Building a Culture of Unity on LSA’s PreK-12th Grade Campus
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Background Information:
As the Head of School on a PreK-3 through 12th grade campus, I have the unique challenge of unifying a campus that has created silos over the years. To understand how these silos came to be, it is important to understand the past. The history of Lutheran South Academy extends back to 1949 when the original Lutheran High School (grades 9-12) of Houston on Woodridge was founded. In 1980, the school birthed a second campus on the north side of Houston and appropriately named the new school Lutheran High North. In 1982, the original school moved to the South 610 Loop and became Lutheran South High School. Due to declining enrollment and closing feeder schools, the administration decided to add grade 7 and 8 to help bolster the student population. With changing times and demographics, it was determined that the school needed to relocate in order to grow and survive. In 1998, the school relocated to its current location which is 10 miles away from the original campus. With this move, the school changed its name once again to more adequately reflect its identity as it now included opportunities for 1st through 12th grade. Over time, the school added both Kindergarten and PreK 3’s and 4’s. Lutheran South Academy now serves over 900 students and their families from the Houston metro. While the location and offerings have changed through the years, the goal of the school has always remained constant. We exist to provide a quality Christian education to children.

Lutheran South Academy is a fully accredited college preparatory school through AdvancEd and NLSA. LSA was granted “Exemplary” status by the National Lutheran Accreditation Commission for the 2012-2013 school year. Our school was the first school in the state of Texas to achieve this status. This award is a testament to the culture of academic excellence at Lutheran South Academy.

Our mission statement is “Securing Their Future.” Lutheran South Academy exists to provide an exceptional education to students in grades PreK-12 in a Christian environment. Students will develop spiritually, academically, socially, physically and emotionally as they are prepared for higher education and life as the Christian leaders of today and tomorrow.

Unique Culture Challenges Facing Lutheran South Academy
Due to the history of the campus growing from only a high school to the current configuration which includes PreK-3 through 12th grade, Lutheran South Academy faces some unique culture identification challenges. Most schools with this structure have grown from the bottom up and therefore a natural progression of inclusion has occurred. Because LSA has grown from the top down, there has been a prevalent secondary education mindset. This has left the early childhood, elementary and middle levels feeling as if they are truly “secondary” to the mission and focus of the school.

Our campus consists of 4 education buildings including the Lower School (PreK 3-5th), Middle School (6th-8th), High School (9th-12th) and a common usage building (gym, cafeteria, fine arts). In addition to the buildings, the school has many auxiliary spaces like playing fields and playgrounds. While this arrangement is age appropriate and promotes the unique identity of each age level, it does create a physical separation amongst the staff, parents and the students at each level. This mindset of top-
down importance and level separation has been perpetuated in the past by the school leadership that was solely trained in secondary education.

**What Was Done:**
Four different target areas were addressed with this project: Communication, Student Relationships, Family Relationships, and Staff Relationships. In each of these areas, the goal was to create awareness and develop relationships that would positively contribute to a unified culture.

1. Create Awareness of the Bigger Picture through Communication
In order to appreciate each levels’ differences and value, it is important to be informed and aware of what is happening at all levels of the school. Historically at LSA, each of the three levels sent out announcements and information to their students and parents that pertained specifically to their level. I created the “Campus Highlights” which is an email that goes out to all LSA Stakeholders each Monday morning. This email includes special events that are coming up as well as celebrations of successes that have occurred recently. This email has raised awareness across levels and has allowed our school community to celebrate with one another. *Future Plans: I am looking into a more aesthetically appealing communication program such as Constant Contact or Mail Chimp for next year.* While traditional email works, I believe that cleaning up the format and being able to add graphics and photographs will draw our stakeholders in at a completely different level.

Another piece to the Campus Highlights is the Campus Prayer List. Any Lutheran South Academy community member may request prayers and be placed on the list for the entire campus to see. As a Christian community, we place a high value on the ability to lift our concerns, requests and thanksgivings to the Lord. Having the ability to do this for all members of the LSA family has brought us closer together in the name of Jesus Christ. Knowing the needs of one another also allows us to care for one another in a real way. The prayer list has been well-received and will continue into the future.

Another method of cross level communication that has been changed is the school’s social media. In today’s instant gratification society, it is important to be marketing the school on social media. Several years ago we created a school facebook account and would update it on a somewhat regular basis. This year, we have changed our methods and include daily events in addition to sharing the campus highlights including pictures throughout the week. A staff member has been assigned to manage the facebook page and to make sure that the material is current and that as many of the posts as possible contain photographs. The primary target group for our facebook page is our current parents and students. We have found that we have followers and interaction from all three levels and many alumni, extended family and friends. To date we have almost 2000 followers. This year, we also linked our Twitter page to the facebook page so that those who prefer to use Twitter will be able to receive the same information and photos. *Future Plans: We
will continue to monitor other forms of social media that are trending and appealing to our target audiences. If the need arises to add additional platforms, we will consider that in the future.

