

THE COLLABORATION OF TWO SCHOOLS

2014-2015 Van Lunen Fellows Program

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My project was to determine and work through the necessary steps leading to the collaboration of Providence Christian Academy's Pre-K through 6th grade school and a nearby 6th through 12th grade day and boarding school, on their campus.

BACKGROUND:

In 1982 a group of parents started a Christian school in the basement of a local church. In 1989, when the church wanted to take over control of the school, the parents and staff sought a different location.

In October of 1990 the original school, which had functioned under the church's incorporation, received its own tax-exempt status and opened as Providence Christian Academy (PCA). PCA found a new home in a building that was once a chicken coop, which was owned and operated by a bi-county group of Deacons that used it for evening adult Bible classes. PCA was then affectionately known as "the chicken coop school."

Fast-forward to the spring of 2006 and an unexpected notice from the "chicken coop" owners that they did not want the school to return in September. It was time to fly the coop. With 147 students enrolled and no place to go an extensive search began.

After many rejections PCA opened in the fall of 2006 as a split campus. Half of the school was located in a Baptist church's Sunday school classrooms and the other half in the educational building of a Roman Catholic parish.

After the start of the second year the Baptist Church indicated it was the last year PCA would be permitted to meet there. Some of their major concerns were their carpet wear, wall scuffs and parking. The Roman Catholic parish lovingly and graciously welcomed the entire school. We vacated the Baptist Church a month after they notified us, rather than spend the rest of the year unwanted.

Fast forward again to 2012 when the PCA Board, now composed of teachers and parents, began discussing a need to change our location to one that would allow us to offer more to our students. As wonderful as our current classrooms are, classrooms are all we have in the current location. An opportunity began to present itself in the form of collaboration with a school 17 miles away.

WHAT TO DO ON THE ROAD TO COLLABORATION:

The following are the steps to take, some baby and others more substantial strides, on the road to collaboration. Schools seeking guidance while considering a similar transition will find them useful.

1. Build relationships. Before delving deeper into all of the aspects involved, there needs to be trust, openness, and communication. Without those elements each side will be guarded. It is easy to share your strengths, but you must also be able to share our weaknesses.

The relationship-building task began quite smoothly. Casual conversations led to thoughts, speculations and dreams of what might be possible. I took an interest in the other school and displayed it through visits, attendance at their events and inquisitive discussions with their principal. This process was made easier because of my prior acquaintance with the gentleman who was then the principal. He was quite open about his school as I was about ours. As the process continued I became keenly aware of all of the individuals involved in the other school and the role each played.

The most sensitive part of the relationship building in my case was and dealing with the on-site, hands-on Chairman of their Board of Trustees. This Korean man began a retreat center years ago and later added a 6th grade through 12th grade day and boarding school. In addition to careful words because of a slight language barrier, I needed to be

sensitive to the cultural differences in doing business. Research and discussion with the principal helped me to understand what this man had been through over the years. It was important that I gain his confidence and respect if we were to move forward as a team. Building relationships is an essential first step.

Lencioni, (2012) states, "Members of a truly cohesive team must trust one another... The kind of trust that is necessary to build a great team is what I call *vulnerability-based trust*. This is what happens when members get to a point where they are completely comfortable being transparent, honest, and naked with one another..." (p. 27).

2. Pray. This is ongoing individually, with your own school and with the other school. The Executive Director of the other school and I had times of prayer together, sometimes tearful, as we sought God's leading and guidance. We asked for a true peace to come over us each step of the way, through every discussion and decision.

3. Keep your Board informed. My Board gave authority to our Consultant and me to be the representatives of the school throughout this entire process. We were the contacts, either together or me alone. We were the voice of PCA and in turn reported back to the Board. Keep the Board involved and engaged, and as necessary remind them of their role as a Board.

I dealt with several issues where Board members were behaving as though they felt left out of the process because they had not heard something first hand. They had to be reminded of the unanimous Board vote to have representatives. At one point my Board had to be told that the Executive Director and principal of other school stated they did not see the need and did not want to meet with our entire Board, which did not go over well. Unfortunately, several of my Board members had come across as demanding and unrealistic to the other school.

4. Determine the physical ability for one campus to accommodate another school.

This was, at the onset, an easy step. They have a lovely 43-acre campus and numerous buildings that are only used for summer retreats. They have fields, a gymnasium, a lunchroom with freshly prepared meals served each day, a built-in pool, tennis court and adequate space for a lower and upper school to function without interfering with each other.

We were advised that buildings could be converted into classroom space. In addition, while we were in the relationship-building phase we witnessed the approval from their township to build an additional classroom building, which would expand their high school building and open up other classrooms for our use. Classroom space never seemed to be an issue.

In early April 2015 our consultant and I accompanied the entire Board to the other campus so that the BOARD could see the classroom and office space that had been determined best for our 2015-2016 school year needs. After the tour the principal spoke to the entire Board and eloquently presented their vision for a future that included PCA. The rent for the space would be no more than we were currently paying. There was also the potential to share services, a benefit to both schools.

