

Van Lunen Fellows Program
Applied School Project Summary: High School Expansion

Wayne Sit, Head of School
Ann Arbor Christian School
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Introduction

When I applied for the Van Lunen Program, my heart had an ambitious dream that I wanted to explore more and to reflect on. For my applied school project, my focus would be to develop a feasibility and implementation plan for starting a high school for Ann Arbor Christian School, which currently ends at Grade 8. The plan would include evaluating market demand, examining different models of high schools, determining course offerings, extracurricular and athletic offerings, staff qualifications, personnel needs (e.g., college counselors), location and facilities needed, timeframe, incorporation, developing a tuition model, marketing, admissions criteria, accreditation, and funds needed.

Having experienced the labor of a start-up school personally (Boston Trinity Academy in 2002), I took on this project knowing that the actual realization of this project would take a tremendous amount of time, energy, prayer, and money. At the same time, however, having been through a start-up experience, I know how utterly amazing and uniquely exciting such an endeavor can be and how desperately the city of Ann Arbor needs a new Christian high school option.

As I worked on my project, several principles began guiding my work.

- Dream big - There was no explicit workshop or presenter on “How to Dream Big”, but, through the stories and examples shared and the repeated emphasis on high-quality thinking, question-asking, planning, and execution in all areas, I am eager to dream bigger and to accomplish much more for God.
- All things are possible – With the right plan, the right disciplines and habits, and the right people, anything can be done. The quality of all presenters made this abundantly clear to me.
- But it all starts with a vision - Everything starts with a God-inspired, clear, and gripping vision that captures people’s attention and the immense possibilities behind it.

Shaping a tangible and compelling vision

As a result, I realized that my energy needed to be spent on crafting a clearer vision for a high school and being able to answer the simple but profound question: Why does Ann Arbor Christian School need to expand into a high school? Why should this happen?

As emphasized by my work with Zach Clark’s coaching services, a clear and compelling vision is the prerequisite for all the pieces that come afterwards - whether facilities planning, admissions policies, staffing needs, course offerings, marketing, or fundraising. The vision shapes and determines everything else that will make the high school a reality. Working with Zach Clark’s coaching services has allowed me to craft a clearer vision and how to share that vision with others in a compelling manner.

For a while, I also pursued surveying parents as a key way to craft a vision for a high school and to gauge interest, but my opinion of the usefulness of such a survey changed. Of the parents who took a survey I sent out, nearly two thirds of our parents expressed moderate to high interest in seeing Ann Arbor Christian School's adding a high school. (The remaining third were committed to public schools for different reasons, but mainly for their children to be in a non-Christian environment while still under their care or to be in a larger setting before college.) Naturally, I took into serious consideration any repeated themes that parents would be looking for in a strong Christian high school. Most indicated wanting a school that was at least of equal academic caliber as the better public schools around us.

However, from their comments, it was clear that asking questions about an enormous, non-existing, and multi-faceted idea such as starting a high school was too broad and nebulous for people to wrap their responses and their heads around. How many students, what kinds of courses would be offered, what facilities would make for a first-rate high school, how it would look as a start-up school, and what it would take to start it are examples of questions that many do not know how to answer well. What I realized is that people need a coherent and tangible vision that they can wrap their minds, hearts, and prayers around. That vision can then be shared to fine-tune and then to rally support around to make into a reality. Ann Arbor Christian School itself started as a vision over 25 years ago.

In short, the bulk of my project has morphed into creating a bold and compelling vision for a Christ-centered high school and sharing that vision with others. Once the vision is clear, then the work of sharing, feasibility, logistics, and planning (e.g., fundraising, marketing, campus site search and planning, curriculum mapping, staffing needs) can begin.

Vision for A High School:

Why We Should Do This | Why We Need to Do This

First, consider the issues facing high schoolers today, such as dating and sexual purity, pervasive Ann Arbor culture of political correctness and pluralism, pornography, gender and sexual orientation identity issues, an increasingly hostile culture to Christian values, social media, general developmental questions about who they are and what they are made for, heighten peer pressure, body image issues, college decisions, early thoughts about possible careers, and ownership of their faith and will they continue it in college when "on their own."

Now, imagine a school environment that understands the unique and significant challenges and developmental needs of high school adolescents, where the Good News of Jesus Christ permeate their navigation of those four crucial years of life, and that helps prepare them to take their faith into college and beyond. In addition, it would provide a first-rate college preparatory education in a city have values high quality academics. To elaborate:

Reason #1: It would be the natural and logical extension of our 25 year-old mission.

When Ann Arbor Christian was founded in 1991, its underlying premise was to provide a high-quality Christian education rooted in a reformed Christian worldview. For 25 years, that educational experience ended in the 8th grade, with our graduates attending area high schools. The expansion into a high-quality high school is simply a logical and natural extension of the school's founding principles and of the legacy of reformed Christian education. It would provide a Christ-center school during a time when ownership of their faith takes another level of depth.

Reason #2: Families are actively seeking a Christian high school alternative.

We know that more of our families are looking for a Christian high school option to consider. Parents see the value of their time at AAC and wish to see that blessing expanded another four years. In addition, the expansion into a high school addresses the increasing concern that many Christian parents have about local public high schools, particularly surrounding the growing exposure and aggressive push of non-biblical ideas and values. That concern has driven the majority of our recent 8th grade classes to look at Father Gabriel Richard Catholic High School, which is considered the only reasonable Christian high school option in our area. There is a need and cry for another option.

Reason #3: We need to produce new generations of Daniels to be leaders in our world.