2. Create and Promote Cross Level Relationships amongst the Students

Integrating the three levels of our students has been a challenge for us due to different bell schedules and quite honestly the fear of the unknown. We currently have one group that is actively engaged in cross level student partnerships. Peer Assistance & Leadership (PALs) is a national program that pairs high school students with younger students that are in need of mentorship. Over the past several years, we have established a thriving PALs program where students help in Lower School, Middle School and even at a local elementary public school. This program is mutually beneficial for the older and younger students and has done wonders for developing relationships across the levels. To learn more about the PALs program, go to http://palusa.org.

In addition to the PALs program, we also have established several student events that incorporate students from all three levels. One of these events is our All School Chapel. We begin and end our school year with an All School Chapel. These chapels are a great way for our students, faculty and parents to come together for worship. It is also an amazing sight to see over 1000 people worshipping our awesome God together. The younger students are in awe of the older kids and the older kids can reflect on their own journey of becoming the leaders of our student body.

Throughout the school year, there are several Green and White Spirit Days where the entire school population wears school spirit clothing to school to celebrate events or successes. Occasions such as Homecoming, National Lutheran Schools Week and celebrations for teams and groups that achieve state tournament berths are examples of these special dress days.

Another all school event that was started this year is our Senior Walk. This event takes place in the last week of school for our high school seniors. They all dress in their caps and gowns and parade down the hallways of our lower school, our middle school, and our high school. All of the underclassmen come out into the hallways and cheer for them as they take their final walk through the halls of our school. Very intentionally, the walk starts in the Early Childhood wing and continues in chronological order until they are in the halls of the high school. This was a very emotional event for both our students and our staff members. It was a beautiful thing to see our seniors high fiving and hugging the younger kids, their former teachers, and their peers. There were plenty of tears and cheers. It was especially meaningful for 12 of our seniors this year who had started Kindergarten at our school 13 years earlier. This was extremely well received by staff and students once it was actually taking place. There was quite a bit of resistance by the high school administration prior to the event. This event will become a tradition for our school. Future Plans: In
addition, we are always on the lookout for more opportunities like this that are simple in nature but rich in the depth of impact.

3. Create and Promote Cross Level Relationships amongst the School Families

Each year, our school incorporates events that are designed to bring our entire school community together. One of these is our Pioneer Pre-Game Party which is a huge tailgate party that is held before our first home football game. Another event is our Gala which is a school dinner auction fundraiser. Throughout the year, we also incorporate younger students into the high school athletic and fine arts events to encourage participation and create awareness among the families of our school. By participating in events that are designed for older students, the younger children and their parents get a preview of the things to come as they continue their enrollment at LSA. This year, there was a more intentional push to create additional parent/family events that were designed for all three levels.

The first new event that was added was the addition of an annual Faith and Family Event. This year we invited Pam Tebow, mother of Tim Tebow, to come and speak at an event designed for parents. The event was billed as a Christian parenting education event and we were blessed to have over 120 in attendance. Future Plans: Our goal is to provide an event like this for our parents on an annual basis.

Another community event that was not new this year but was changed was our Easter Celebration. For the past two years, our school has partnered with an inner city Hispanic Mission Church to throw an Easter Celebration for the community surrounding their church. This year, we focused not only on a good attendance from the community around the mission church but also on increased attendance from our own community. We highly encouraged families to come and serve together. The response was great and the day turned out to be mutually rewarding. Over 600 families (theirs and ours) were in attendance. We played together, worshipped together, and broke bread together.

4. Create and Promote Cross Level Relationships amongst the Staff

The staff is by far the most challenging group when it comes to the idea of breaking down the silos. This process has to start with leadership. Recognizing that, our Leadership Team meets weekly to discuss the campus as a whole. The Leadership Team consists of the Head of School, the 3 Principals and the Director of Athletics. During our meetings we discuss the upcoming weeks, look at the calendar, talk about communication and marketing, discuss staff challenges and celebrations and support one another in prayer. The team recognizes that we continue to have issues with identity and unity so we are challenged to constantly be thinking of ways that we can continue to move forward in breaking down the walls.