5. Assure an alignment of your mission, vision, and statement of faith. Discuss at length what each of these means to you. Weigh how each of these forms the culture of your school. The PCA mission, vision and statement of faith links well with theirs.

We are an evangelical school and so there had to be discussion on how this would feed into their covenant school. Through discussions, made easier because of the openness of our relationship, it became known that although on paper they are a covenant school, in reality, they are not.

6. Create a shared vision for the future. Spend time discussing your vision for the next year, the next 3 years and the next 5 years. All of this will eventually come together in a shared strategic plan. It is important at the very beginning, before the creation of the actual plan, that you see an agreement in a vision for the future.

One example was our visions for the size of the future student body. As a future K-12 school we found agreement in not believing we would become a “mega-school,” but rather one that would accommodate approximately 200 students. We are in agreement that the first reason for this is that we want an atmosphere that provides the ability to have a close relationship with each student. Following that we must deal with issues surrounding the septic system.

There is **a lot** to talk about during this phase and the conversation can easily begin with, “What does this school look like to you in one, three and five years?”

Cloud, (2010) emphasized the importance of this when he stated,

“Although the very word “*vision*” and the techniques of seeing the “good future” have been so talked about that they almost fall on deaf ears at times, that overuse has happened for a good reason. Human brains are designed to create what they see in the future. Our internal resources begin to align with that internal reality and create it. It is the reason that great golfers see the shot before they hit it, or NBA players see the ball going in the basket before they shoot it. It is the reason that CEOs cast the vision of what they want the company to look like and be over and over. When people see it, they can create it. If it is communicated strongly enough and often enough, they almost cannot *not* create it!”

“The question ‘Where do you picture yourself in five years?’ is more than an inquiry to find out more about a person. It may be diagnostic of where they will actually be.”

“So make it real. Write it down. Talk about it and create reminders in your personal life and your organization.” (p. 161-162)

7. Understand the organizational structure of each school. I already knew about my own and came to learn that both schools have Boards that are dysfunctional.

We found in the other school a Board that had no knowledge or understanding of the proper structure of an independent school. My Board has been educated on their role as the Board through our consultant's excellent presentation, "The Board and Head of School... Who's in Charge of What?" They have, however, failed to follow through on what they heard. Though the other school spoke of their desire to seek Middle States Accreditation, they were woefully lacking in any understanding of how their current structure would not be accepted as appropriate.

Lencioni, (2012) explains this well in the first chapter of his book, and states, "Once organizational health is properly understood and placed into the right context, it will surpass all other disciplines in business as the greatest opportunity for improvement and competitive advantage. Really." (p. 4).

8. Agree on the nature of your relationship. Determine if you are looking at a collaboration, acquisition or merger. The other school initially spoke of a merger. Paperwork later submitted for our review indicated an acquisition on their part. For numerous reasons we agreed to a collaboration with look toward a strategic plan that would eventually lead to a merger.

9. Observe the other school in action. Frequently review the web site, Facebook page and any other social media tools they use. Be a presence on the campus. Interact with students. Casually observe classes in session. Review what courses they offer and at what academic level. Inquire as to where students progress once they leave the other school.

We want our students to naturally progress to the upper school. The public will view us as one entity. It was important that what the other school was doing would, frankly, be worthy of the students that would leave us and move on to them.

We feel their school has a culture that presents itself as a youth group retreat peppered with academic classes, though they brag on their SAT and Terra Nova results. The appointment of a Youth Pastor, by training and God's calling, as the Executive Director of their school is not helping their situation. He readily admits he does not know how to run a school, however he was hand picked by their Board Chair, in part because he assists in communication.

10. Set up a realistic timeline. Determining who will do what and when it will be done will take a great deal of coordination and planning. Informing current families, marketing to new families, arranging for re-arranging and moving are just a few of the items to coordinate. Do not assume that, for example, that the other school understands all it takes to prepare a classroom for a kindergarten grade. During this process you should map out all of the small details that to this point were maybe just your passing thoughts.

11. Never minimize the risks or underestimate the opportunities. Being the VLF "diagnosed" pragmatist that I am, I always tried to stay focused on the goal in a realistic, practical and sensible manner. My question is frequently, "What is the worst that can happen?" In answering that question I always go back to what is realistic and sensible and would encourage others to do the same.

I know that my straight forward, matter of fact approach with the Executive Director was at times a bit strong for him and his cultural ways. His meek ways and failure to step up and be a strong leader when needed is difficult for me to understand. As we talked this out and continued to work together we found we are a nice balance to each other.

WHAT I LEARNED ON THE ROAD TO COLLABORATION:

1. Collaboration and cooperation between two independent schools is an interesting and pursuable alternative to remaining alone. There are benefits to be realized. As Helen Keller said, "Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much." (retrieved from: <http://www.brighthub.com/office/collaboration/articles/71425.aspx>).

