

So We Have a Strategic Plan: Now What?

Abbotsford Christian School (ACS) is a Pre-12 school located in Abbotsford, British Columbia, Canada. In the fall of 2009, the board at ACS approved a Strategic Plan that would provide a blue-print for its future. The board was vehement upon making sure staff was implementing the plan and expected to see it carried out as such. Thus the staff put together an implementation plan to carry out the goals, objectives and initiatives as laid out in the plan. It became clear over time that this implementation plan needed to be celebrated in the school community – because it was driving so many wonderful things that were happening in the school. So while staff was busy implementing a plan, they were also communicating its progress to the various stakeholders, and in turn seeking to engage the community as objectives were being met.

The following project outlines the steps taken in the implementation phase of the strategic plan and shares examples of what the implementation of a strategic plan can do to engage in and celebrate with its community.

Julius Siebenga
Executive Director
Abbotsford Christian School
Van Lunen Fellow
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35526 Sheena Pl.
Abbotsford, BC. V3G 0A2
604-302-3833

jsiebenga@abbotsfordchristian.com

Description of school

Abbotsford Christian School (ACS) is a Pre-12 school located in Abbotsford, British Columbia, Canada. It currently has a student enrolment of approximately 1000 students and it is a non-denominational parent / society run school. The society elects a board to maintain the operations of the school and in turn the board hires an Executive Director to do this. Founded in 1953, the school is closing in its 60th anniversary and it has a strong and rich tradition with which to draw on. There have been many phases and additions to the school over the years, but currently the school has three campuses in two locations in Abbotsford, with the secondary and middle schools sharing a location and the elementary being less than a mile down the road.

Abbotsford is generally a fairly non-transient community and as such, a high percentage of students who graduate from grade 12 have been students at the school since kindergarten. Abbotsford also prides itself on its rich farming industry and a strong percentage of its families are in the agricultural business. ACS prides itself on attaining all aspects of its mission and maintains a solid percentage of the market-share in Abbotsford. Because the province of British Columbia operates with 50% funding to independent schools, ACS receives approx. \$3,800.00 (2010 numbers) per student that goes towards operational costs. Families also receive charitable receipts on a portion of their tuition (averaging around 35%). ACS operates with the following Mission Statement:

Abbotsford Christian School, operated by Abbotsford Christian School Society Members, seeks to serve Christian families by providing a secure learning environment in which God's students can continue to explore, evaluate, and experience all of life under God. We aim to nurture students in the discovery and development of their abilities and unique gifts so that they are enabled to be faithful, discerning, obedient and creative servants of God and of neighbour, and stewards of His creation.

Focus of project

In the fall of 2009, the board at ACS approved a Strategic Plan that would provide a blue-print for its future. The board was vehement upon making sure staff was implementing the plan and expected to see it carried out as such. Thus the staff put together an implementation plan to carry out the goals, objectives and initiatives as laid out in the plan.

It became clear over time that this implementation plan needed to be celebrated in the school community – because it was driving so many wonderful things that were happening in the school. So while staff was busy implementing a plan, they were also communicating its progress to the various stakeholders, and in turn were seeking to engage the community as objectives were being met.

The focus of this project was to carry out and monitor the implementation of the strategic plan. There were key documents that guided the project along and gave it focus, that are explained in detail in the “highlights of the project” section. Ultimately, the project monitored the current climate that Abbotsford Christian School finds itself in as it seeks to carry out its mission and vision.

Highlights of the project:

A key stakeholder in the institution is obviously the school board who in turn represents the school society – who ultimately owns and operates the school. The board of directors were holding staff accountable to a strategic plan that took many hours to establish, and was not going to allow what many institutions allow – a dusty strategic plan manual at the back of a board manual that people forget about in a few months. Thus the board implemented two accountability strategies:

1. An all school *Report Card* that administration had to complete on an annual basis providing the board with an update on how well the strategic plan was achieving its mission and vision; and
2. A strategic plan *Dashboard* that accurately updates the board (and possibly other stakeholders) of the progress being made in the implementation of the strategic plan specific to all the many initiatives that had been laid out in the plan.

Both of these strategies required hours of intense labor in setting up the documents and hours of continuing labor in updating the documents to keep them as living documents.

Report Card

Because the board required a Report Card to be completed on an annual basis, the Leadership Team of the school (the Executive Director and campus Principals), put together a comprehensive plan that consisted of surveying our parent community regularly, surveying our staff community regularly, surveying our student community regularly, instituting systems that allowed us to track data that had not been tracked previously, tweaked current systems to allow us to regain data that we currently had but were not actively tracking, and provided deadlines so that we could ultimately come up with a report card document that could speak to the effectiveness of our strategic plan. This comprehensive plan that gave us data to fill in the Report Card, actually became a quality communication tool as we were telling our broader constituency that we wanted to hear what their joys and concerns were. Not only did we want to hear them – we wanted to be able to act on them – which will be expanded on in the section entitled “Analysis / Commentary”.