As I stated earlier, these silos have been created over time they will be broken down over time as well. I am constantly reminding the leadership team to address negative talk about the other levels and promote the positives to build one another up. As a result of our weekly meetings, I send out a
weekly staff memo that includes everything going on for the following week. Every person that works on our staff receives the memo and is able to see everything that is going on from the campus viewpoint. This perspective helps us all realize that we are part of a much larger picture.

Each Monday, the entire staff is invited to join in a devotional time to kick off the week. The location used to be in the choir room which is a neutral location for all three levels. We now change the location from level to level so that staff members have the opportunity to visit the other academic buildings.

Once a month, we have a mandatory staff meeting on Monday morning where all faculty and staff members attend and get a state of the campus overview from the Leadership Team. All school staff meetings are an area where I have attempted to unify our team by intentionally mixing up our levels. During the first two sessions of the Van Lunen program, I learned some valuable “ice-breakers” that inspired me to try some new things with our staff. I was not sure how they would respond, but they all really seemed to enjoy it. Beyond staff meetings, we have also been able to incorporate some all school staff development for technology and subject areas.

Our school uses Rubicon Atlas for our curriculum mapping. Right now, each level focuses on their own curriculum and an attempt at alignment is taking place. There is a disconnect however because the different levels do not get together to discuss alignment, it is all done through coordinators and online platforms. Future Plans: One of my goals for next year is to incorporate formal professional learning communities (PLC’s) across the campus. These subject based communities will allow and foster discussion for alignment, professional development, and camaraderie. Currently, this type of collaboration is only done within the levels.

Finally, staff fellowship is an important part of staff unity. At the beginning of this school year, all of the women on the faculty were invited to attend a “Painting with a Twist” party where we went to an art studio and were able to create a piece of artwork reflecting the theme verse for the year. This December, I hosted a Christmas Party at my home for the entire staff and their spouses. While not everyone was able to attend, we did have over 120 people present. It was an event of fun, food, and fellowship. We are ending the school year with another party at my home. This one will have closer to 200 people in attendance and will be a steak and potato dinner, shrimp boil, and pool party. For this party, the staff and their entire families are invited. It is difficult to host all-faculty parties due to the size of our staff but it is rewarding and well worth the challenge.

This year, we did face a huge staff setback through the process of hiring a new high school principal to replace the long time principal who is retiring. For the position, we had 2 external and 1 internal candidates. At the end of the process, the decision was made to extend a call to one of the external candidates. The internal candidate did not handle this well, has taken a job in Colorado, and has chosen to taint the waters and be extremely divisive since the decision was made. Unfortunately, this behavior has divided our high school staff. The vast majority are on the same page but there is a
small sector that is noticeably rebelling and continues to be upset by the decision. The prayer is that once the disgruntled employee has moved on, the staff will become unified once again, but this is going to be a challenge.

In addition to the HS issue, we also had to RIF of one of our 4th grade teachers who had been here on staff for 14 years due to decreased enrollment. This has been difficult for everyone as we care deeply for one another. Although, this employee has handled the situation very well and is leaving on good terms.

**What Was Learned?**
Culture is not something that changes overnight. I have learned that the history of our school and the longevity of some of our staff members makes erasing the silo effect extremely challenging. Changing mindsets is also more challenging than changing programs and methods. For those who are entrenched in the past, they must be shown that there is a better way.

We had five retirements this year, two of which were in key leadership roles (High School Principal and LEAH Association Executive Director). While these are key positions to replace, I believe that this is going to help break down the walls between our levels. Both of these leaders are secondary related, have been with the organization for 30+ years, and have been perpetuators of the top down mentality. Although not intentional, their lack of understanding and appreciation for early childhood, elementary, and middle level education is quite evident. While both are wonderful Christian leaders, I feel that a new perspective will bring a positive change that contributes to a more unified campus. In addition to them retiring, both of their replacements are external hires. In my opinion, this was the best case scenario in moving us forward toward Pre-K through 12th unification.

As stated earlier, the Leadership Team plays a key role in the change factor. For us to move forward, we must all be on the same page and committed to bettering the culture of our school. With the upcoming personnel changes, there is a renewed hope that additional positive culture change is on the horizon.

**What Difference Is It Making?**
Each of the different things that I have tried and things that I have changed are having a positive impact on our culture. Throughout this year, I have witnessed more cross level collaborations (students, parents, and staff) than I have during the other 9 years that I have been at LSA. I have enjoyed seeing the change in attitude and the change in focus. I feel that the Leadership Team is focused on ways to continue to promote our campus as a whole while trying to keep each level unique and age-appropriate. I am looking forward to continuing this effort and making it a natural part of everyday life at Lutheran South Academy.