



STRATEGIC PLANNING

For DARREN PATTERSON CHRISTIAN ACADEMY
Buena Vista, Colorado

Summary of Project Goals and Results

Darren Patterson Christian Academy (DPCA) is a small school in rural central Colorado with about 170 students in preschool through 12th grade. The Academy completed a successful capital campaign and building project in August 2007, following which the board and administration desired to seek the Lord together for the next priorities which school leadership should address.

Accordingly, the administration and board began a prayerful strategic planning process in August 2008 with the goal of using input from board members, faculty and staff, and school parents to establish a three-year strategic plan document that would accurately reflect the priorities that the school community had identified. The planning process spanned the 2008-2009 school year, included board members, faculty and staff, and parents, and yielded positive results in at least three areas:

- 1) The formation of a coherent strategic action document that specifies priorities upon which the board, administration, and staff of the school will focus over the next three years, and
- 2) The identification of other issues which will require additional planning and prayer, and which are expected to become elements of future strategic action plans, and
- 3) Perhaps best of all for the long-term health of the school, a renewed appreciation for the need for and benefit of ongoing strategic prayer, thinking, and planning .

Contact Information

Erik Ritschard
Administrator
Darren Patterson Christian Academy
Buena Vista, CO



Project Focus

The need for additional planning became abundantly evident following the completion of Darren Patterson Christian Academy's Building For Excellence campaign and construction project in August 2007. The building project, which added 22,000 square feet to the school facility, had been the major factor around which all of the board's and administrator's efforts orbited from summer of 2004 through August 2007. The building project also represented the successful culmination of years of prior effort and planning. However, the completion of the new building left a clear vacuum: what next?



During the construction project, many other conversations about what the school "should" do, or "should" work on, occurred, but these were always set aside due to the obvious need to complete the building effort. As that project came to an end, those questions and conversations began to resurface: Should we expand the curriculum? Should we seek accreditation? Should we work on mission assessment? Should we develop funding other than tuition? What about technology? Is marketing our top priority? In addition to daily operations, where should the board and administration, faculty and staff now focus their time and energy?

As the school year 2007-2008 unfolded, everyone enjoyed some rest from the extra intensity of the building project, but the questions about next priorities began to seem more urgent. Thus by winter 2008 and into the spring, the focus on the need for the next step in the school's planning process was very clear.

The Lord provided a Van Lunen Fellowship for me at a critical time. With the need for further planning quite evident, and with the guidance and support available through the Fellowship program, the need and some provision to meet it came together and a new strategic planning initiative was launched in August 2008. The goal of the planning process was to gather input from board members, faculty and staff, and school parents to establish a three-year strategic plan document that would accurately reflect the priorities that the school community had identified, and that would provide specific action steps for accomplishing those priorities.



Project Methodology/Process

During some initial discussion regarding who would guide the planning process, some previously unknown fears and resistance to strategic planning came to light. The primary concern, based on some unpleasant history in the school's past, was whether the board would be able to retain control of the process. As a result, we abandoned the original plan to create a steering committee separate from the board in favor of the board itself acting as the steering committee. The planning project then unfolded as follows:

- **August 2008:** Board establishes structure and general timelines for the project. I function as project chairman in the beginning. Board begins to pray, ask questions, and share individual perspectives on the state of the school. At faculty in-service, faculty are given the basic planning goals and process.
- **September 2008:** Board member Terry Horton selected as chairman of strategic planning. At a "Parent Coffee," parents are told of the strategic planning process underway, notified that they will have an opportunity to formally participate at a later date, and invited, if they have immediate ideas, to share those with board members or the administrator.
- **September – October 2008:** Board conducts a SWOT analysis to assess the state of the school and provide a starting point for discussion of possible strategic priorities. Faculty receive reports on the process and are invited to perform their own SWOT analysis and share their thoughts with the board. Only two faculty members do so. The SWOT list is extensive: prioritizing needed.
- **November 2008:** Terry Horton resigns from board for personal reasons. Strategic planning comes to standstill for about 30 days. I again take on role of chairman of the planning process.
- **December 2008:** Board ranks results from SWOT analysis in order of perceived importance. Board compiles notes and thoughts from fall discussions and SWOT, constructs initial list of 34 tentative priorities in 8 categories, prepares to seek further input from others.
- **January – February 2009:** We design a survey for staff and parents in which most questions are identical, while a few are specialized for each group. The board both desires feedback on the results of the SWOT analysis and the fall discussions, and wants the staff and parents to have the opportunity to identify other concerns. With that goal in mind, the survey is constructed with both closed- and open-ended questions. I presented the survey to staff, and held two parent meetings to explain the



process to date and to introduce the surveys. Approximately 80% of the families in the school are represented at the meetings, and 23 surveys are returned by the deadline, representing about 33% of the families. Likewise, 100% of staff are presented with the staff version of the survey, and 9 surveys are returned by the deadline, representing about 43% of the staff.

