



Finding Your Inner Hedgehog: Reclaiming Institutional Quintessence for Directional Viability

**To have [one] good idea,
have a lot of them.
~Thomas Edison**

The goal for this project was to prepare Belleville Christian School (BCS) for a traditional strategic planning process by educating the community at large in the societal and educational trends shaping the 21st century schoolhouse, thereby increasing the likelihood of generating a viable, marketable, and progressive future for BCS.

Eight community visionaries were recruited and charged with the task of imagining what BCS could be in 25 years. The school's current strengths and markets were identified, and subgroups of the home group were asked to engage in some "sky's the limit" thinking using the strengths as a foundation. As a result, four unique visions were researched, developed, and ultimately presented to the home group. From there, the home group began a grass roots initiative to share their findings with the community at large in informal settings such as dinner parties, games nights, bbqs, etc. As the ideas spread, the goal of educating the community at large in preparation for the strategic planning process is realized.

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Summary

Belleville Christian School has been blessed with steady enrolment increases and some newly hired, high-caliber staff that arrived with vision and enthusiasm. The Board and administrative team quickly recognized that strong school management had served the school well for the last few years, but it was time to look to the future. This was a chance to address societal and educational trends toward 21st century learning and to explore how faith nurture and Kingdom service could be enhanced through technology. The need for a strategic plan was clear. Traditional strategic planning models were seen as effective at rallying a community behind a collective vision, but there was doubt that our current community had a good grasp of 21st century education and its implications. A visionary plan that inspired the community as a whole would require some ground work.

Project Focus

When the Van Lunen Conference wrapped up last July, a perfect storm railed in my heart. I had long since recognized the value of a Strategic Planning, and knew that BCS needed one desperately if it were to continue to thrive in Belleville, but I also knew that virtually no one even remotely grasped the concepts and research around 21st century education, nor the effects of globalization that were driving it. Casting vision for the school had been effective when it came to culture, curriculum, and Christ, but ideas around technology, ecology, new skill sets, and new grading paradigms were radical and threatening. To generate a strategic plan from so shallow a pool of visionaries seemed sure to set us back. Dr. Roels and my consultant Dave Medema had me sold on strategic planning as the focus for my project upon my departure, but I was not settled.

Upon my return, I sat down at my computer and Googled “strategic planning is wrong,” mostly because I am often amazed by how Mr. Google is often so perceptive and finds me exactly what I was looking for. Lo! and Behold! I found some kindred spirits who shared my misgivings around the process, and I began to wade through the articles. My favourites, and those which shaped my project are listed here:

“The Case Against Strategic Planning,” by Robert Evans

<http://www.nais.org/publications/ismagazinearticle.cfm?ItemNumber=150115>

“Independent School Strategic Planning: The Times They Are A-Changin’,” by Jim Wickenden

<http://www.wickenden.com/blog/2009/06/independent-school-strategic-planning-the-times-they-are-a-changin/>

Finding Your Inner Hedgehog: The Case for Truly Strategic Planning

<http://www.nais.org/publications/ismagazinearticle.cfm?ItemNumber=151867>

Project Process

Goals

1. Achieve clarity re what school is / is not
2. Define who the school it is (not) good for
3. Define what the school can (not) become
4. Identify our niche and own it

Core Questions of Strategic Thinking

1. What value do we bring?
2. How do we allocate and focus to be the best, or better than others?
3. What is our actual market position?
4. What are possible market niches
5. What is the financial potential for each possible market niche?

Process Description:

