

Seeking God's Plan for Our Future:

Strategic Planning at the Verde Valley Christian School

What Did I Do?

I have the blessing of entering my fourth year in christian school administration at a school that has been in existence for over thirty years. After five years in administration at the local public school, the Lord opened an opportunity for me to enter into christian schooling. The Verde Valley Christian School (VVCS) is a school of one-hundred fifteen students located on the campus of the Verde Baptist Church in Cottonwood, Arizona. Cottonwood is a community of twenty-five thousand close to the resort town of Sedona, Arizona. Located in northern Arizona at an elevation of thirty-five hundred feet in elevation, Cottonwood is a town built on retirement and tourism. Our school serves students' ages three through fifth grade. Our average class size is thirteen students and we boast a staff of eighteen. Eighty percent of our families report a Christian church of home attendance.

As I took the helm at VVCS I fell in love with a school that has a strong reputation of academics and spiritual formation within our community. It is common for parents of our current students to have attended our school as students. Our family survey scores have been excellent during the three years that I have begun taking data. On the surface, everything appeared to be in excellent working order. As a matter of fact, upon my arrival it was shared with me that the school "pretty much runs itself" and did not need much in the way of direction. Within my first year it became apparent that our school had some amazing strengths but also some cracks in our foundations of excellence. It became apparent that our reputation of academic excellence was almost a barrier to us as a school as there was an atmosphere of acceptance of and energy towards keeping status quo. I had been told that our school once had a strong reputation but had appeared to be in decline as related to excellence in academics. I further found that we had a few staff members who were resistant to change or a focus on improvement.

By the beginning of my second year, three of my staff members were moving on from VVCS to new opportunities. There was a vast improvement in culture in that year. One particular story encapsulates what I noticed that year. A teacher who had been at our school for over fifteen years came to see me in the summer just before school began. She recounted the story of the wineskins from scripture. She shared that she had been in prayer and had sensed that the Lord was doing great things through our school. She shared that she did not want to be the old

wineskin but wanted to trust where the Lord was taking us. She shared several devotions with our staff throughout that year (and since) that have helped solidify a budding acceptance of change and seeking the Lord's direction as opposed to seeking the status quo.

One of her devotions, based in Isaiah 58, spoke of the passage of God's promise of rebuilding ancient ruins and raising up age old foundations. She likened our school to this rebuilding process. This was a pivotal moment for us. It made clear to us all that the Lord wanted to do a new work at VVCS. I continue to praise the Lord for his work through this staff member as she has been a wonderful tool in his hand (as well as a wonderful help to me as the leader). With the momentum building within our school for change, all I needed was support in how to begin intentionally planning for change. I became convicted that we were in great need of a strategic plan for VVCS. I only lacked the knowledge and experience of how to move forward in the process.

At one of our quarterly regional Christian school administrator meetings, a friend shared about his experience in the Van Lunen Fellowship (VLF). After gathering more information, I knew this was just what I had been praying for. My acceptance into VLF began an amazing journey towards a more intentional school. The journey started with excellent training then follow-up coaching.

At our monthly phone conference, my coach and I began to plan what the strategic planning initiative at VVCS would look like. The first decision was to determine who would lead. After reviewing the options, I decided to use an outside facilitator from our area. She had a ministry focus and had been involved in multiple planning meetings for nonprofit ministries. By October, I began meeting regularly with both my coach and my facilitator. Initially I planned to use a monthly meeting format. It was determined quickly through conversations with my facilitator that this was a less efficient method. We decided to use a two-day retreat style format with smaller groups forming from there.

We set a date in February and I began forming my team. I wanted to have representation from all of my stakeholders. I gathered members from our school families, our school staff, my leadership team, our church family, and our local community. In the end I had about 15 people who committed to joining our strategic planning team.

My next challenge was to find a suitable location. I wanted to hold the retreat off campus if possible. I felt that the right location would be vital to creating an atmosphere of excitement and vision. The search grew dim after the first six locations on my list didn't work. I was in for an awesome God moment several days later as I sat down for lunch with a pastor/friend from a nearby church. I began to share my excitement about our upcoming planning process and found him an eager ear. In short order it became evident that my friend was a strong proponent of planning. He began to share his excitement for the plan his church was building. He invited me back to his church to see documents he was creating. He was a wealth of information and insight.

That afternoon I sat in my friend's office chatting about strategic planning and looking out his window over the breathtaking views of the Verde Valley where we live. The Lord placed a sudden thought on my heart, "why not here?" The location was perfect as it was just down the street from my school. The facilities were incredible as they had just finished with building several months before. The views from the patio outside of their meeting room were unparalleled within our valley. He readily agreed to my request and my seventh location proved to be the number of completion.

Our team met on a Friday afternoon to begin our planning session. Through the blessing of the Lord, the skill of our facilitator, and the beautiful surroundings, we built a quick momentum towards "finding God's plan for our future." We shared briefly the what, why, and how of strategic planning and I took some time to lay a vision for those who were in attendance. We used a strengths-based approach to look at what was strong about our school and what we wanted to focus on with more intentionality. We were very interactive as well, breaking out into small groups frequently to brainstorm and discuss. We continued that process on Saturday and in the end, settled on three goals for VVCS.