- **March – April 2009:** A school secretary compiles the raw data, and the surveys are analyzed to determine parent and staff priorities, and to compare the two. Analysis reveals that parents and staff agree strongly in two major areas, and that neither parents nor staff identified any areas of concern that had not already been identified by the board during the SWOT analysis. Survey data is compared to initial board list and correlations noted. After more detailed discussion, board begins draft document.



- **May – June 2009:** Board refines list of priorities, discusses time frames, and writes initial strategic plan document that focuses on seven categories with 1-4 elements in each category. Priority is established through placement in the action plan.
- **May – June 2009:** Administration, faculty, and board begin to implement the initial elements of the strategic action plan.

At several points during the process, most notably in the early stages and then again prior to constructing the survey, I consulted with Kiki Johnson of Carney, Sandoe, and Associates. Her input, perspective, and advice prove invaluable to successfully completing the plan.

Project Results

Despite some setbacks along the way, the project generally went well, and in the end both the overall goal and some additional benefits were accomplished. The DPCA 2008-2009 Strategic Planning Initiative yielded positive results in at least these three areas:

- 1) The board wrote a strategic action plan document that captures a broad consensus regarding those areas of the school's operations that should be addressed over the next three years, provides guidance as to who will be involved with each element, what resources are needed, and what the target time frames are for beginning and completing each element.
- 2) The board identified additional areas of concern that will need further work, analysis, and prayer, and will likely become elements in the next action plan document.

- 3) Board, staff, and parents were all reminded of the need for strategic prayer and planning; structures for continuing the process (such as a periodic board retreat focused on strategy) are already being put into place in order to make the process of strategic thinking much more continuous.

Analysis/Commentary

As with every project, some things connected to the DPCA 2008-2009 Strategic Planning Initiative went well, and others did not, or did not happen as planned.

An early challenge to the project was some previously unidentified skepticism on the part of some board members regarding the efficacy of strategic planning. That proved relatively easy to overcome as the actual process and intent were outlined. IN future I would simply spend more time walking the board through some of the basic elements of strategic planning, rather than assuming that all board members would understand the process.

A stronger challenge was resistance to the idea of a strategic planning steering committee composed of a broad cross-section of the community, which was the original vision and suggestion that I had received at the Van Lunen center. Temporarily derailed, I called Kiki Johnson and talked over the situation with her. We agreed that sensitivity to reality was needed, and restructured the plan to have the board as a whole function as a steering committee. In hindsight this proved very wise, as it gave time for all the board members to “get on board” and be at ease with the process and their level of control. By the time we needed to gather data from parents, the board understood the process better, felt good about the level of control, and were very supportive of gathering further input. Had we forced the issue at the beginning, it is quite likely the project would never have enjoyed full board support and would likely have been unsuccessful.



We suffered another setback when Terry Horton resigned from the board in November and we lost both his good ideas and a significant amount of time. Fortunately the original timeline called for a draft plan document to be finished by April. Since we had been working toward that goal, when we lost a month or so we were able to adjust and still finish the project during the school year.

On another note, we should in hindsight have had more regular contact with parents during the fall so that when the survey arrived in January they might have been more engaged in the process and we might have been able to improve our 33% survey response rate. Also, I would still have preferred to have some parents working through the

SWOT analysis, even if in a separate group. I believe it is still the ideal to have a steering committee apart from the board. Perhaps next time around we will be able to do so here.

Faculty participation in the project was also a bit disappointing, but again, none were included at the steering committee level, so despite my efforts to communicate otherwise, I think the faculty largely perceived this as a board project. In future efforts I will work to change that perception.

We also experienced repeated delays due to several deaths connected to the school. A good friend of the school passed away January 19th, and a 2006 graduate of DPCA died January 23rd. Her funeral was held at school, so the entire two weeks around her death were lost in terms of strategic planning. My own mother passed away in late March, and since I was chairing the planning efforts, significantly more time was lost there. These were unforeseeable situations over which we had no control, but again the fact that we had established the goal of finishing in April meant that at each setback we had enough time to be flexible and still get the project completed during the school year, although we have only just in early June created the first draft of the action plan. I learned again in this context that planning for completion dates that are set before actual “drop-dead” deadlines is a wise move.

Many good experiences came from the project as well. In the end, we found the following elements went well:

- We allowed adequate time for the discussion to unfold and for people to be heard. I wanted the early discussions to move faster, and they probably could have, but in the end everyone (at least on the board) had time to wrestle with the issues and express their thoughts.**
- Though not at the steering committee level, we did include a broad representation of the school community in the planning process.**
- We discovered broad agreement among all members of the school community on a number of issues and produced an action plan document that reflects that consensus.**
- We achieved the goal: a coherent, practical plan for improving the school over the next three years, and a renewed framework and enthusiasm for strategic thinking and planning.**