We also know and experience that our students are living in a time when courageous, winsome, and articulate Christian leaders are in extreme need to be beacons for Jesus Christ in their communities in a period in American history where our faith and convictions are aggressively being challenged, dismissed, twisted, belittled, and discriminated against. In the eyes of our culture, “Christian” was once socially good, then became socially irrelevant, and now is viewed by our culture as socially dangerous.

In this climate, it is crystal clear that the place of Christian schools is more essential than ever to help raise the next generation of Daniels - young men and women who, in the face of tremendous pressures and cultural changes around them, will hold firmly to their faith and convictions and in a manner that wins people over. Working with students during four critical years of developing their identities, an Ann Arbor Christian high school would work alongside parents and churches to raise these new generations of Christians who are distinguished by being deeply rooted in the historic Christian faith, unwavering in their convictions, intelligent and mature in their academic skills, savvy to global culture, know how to engage their neighbor and world, are discerning, and are faithful in difficult situations.

What would the high school look like

Vision

Our vision is to transform new generations of students who are distinguished by their Biblical convictions and winsome ability to integrate faith, the pursuit of knowledge, intelligence, character, work ethic, and sense of service and who will be transforming agents and leaders for Christ into college and beyond.

Profile of a graduate

- **Deeply rooted** - Students understand and know that their chief end in life is to know, enjoy, and love God and, thus, naturally and automatically see the world and their lives through a historic Christian worldview and conduct every facet of their lives accordingly.
- **Well educated** - Students complete a first-rate academic program. Students are equipped as truth-seekers with the skills to gather, organize, evaluate, and communicate information with integrity, clarity, intelligence, humility, and conviction.
- **Joyful about learning** - Students are eager to develop and pursue skills, experiences, and knowledge as means to develop their God-given abilities. Students have a strong understanding and commitment to pursuing growth and excellence in mind, body, and heart.

- **Wise and winsome** - Students are reflective and know how to use past experiences and acquired knowledge to make discerning choices. Students also present their core values and beliefs in a manner that is clear and firm while honorable and respectful.
- **Socially savvy** - Students have strong interpersonal skills to effectively navigate different group and social settings and to be leaders in those contexts.
- **Faithful in trials** - Students endure all circumstances with resilience. Students see their faith as intelligent, defendable, and life-giving and are resistant to the moral mindlessness, excessive political correctness, and silence that permeates our culture.
- **Responsive to their neighbors** - Students understand who their neighbors are and have a heart to love and serve them. Students also believe in the power of living and working in community and in the concept of “many parts, one body.”

Size

Approximately 80 students per grade (320 students total) – At this size, there would still retain some of our core communal values (e.g., students are known and loved, strong connection between families, being a smaller school), but provide students and families with a broader experience with more people in each grade level. Currently, at Preschool through Grade 8, each class is, on average, made up of 15 students.

Academics

The high school would be college preparatory and remained rooted in the historic Christian faith in all subjects. For each subject area, different tracks would be offered to address different abilities and needs of different students. For instance, Algebra 1 would be offered for Grades 8-10, Geometry for Grades 8-11, Algebra 2 for grades 9-12, Pre-Calculus for Grades 10-12, and AP and non-AP options for Calculus for Grades 11-12. In English, for instance, twelfth grade English would be a choice between AP English Language & Composition and a non-AP counterpart.

Enrollment

Unlike Preschool through Grade 8, enrollment would be opened to both Christian and non-Christian families. This would:

- Allow more families to apply and to help ensure a healthy admissions flow. Naturally, all families would sign an agreement that they understand the standards of the school and the place of a Christian worldview in all areas of the school.
- Address concerns among some Christian families that their students need some exposure to the “real world” before college.
- Provide an opportunity to share the Gospel to non-believers and to pray for their acceptance of Christ as their Lord and Savior.
- NOTE: Perhaps establish a cap for percentage of non-Christian families

Facilities	Personnel
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gymnasium – three basketball courts, training/weight room, locker rooms, trainer’s room, café • 2 full-size fields • Auditorium • 3-4 art rooms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High school principal • Office manager • 2-3 office assistants • Business manager • Assistant business manager • Development director

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 music rooms • Media Center/Library • Cafeteria • 4 science classrooms • Reception/welcome area • Admission area • Break out rooms • One small lecture hall • Lounge/community areas for students • Areas for mediation and prayer (e.g., chapel) • Offices for personnel listed below • Strong network infrastructure for all technology needs • Reasonable security and safety needs in place (e.g., keyless entry, cameras in needed locations) • NOTE: I am currently not including a computer lab with the assumption that the school will be laptop-oriented. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assistant development director • Admissions director • Assistant admissions director • Dean of Students • Dean of Academics • Student support coordinator • 2 college counselors • Athletic director • Assistant athletic director • Part-time trainer • 2-3 facilities staff • Part-time social worker or psychologist • Teachers • Coaches <p>All employees need to be strong, active Christians in order to maintain the historic Christian faith as the bedrock of the school. Each are highly qualified to teach in their respective areas.</p>
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Timeline

- Two years: Gather financial support, identify location, map out programs
- Fall 20XX: Open doors to grades 9-10
- Fall 20XY: Open doors to grades 9-11
- Fall 20XZ: Open doors to grade 9-12

Next Steps

- Continue discussing this vision with the Board and determining our commitment to it
- Organize a prayer group for the high school
- Actively engage with needed consultants (e.g., John Cissel) to refine vision and define steps
- Stabilize the school's current financial situation, primarily by strengthening enrollment and eliminating our mortgage
- When ready, begin sharing the high school vision with the broader AACS community and supporters
- Create any needed documentation (e.g., admissions policies, curriculum guide)
- Identify and gather a small group of individuals who will provide the initial financial push to make this a reality
- Engage with CSI and a few key schools for advice and counsel
- Engage with a few key churches for support and prayer