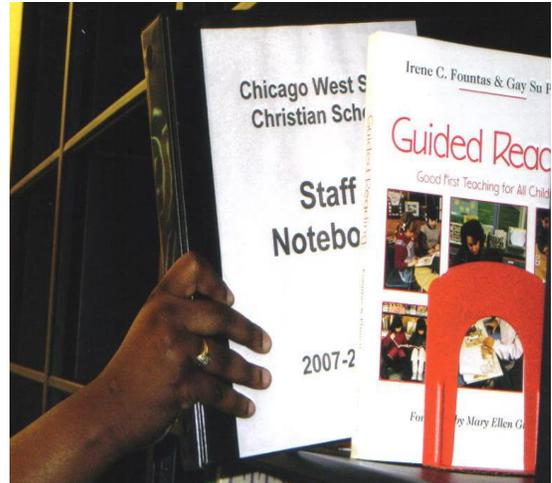


# Developing Manuals that Reflect Mission, Shape Culture and Improve Education



**Project Summary:** Our goal was to develop parent, staff and board manuals that reflect the school's mission and culture and are used regularly to guide the community's efforts to shape and improve the school. Rather than simply being a collection of past decisions, the manuals also include articles for thoughtful reflection, training and growth, explanations of annual goals (needs, opportunities and strategies), and guidelines and expectations for the various members of the school community.

The resulting manuals are accessible, relevant and expandable. They explain and affirm the school's mission and culture while inviting readers to think strategically about their role in school improvement.

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## **Developing Manuals that Reflect Mission, Shape Culture and Improve Education**

### **Project Focus:**

We wanted to create engaging, usable manuals that would help the school communicate its mission, culture and goals to various audiences (staff, parents and board members). We considered several factors:

- Most manuals are relegated to bookshelves and are rarely read after initial orientations.
- Newer staff members need tools to understand our school culture and mission.
- Our school board, eager to learn how to govern more effectively as it takes on increased leadership following the retirement of the board chair after 30 some years, needs tools to understand culture, mission and governance.
- Through our accreditation process, we need an organized format to gather documents, policies and procedures.
- Although our interpersonal relationships with parents are strong, we have struggled with effective communication, particularly with print materials.

### **Methodology:**

As we looked at each of our audiences, we developed methodologies to address their needs.

**Staff Manual:** We have completely revised the staff manual, adding organizational sections for monthly calendars, schedules, contact information and forms. We have highlighted school goals with sections that include strategies, outcomes and professional development reading materials. Because our school uses the Search Institute's 40 Developmental Assets as a framework, the school culture section contained articles and charts that explain the assets. Throughout the year, teachers have added operations materials, professional development readings and in-service materials to the binder.

The specific index categories are: calendar, schedules, student/staff information, forms, teacher handbook, high expectations, school culture, assessment tools, professional development, accreditation process, parent handbook, staff notes and action steps.

**Parent Manual:** The parent manual, revised with parent and staff input, informs parents of key policies and procedures and explains the school's mission and commitment to the developmental assets. Although the manual is thorough, we

have found that few parents are actually aware of its contents, as evidenced by frequent misunderstanding or lack of knowledge regarding school policies and procedures. With the goal of making a more usable, engaging document, we are now working to significantly change the manual in the following ways:

- Visually, we will add pictures and text boxes to make the manual more attractive and to highlight students and the school program.
- We will upload the completed document to our website so parents have both print and web-based access.
- We will develop an index so parents can easily find information as we move from an alphabetical format to a more thematic approach.
- We are reformatting the content to make the document more readable and engaging using the following broad categories:
  - **Who we are** (letter of introduction, mission, statement of belief, highlights and aspects of school culture, our commitment to developmental assets and how assets are embedded in the school's program, our participation in community collaborations and partnerships.)
  - **Parental role/expectations/communication** (parent contract, communication tools, explanations of how EdLine and GradeQuick work, the importance of shared goal setting with teachers and students at quarterly conferences, tuition payment procedures and policies, the purpose of volunteer and fundraising requirements, parent development opportunities).
  - **Student expectations** (academic growth with photos of engaged students, behavior guidelines/discipline policy, care of property, uniform policy, attendance and tardiness policies and homework.)
  - **Program** details (curriculum description, procedures for arrival, dismissal, early pick-up, before and after school program activities with photos, hot lunch program requirements, field trips, and explanations of our "Use the World as our Classroom" travel experiences.)
  - **Operations** information (alphabetical order for procedures on emergency school closings, annual calendar, school supply list, illnesses, medication policies, etc.)
  - **Policies** (wellness, internet use, library materials selection policy, anti-discrimination policy, human dignity policy)

