

Developing a Vision Statement

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Background

New Life Christian School (NLCS) began in 1983 as the main ministry of Randallsville Baptist Church. While the Church has stood with the school through the years, there have been many challenges with finances and student enrollment. Throughout the school's history, tuition has not met our operating budget. The church has shouldered much of the cost. The school has also been active in fundraisers with varying levels of success. Work has been done, with limited success, to solicit strategic funds that can develop a long-term solution to meet our needs of a scholarship fund and also improved school buildings.

The school relies heavily on fundraising to meet the operating budget of the school. Tuition covers 60% of the operating budget. We also are very generous to provide tuition reduction for families in need. While this fits with the original intent of the school to provide a Christ-centered education for any family who wants one, there isn't a scholarship fund that fills in the gap for reduced tuitions. The school also relies on a handful of area churches that support the school financially and on the donations of many generous individuals. We also rely on larger fundraisers such as an end-of-the-year campaign, a serve-a-thon and a golf tournament. The Board of Education (BOE) has identified the need to develop relationships with additional donors to create a scholarship fund and build an improved physical campus. We determined that a clear and compelling vision needed to be defined that would encourage people to partner with us and give more strategically rather than to fill a budget deficit need. I worked with Zach Clark from Leadership and Development Coaching. My goal was to craft a message that can be used to share our story with potential donors and develop a strategy to then identify and approach them.

What did I do?

As a new principal at the school in 2012, I saw a need to develop a strategy for the direction of the school. Plans for fundraising were haphazard and student outcomes were ill-defined. A strategic plan was never crafted for the school and we lacked direction. One of the first tasks was to work with the BOE and other stakeholders to create the first strategic plan for the school. Through this process, it generated quite a bit of excitement in the parents, teachers and leadership of the school. While it gave us a common focus, I had a hard time determining how I could communicate the details of the strategic plan in a compelling way as I built relationships with donors. Particularly, how this new plan would change our students and prepare them for

life after leaving NLCS. The strategic plan gave us direction, but that didn't translate into explaining a vision to potential donors.

In addition, I wanted to share a clear and compelling message with current and potential families. As we continue to grow, I want families to see the value the school would add to their families by sending their child to New Life Christian School. Retention of students is a constant issue. I knew I needed to share a vision that clearly demonstrated how we would achieve our goals and cast a vision of what we are working towards.

During the process of creating a strategic plan, we developed a mission statement and core values. We also developed strategies to focus on areas of improvement for the school. The process of involving stakeholders and looking to the future for the type of school we want, created momentum in the school community. Work was started with the focus on school programs and structures. As time went on, I discovered that the work was profitable, but it didn't seem to be resonating with others because I wasn't looking at the strategies in terms of changed lives. The mission statement created a reason why we exist, and the strategic plan gave us a map of where we were going; however, we were lacking a vision of the type of student we want to produce.

During my initial conversations with Zach Clark, we identified the need for a compelling vision statement and began the work of crafting a clear message for the school. I began this process by answering a set of questions that forced me to examine who we are as a school. These questions provided an avenue for me to think deeply about our core values which reveal what is important to us. Through this process, I learned more about the history of the school and the background of reasons why we do ministry the way we do. I wrestled with thoughts of why people would want to give to our school and reflected on the way that potential donors may view our school. I also included members from the Board of Education during this process and talked with others who were involved with the school since its inception. Through this process, I believe I came to know the school better, which helped me to clarify who we are.

Once the questions were answered, I began the work of crafting a vision statement by reviewing our mission statement and core values, along with the initial questions. During the strategic planning process in 2012, we developed a mission statement and core values, but not a vision statement. The mission statement describes how we do what we do. Because a vision statement is most effective as it relates to individuals, this became a very important step. The vision statement made the connection from the structure of the organization to the picture of what we want our students to be. I began to think about the vision statement as a picture of our students. I began to visualize, based on the questions I answered, who we want our graduates to be when they leave New Life Christian School. Our vision statement is now,

To see young men and women become confident and prepared spiritually and academically to integrate their Christian faith into every aspect of their lives.

It was during this time that I also began to develop a graduate profile, which is a list of the attributes we desire to see developed in our students. This was an enjoyable step as I began to reflect on the graduates from NLCS and the incredible people they are. I put together a list of the attributes that seemed to exemplify these graduates.

Graduate Profile

- Well-educated - completes a strong academic program
- Biblical Worldview - evaluates information and acts faithfully based on scripture
- Leader - accepts responsibility and has a positive impact on others
- Passionate Faith - strong faith demonstrated through faithful actions
- Improvement Mindset - believing that they can always improve and build resilience to overcome adversity
- Respectful - demonstrating humility to others
- Engage - being proactive to serve others
- Strong Communicator - ability to articulate information in a clear way
- Confidence - ability to engage others and situations with boldness

Once I developed the vision statement and the graduate profile, I began to develop an organizational strategy. I needed to create a roadmap of how this vision statement would translate into a benefit for those we serve and those who give resources to the school. Zach first encouraged me to think about the people that we serve. This is an important step to know our audience and who we need to focus on. As a school, we serve the students and their families. They are the ones that we support and ultimately want to impact. For the purpose of this project, we also serve our donors. As they partner with us, we want to make sure that the resources they give are used appropriately and that they are encouraged by the impact their resources have on the school.

