay attention. Reading the book, “Necessary Endings” by Dr. Henry Cloud, coupled with talking to Bruce Hekman, helped me to ask myself the tough questions, like “Do I want this same reality, frustration, or problem six months or a year from now?” and “What do I see changing?” I had no real objective reason to believe the future was going to be different from the past. I had lost hope. I felt the school was falling into a deep hole that I had no idea how to get out of. It became clear to me a new hope filled leader at the helm was needed with a fresh perspective and the endless energy required to address these problems that felt so much bigger than me. I needed to reduce the sense of overwhelming stress and hopelessness that was growing as a result of mounting responsibilities and the sense of pending doom (a little dramatic, but it was there). And so, I tendered my resignation.

The pastor was quite shocked. Oddly enough, (or maybe not) God did provide. The pastor received a text from a former very beloved teacher who had asked if she could be my assistant principal and take over my position when I retired. She was the only person interviewed. She has no experience in administration and received three weeks of training from me, which consisted of a giant brain dump of information. Actually, it was closer to one week of training and two weeks in the trenches, dealing with the end of the school year events and the very sad loss our school community experienced due to the death of a preschooler.

During this time, the new principal was a tremendous asset because she knew all the families and students and dealt with them graciously. While I had intended to stay through the summer to prepare and train her, the pastor was concerned about the budget and decided Grace couldn't afford to pay two principals. My 21-year career at Grace Lutheran School ended on the last day of the school year.

The new principal is a brilliant young woman and a devoted servant. I will be available to her if she needs me. Best of all I am feeling like I have laid my burden down and am hopeful once again that Grace Lutheran School can not only survive these unresolved challenges, it can thrive.