1. Recruit key leaders in the school and community to form a Strategic Thinking Team. Participants could include key administrators, board members, and possibly faculty who possess a capacity to think and speak in visionary terms.
2. Describe the process to faculty, parents, and other stakeholders who will want to know the outcome. Be transparent.
3. Data Collection (purpose is to engage stakeholders and receive advisory input to be integrated into the planning process). This could include surveys, interviews, or a town hall-type meeting. Planning team is to discern the visionary elements of stakeholder input and its value in the planning work.
4. Define the Unifying Vision: What the school is and is not.
 - a. Evaluate Strategic Options
 - i. Stay the course and focus on it more intensely?
 - ii. Totally reinvent ourselves from what we currently are?
 - iii. Identify our most marketable current competency and put that forward as our core strength?
 1. Identify our key strengths in relation to our core competency (broad listing)
 2. Identify those competencies that have the most potential to leverage historical value, public perception, and market opportunity
 - b. Create working subcommittees whose mandate is to prepare a presentation advocating for why their competency should be selected as the school's central strategic focus. Several weeks to complete this task. Subcommittees must consider:
 - i. Stakeholder feedback (advisory only)
 - ii. What will it take to do this?
 - iii. What are the consequences?
 - iv. Affordability
 - c. Identify the preferred option(s)
 - d. Communicate Strategic Thinking Process results to stakeholders and acquire feedback.
 - e. Engage in more traditional strategic planning and its focus on execution and implementation.
 - i. Align message, evaluate programming, and concentrate resources where they will be most effective in supporting the core competency
 - ii. Create an execution plan and align organizational activity around the core competency

The project was set to be launch in February, but 2 major developments caused delay. When the school investigated the possibility of securing land near the Christian high school 2008, we had contact several land owners in the area to make inquiries. All doors were closed at that time, so we decided to wait and pray. On Christmas Eve of 2010, an email came to the school from a church which owned the land immediately beside the high school telling us that they wanted to sell the land to us. This launched a 4 month scramble of Town Hall Meetings, membership meetings, negotiation meetings, and ultimately a unanimous vote in favour of purchasing the property. In that time, many of the visionaries that had been recruited for my project were very busy on the land committee. This and some much needed emergency fundraising gave my project a late start, but drove home the urgency of developing a strategic plan. No longer was the vision for a new facility a pipe dream. It was real. We had a site. It was time.

Project Results

The tangible result of the project was 4 distinct and completely illustrated visions of our future. Each one had been developed in isolation of the others, but from the beginning we knew that the ultimate product of our labour would be a facility that included pieces of all 4 projects. BCS in the future will include elements from each of the following:

The Smart School (Cyberschool)

In this vision, BCS has technological elements throughout its spaces. Technology is not an “event” at this school, because it is so integrated. Staff have been given the professional development necessary to integrate technology into their newly reengineered curriculum, and are able to operate as Professional Learning Communities as they collaborate in myriads of new ways. Students have access to the internet and cloud technologies that allow them to work in groups, conduct research, and develop new ideas using mobile devices and hard wired tools throughout the building. Parents are in touch and up to speed with the significant learning taking place through remote access to student portfolios, online assessments, and digital updates. The physical spaces are modular and easily adaptable to the needs of students on any given day.

The Green School

In this vision, Earth Education and Sustainable Communities are core to the school program. There is a strong sense of community here because we have accepted our role as stewards of God’s creation and know we must operate as community if we are to succeed. When the school was built, solar and geothermal systems were installed in such a way as they are exposed and illustrated to students and others who visit the school. The gardens provide opportunities to learn about agriculture and nutrition. The Thrift Store operated by parents not only benefits the environment, but the funds generated there provide a much needed revenue stream for the budget.

The Christian School of the Arts

In this vision, the school day is a little longer and allows for more minutes of instruction in the arts. At night and on weekends, the community uses our auditorium for concerts, our studios for rehearsals, and other areas of the school for classes in pottery, quilting and other fine arts instruction. Our foyer is place where groups can congregate and share their work whether is on the wall or in the amphitheater.

Truly Special Education for All

Here, students have access to the technologies that will allow them to access curriculum in new and heighten ways, and teacher are able to collaborate easily on the best program for each student.

In all, we learned that vision is not something people are born with. It is a cultivated entity, and even the most apathetic community can become engaged in your school when intentional efforts are made to bring them on board. We learned that you have to clearly know who are, and who you are called to be, but also to give room to dream, stretch, and take risks because God delights in blessing us beyond our wildest expectations.

Our greatest result was the propagation new ideas around education, technology, and faith nurture that will direct the school from the ground up. When families gather for school events, there are many positive things to talk about and much enthusiasm for the school. When new families make inquiries into our school, they almost always reference a conversation they had with an existing or graduating family. They are drawn to our school because we have a vision everyone is excited about.

At this point, no decisions have been made about what BCS will look like at its new location. That will be determined through the Strategic Planning Process slated to begin in the new year.