An example of a strategic plan initiative that we are tracking for the report card is our “Kindergarten recruitment plan”. After completing the initiative – which was to establish and implement a quality Kindergarten recruitment plan – we are closely tracked (and continue to track) Kindergarten enrolment to see if our efforts have made any significant difference. This information is helpful as we evaluate the effectiveness of the Strategic Plan itself.

Dashboard

The Leadership Team of the school also put together a Strategic Plan Dashboard that helped the board see the status and chart the progress as we implemented the plan. In the dashboard we could point out the start date and end date of an initiative, the champion / team / individual that we held accountable for a deliverable, and commentary to explain why or why not we would meet be meeting the deadline

for the particular initiative. So to use the example above, there is a strategic plan initiative that calls for ACS to establish and implement a “Kindergarten recruitment plan” – with the expected due date schedule for June of 2010. The expected champion was our Community Relations Coordinator. We accomplished this initiative – albeit a year late – but the commentary explains the reasoning for why we pushed the deadline back a year from its original intent – which in turn sparks a discussion at the board level. This of course gets tracked from a *Report Card* perspective because now the board will be interested in whether or not this initiative (a kindergarten recruitment plan) was worth the time and commitment of staff and worthy of being in the strategic plan (as is explained in the report card section above).

Uniting the Staff

Another key stakeholder in the operation of the school is of course the school staff. They are the heartbeat of the school, the ones who ultimately carry out the mission day to day. It is paramount that staff see the Strategic Plan not only as a quality exercise to go through in producing, but even more importantly – the staff needs to experience the implementation in tangible ways that allow them to see the value in the whole process. Many staff can get “jaded” in strategic planning exercises, that are often seen as “administrivial”, and really carry limited significance in the grand scheme of actual learning in the classroom. Being able to involve the staff in the implementation process and communicating the results to them has been invaluable. At ACS we have intentionally put mechanisms in place that allow for staff to regularly receive feedback on the implementation of the plan, and we offer opportunities for staff to speak to the implementation of the plan in meaningful ways. What is so often the case is that staff are involved in many of the initiatives and then share how they are doing with these initiatives on a regular basis. The Dashboard has been provided as a public document to all staff and generally being used at almost every level of staff meeting as blue-print for yearly goals as it evaluates the work that is being doing specific to the plan. For example, the Education Team at the school is an important team that meeting regularly to make educational decisions at the school. This team lays the strategic plan dashboard in front of them at each monthly meeting to evaluate how they are doing on the initiatives that have been set out for them for that year. As a team, there is built in cohesiveness and commitment towards meeting the initiatives and the implementation process ultimately becomes something that unites us them. In the spirit of feeling united, another aspect of the implementation process that is noticed among staff is that because so many staff regularly see the dashboard of the plan, they can see the progress in other parts of the school that don’t involve them, yet they can see the progress and appreciate that other department or team.

Student Learning

The highlight of this project both in the reality of finishing it up for the Van Lunen Center but also in the actual reality at ACS is that we are seeing tangible evidence of improved learning and education for our children – which is a major focus of the strategic plan. The Leadership at ACS is firmly committed to an understanding that, as image bearers of Christ, our commitment to excellence should never be second rate. We should do the best at the work we do. We should be leading the charge in education as we see the educational landscape changing rapidly in this new century. This commitment has been renewed

not only during the creation of the Strategic Plan, but especially as we have insisted on its implementation.

Analysis / Commentary

It became clear to us that we needed to be intentional in sharing with our school community ways in which the strategic plan and the initiatives that are being implemented are actually making a difference for their children. Responding to the parent surveys in different formats became an effective way for us to engage our school community as we were in essence sharing with our constituents that we cared about the thoughts and satisfaction level of the families at our school.

Achieving our dreams comes at a cost. The most obvious one is the financial cost. We wanted to believe that the initiatives being achieved will result in a growth in enrollment, that would in turn alleviate the stress on the costs of the plan. Unfortunately the desires laid out in the actual plan have become quite expensive and there were no clear-cut objectives that centered around cutting programs. This leads to being pressed into having to make tough decisions that no one likes to do and it causes stress on the process of implementing the strategic plan that people get synergetic with. The harsh reality for ACS is that enrolment is not increasing at the rate we were hoping for and thus, there is pressure to either: find alternative revenue streams, refinance our debt, shift priorities, or re-think some of the initiatives and possibly put them on hold or cancel them altogether. The last alternative in the above list is tough to navigate through as a school community because of what can potentially feel like promises made in the strategic planning exercises and unveiling to the society.

The project was a complete application of what was happening at ACS and this made the project exciting. There was nothing that felt stretched or out of the realm of what already going on at ACS. Whether or not I was in the Van Lunen fellowship did not make any difference in whether or not these things were to be accomplished at ACS – but it gave me and the school focus as we progressed through the project.

Attachments

1. Strategic Plan
2. Strategic Plan's Dashboard
3. Strategic Plan's Report Card