2. There needs to be vision, structure and deadlines in any change event.

3. A Board that hires a consultant and does not follow through with assignments and plans has wasted its money. Some of the Board took personal offense to his comments and suggestions when it conflicted with their own beliefs. It became increasingly difficult for me to observe my Board, with total years combined "experience" less than half the number of years of his, go about their own way. Assignments they agreed to do before the next meeting went undone. Outlines he presented based upon decisions they had made went ignored. "Listen to advice and accept instruction that you may gain wisdom for the future." (Proverbs 19:20 RSV)

I personally appreciate his involvement, support and encouragement to me, which was and is priceless for my work, and sometimes my sanity.

4. As the Board goes, so goes the school. The Board needs to, as Henry Contant reminded us "protect, direct and sustain." Your school can only be as healthy as the health of your Board of Trustees.

Lencioni (2012) makes it clear, "When leaders of an organization are less than honest with one another, when they put the needs of their departments [their family-half of our Board are parents of students] or their careers [half of our Board members are teachers] ahead of the needs of the greater organization, when they are misaligned, confused, and inconsistent about what is important, they create real anguish for real

human beings. “ (p. 13). He later points out the folly of underestimating the cost of allowing a sick state of affairs to remain.

5. “If you are raising money in a school year to cover tuition assistance you are not getting that year, that is an unsustainable situation and you are doomed to fail.” Words to live by, shared with Van Lunen Fellows during our July 2014 gathering by Chuck Evans. The reality is PCA has functioned with a yearly deficit since its inception in 1990. Whether they opened with an approved budget in the red, or paid employees below poverty salaries, there has always been a deficit.

6. Negativity drains the body, mind and soul. “When we allow ourselves to think negatively we limit our potential in many ways. The worst thing is that we may be so wrapped in negativity that we cannot even see that there are ways out.” (Retrieved from: <http://www.the-benefits-of-positive-thinking.com/negative-thinking-versus-positive-thinking.html>). Hours spent in Board meetings where no one would take a “how can we make this work approach” were exhausting to say the least.

WHAT DIFFERENCE IS IT MAKING IN MY SCHOOL?

On Thursday, May 7, 2015, the Board of Trustees of Providence Christian Academy voted **not** to enter into collaboration with the other school. The discussion leading to this vote included issues the other school is dealing with, the other school's inadequacies and confused state of governance, and a feeling that “they just aren't that into us.” In addition, no matter how they looked at it, there would be a budget deficit in the upcoming year.

The Board then voted to suspend school operations for the 2015-2016 school year. After years of approving budgets with deficits and admitting they had failed to fund the deficits approved in prior years they determined they did not want to again use funds that

had been set aside for a building and/or relocating in order to make ends meet. The Board hopes to take the next year to re-group and re-invent the school.

In the end, the road to collaboration, paved with bricks of good intentions was not meant to be, and the work that I did helped the school come to a place it probably should have looked at years ago. When the faculty was made aware of the decision one of my teachers with a long history at the school said to me, “The shocking thing isn’t that they voted to close, it is that it went on for a quarter of a century through ridiculous financial struggles every year, which was carried on the backs of their employees.”

Though the collaboration did not work for us this information will help other schools considering a similar change. I would be willing to discuss and help facilitate other school collaborations based upon my experiences. I do believe that collaboration, cooperation and consolidation can be positive for Christian schools.

Twenty-five years of educating and nurturing children is nothing for PCA to forget. Many minds were taught, hearts were touched and lives were shaped. I am thankful for my 19 years here. Parker Palmer sums it up well: “On the spiritual [life] journey...each time a door closes, the rest of the world opens up. All we need to do is to stop pounding on the door just closed, turn around—which puts the door behind us—and welcome the largeness of life that now lies open to our souls.”

My acceptance to The Van Lunen Center was in God’s timing. I will take the knowledge and blessings of this experience with me, wherever I go. Thank you!

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FOOTNOTE:

On May 26, 2015, I received a call from the Executive Director of the other school. He had finished a discussion with his Board Chair and key Board member. He, on their behalf, was asking that I consider coming to the other school, independent of PCA, to begin their early education program. He has asked I submit a proposal to them outlining my vision for this idea. Whether it is this or something else, necessary endings open the doors to new beginnings.

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WHAT DID I DO?

I mapped out and worked through the necessary first steps that would lead to the collaboration of two Christian schools on one campus.

- Build relationships
- Pray
- Keep your Board informed
- Determine physical ability for one campus to accommodate another school
- Assure an alignment of your mission, vision and statement of faith
- Create a shared vision for the future
- Understand the organizational structure of each school
- Agree on the nature of your relationship
- Observe the other school in action
- Set up a realistic timeline
- Never minimize the risks or underestimate the opportunities

WHAT DID I LEARN?

- Collaboration is possible
- Vision, structure and deadlines are necessary
- Consultants are valuable resources
- A school is only as healthy as its Board of Trustees
- Unsustainable financial situations should not be ignored
- Negativity drains the body, mind and soul

WHAT DIFFERENCE DID IT MAKE?

Providence Christian Academy was forced to face reality, and thank God for the 25 years of teaching minds, touching hearts and shaping lives that it was given.