Our goals were to improve the culture of excellence, community-building, and marketing or telling our story. Under excellence we also knew that we had much work to do in rebuilding our mission and core values, which had not been updated in thirty years nor could anyone recall what they were. Our excellence team met and began work on our new mission statement and slogan. We came up with, "VVCS is on a mission to educate students to; know Christ personally, excel academically, and transform communities for God's glory". We subsequently worked on our school slogan and came up with "igniting hearts, unleashing minds". You will find a copy of our

strategic plan document at the end of this article. Our next goal is to begin working on our core values. This will take place over the next year.

What Did I Learn?

In Luke 14:28, (NIV) Jesus says, “Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it?” This is the most important thing that I have taken from the strategic planning process. The concept of planning and being intentional is prevalent throughout the Bible. In proverbs it says, “Where there is not vision, people perish.” I became convicted early on that planning and vision were a great need at VVCS. Looking back on some of the struggles we had as a school, I can see how they were directly related to our need for planning even though we didn't know it at the time. We had no long term plan for facilities, technology, marketing or curriculum and things did not appear to be running themselves as I had been told.

Another important take-away that I have from the strategic planning process is that it must be a living and breathing process. At our first day of our planning retreat, one of our parents shared that she has been involved in the planning process in the corporate world on many occasions. She shared that in most cases, the plans went to a shelf never to be heard from again. I could see clearly that an important role for me as the administrator is to be the champion. Our plan needs to remain vibrant, active, and flexible to be effective. As such I have shared our plan with our leadership within the church, with our families and with our staff. The key challenge now is for me to continue to champion this plan as well as to meet on a regular basis to update it. The difference will be a document that helps guide a strong future or a document that dies on a shelf.

Through this process I have a better understanding of the need for clarity within our organization as a result of the strategic planning process. One particular story illustrates this need within our school. Last summer we convened our first curriculum committee. As we began to look at curriculum and question what direction we wanted to go in, a staff member said, “What is our vision? That will help inform us which curriculum will benefit us most.” We all got quiet for a moment as the truth of that statement hit us. How could we choose a curriculum, or make any important decision for that matter, without know what our overall purpose was. This process has already provided a great leap of clarity for our school.

What Impact Did It Have on Our School?

I point to the Lord's leadership through our strategic planning process as the single most important initiative in my three years of leadership at VVCS. It's hard to overestimate the value this is having in redefining who we are as school. Additionally, every effort I make to share our plan with our stakeholders and bring them on board, its value improves.

It has helped create a broad culture shift towards continuous improvement in our school by consistently looking at how we can reflect the excellence of the Lord in our practice. I have found my teachers to be more excited and empowered about what the Lord is doing through us as a school through their involvement in the planning process. They now have ownership that they didn't previously have.

This process has also informed my priority list of what is important at our school. If building excellence is really a passion for us then my budget and my projects list will have pieces that directly relate to improving the excellence of our programming. Imagine now the improved effectiveness of my communication with my leadership team as it surrounds a projects list, budget and strategic plan that are aligned and lay out a clear path for our school. Another strength is that they have had a hand in developing the plan. It has been very exciting to see this happen.

I would like to share a quick story in conclusion. At our most recent three day curriculum development session this summer, we began to look at our writing curriculum. By the third day we had reached a complete consensus and were excited about what we have planned for next year. During a discussion about the process, a new teacher to our school spoke up. She shared that in her many years of public school teaching she had grown to greatly dislike committee meetings. She shared further that in this three days she had grown a great excitement for the process. She shared that she was going home doing further research after our meetings to help inform our process. The main difference was the empowerment she felt in working together as a team to seek the Lord's guidance and direction. I'm grateful to the Van Lunen Fellowship and to our awesome creator that this process now flows from a clear mission and plan for where we want to go in the future!

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Verde Valley Christian School- Cottonwood Arizona

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Summary: With the help of Dave Medema and my facilitator, Carol Stensrud, we embarked upon the strategic planning process as a school. We gathered a team consisting of members of my leadership team, staff, parents, and community/business leaders to look at our school with a strengths-based approach and find the areas that we would like to focus on for the coming year(s). We also developed our mission statement and slogan through this process.

Mission: We are on a mission to educate students to;

- Know Christ personally
- Excel academically
- Transform communities for God's glory

Slogan: igniting hearts, unleashing minds

Strategic Planning Goals: 1.)Building Excellence, 2.)Building Community, 3.)Marketing- Telling our story

What I Learned:

- The value of intentionality (Luke 14:28)
- The importance of championing the plan
- The importance of a living breathing plan (rather than a shelf-dweller)
- The importance of clarity from mission, to strategic plan, to decision making within the school, to the experience families get when they attend

What is Different:

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Our strategic planning process has helped create a broad culture shift towards continuous improvement in our school by consistently looking at how we can reflect the excellence of the Lord in our practice. I have found my teachers to be more excited and empowered about what the Lord is doing through us as a school through their involvement in the planning process. They now have ownership that they didn't previously have.