**Board Manual:** Although we had initially thought we could produce a board manual filled with policies during this project, we quickly found that we needed to do some important background work first. Our board includes two new members and several seasoned members. As a group, they expressed a need to understand better what their roles and responsibilities were. Using the BoardSource book The Source, each month the board discusses a one-page chapter on a topic designed to help members understand topics such as mission,

strategic thinking, and working cooperatively with the administration. Our board members are eager learners and have thoughtfully incorporated the articles' ideas in to the discussions and decision making required of the board. An additional resource from the Lutherans' policy manual has helped the board understand the difference between procedure and policy, the board's role in setting policy, and the administration's role to define procedure. As an outcome of the training, the board is eager to hold a retreat this summer to think strategically about the school's mission and vision. As the school pursues accreditation this coming year, the board will move forward to develop and add effective policies to the board manual.

### **Results:**

The staff greatly appreciates the organization and comprehensive inclusion of materials in their manual. They carry it to meetings, add to it, refer to articles, and use the manual frequently as a tool. Newer teachers appreciate the "filling in the gaps" of our school's culture and language. Because we reframe school goals each year, the manual will continue to expand with useful materials.

The parent handbook was a good first step in defining and clarifying procedures for staff and parents. Although we were disappointed that it was not carefully read or referred to, we feel that we have done the hard work regarding content and now need to re-format the materials and make the upcoming year's handbook engaging and accessible via both print and the web.

The board manual, though still in its early stages, now includes training materials, bylaws, a roster, board member roles and responsibilities, budget/finance materials, minutes and administrator evaluation procedures. We believe the training process has been and will continue to be invaluable for our board members and that the board manual will reflect thoughtful deliberations and an understanding of what appropriate governance should be.

### **Analysis and Commentary:**

Although our initial focus was to develop manuals that would help us get organized and work towards accreditation, we were delighted to find that there were ways to make the manuals interesting, usable documents that could effectively reflect mission, shape culture and help improve the education at Chicago West Side Christian School.

As we developed each manual and evaluated its effectiveness, we found that the process of determining what format to follow and what content to include was very important and made a significant difference in the response to and use of the manual. Because the staff manual was highly organized, well indexed, and full of useful and thought-provoking information, staff responded very positively to

it and used it frequently. In contrast, the parent handbook contained useful information but didn't compel the parents to read it or use it as a tool. Thus, it must be revised! The board manual, still in its early stages, promises to be a responsive document that will continue to meld training and decisions in a shared format.

Two things emerge as important in this process:

- A manual can be a useful tool for an organization only if it is actually read. Audience, content and format are important considerations.
- A manual should reflect the school's mission, culture and goals. It should be a work-in-progress that continues to adapt as the school community articulates and defines its core values and goals.

### **Resources:**

[www.boardsource.org](http://www.boardsource.org)

The Source: Twelve Principles of Governance that Power Exceptional Boards, BoardSource., 2005.

Exceptional Board Practices: The Source in Action, BoardSource, 2007.

Lutheran Church Missouri Synod Governing Manual for Lutheran Schools: a Resource for Administrators and Boards, version 1.1, Board for District and Congregational Services—School Ministry;  
[www.lcms.org/graphics/assets/media/DCS/brdmanual-1\[1\].1.pdf](http://www.lcms.org/graphics/assets/media/DCS/brdmanual-1[1].1.pdf)

“40 Developmental Assets”, The Search Institute; [www.search\\_institute.org](http://www.search_institute.org)