This leads to the second step of our organizational strategy. I needed to find ways to increase the value donors feel when they give to the school. They need to feel valued and also visually see the impact they are having on our school. Just as when we purchase an item at a store, we want the value of the item to match the amount of money we spend on it. We look for a good value and the more we receive for our money, the more satisfied we are. The same is true with donors. I want to show that when donors give to the school, it is a good investment. My goal is to see the impact of each donation increase as I build a partnership with donors. We want each donor to see that by giving resources to the school, there is an immediate and lasting impact on the school, and specifically the students.

To accomplish this, the finance action team began by developing a stewardship plan. Not only did we identify a need to determine how donor money would strategically be used, but we also needed to identify ways to thank our donors and communicate more effectively with them. We thought this would add clarity, structure and accountability, which would be vital to demonstrate to any potential donor. This plan was drafted and finalized and is currently being used.

I was also challenged to change the ways I communicated using different avenues. Three areas that were identified were our annual report, monthly newsletters and a new school website. This is explained further in the next section, and the results have been widely felt.

As I prepared to meet with potential donors, I worked with the Board of Education to determine the strategic areas to which we are asking donors to give. Each of these steps was chosen in a particular order to build on each other and create momentum. Zach encouraged us to develop our first step as something that has already been completed. This creates in the donor's mind that work has already started and momentum is building. Over the past 4 years, \$300,000 was given to support our operating budget of the school. This directed us to the next step, which is to create a scholarship fund. The money through this fund will be used to narrow the tuition gap and strengthen the school's finances. Once that gap is narrowed, we then will work to build a new campus. Our buildings are aging and small classrooms are hindering growth and the perception of our school. The second phase of the construction project and the last step will be to build a gymnasium. Currently a local church gym is used that is not located on the NLCS campus.

Finally, I began the process of identifying potential donors to approach. Before I began this project, I worked with our business manager to consolidate and put into a spreadsheet all of our donors, the amount that they gave, and if it was for a specific fundraiser or program. During the project, the spreadsheet was completed which gives an overall picture of the donors who have been consistent in their giving. This helped to evaluate our top donors which will help us continue to build relationships with these individuals. I need to continue to deepen relationships with our current donors, but an important task of building relationships with new donors is vital to address additional needs. Work needs to be done to identify other potential donors and create a realistic plan to approach them.

What did I learn?

My initial question through this project was answered. I was seeking to better define and be able to explain who we are as a school and clearly communicate that with others. I was able to make the connection between our programs and how it relates to our students and who we want them to be. I am finding that it shapes the discussions I have with our teachers as we discuss student outcomes and programs.

One of the most powerful ways I learned to communicate our vision was through sharing stories. As I defined our vision statement by thinking of individuals, it changed the way I thought about communicating with our stakeholders. The stories I shared were ways that NLCS impacted students and others' experiences. I began to use our annual report, website and school newsletter, to strategically communicate. The goal of the annual report is to create a visual document of the work accomplished at the school. This year I wanted to not only capture the work being done at the school and our accomplishments, but I wanted to share this through stories. I included testimonies from a current student, alumni, a current teacher and parents. To help direct the testimonies, I asked each person a set of questions that pointed to our vision, mission and core value statements. The result was a personal picture of how NLCS is impacting

lives. I received an overwhelming positive response to the report. People saw how the vision of the school was being fulfilled through the lives of those we serve.

http://media.wix.com/ugd/651d63_6fcf3499d06c4c0eb6777a3f93e12c26.pdf

I continued to convey stories through our new school website. A major thrust of the design was to point people to our student story page. This format allowed us to increase the number of students from different grades who told their NLCS story. We also included a feedback page so that alumni and parents can share what NLCS did for them. These stories will be featured on Facebook and our monthly newsletters. <http://www.nlcsny.org/#!/student-stories/crza>

What difference is it making at my school?

While not the original intent of the project, the biggest immediate difference I noticed at the school is re-enrollment numbers for the upcoming school year. During the first 4 years of being a principal, we were only retaining about 70-75% of our students each year. During the summer months, our enrollment would come back up to the amount it was from the previous year. This year, after defining our vision statement and developing a graduate profile and sharing these with stakeholders in strategic ways, our retention rate for the upcoming school year is 90%. I am anticipating that we will continue to see our student body grow over the summer months. Based on the comments I am receiving about the student stories, I believe that people are beginning to see the impact the school has on individual lives. I think that stakeholders knew that the school was making a difference, but to hear from students and others gives a personal glimpse into the work we are doing. I believe that this shows the power of defining a vision and effectively communicating it with stakeholders.

I am finding that my mindset is changing, specifically in the way I communicate with others. I am intentionally painting pictures of students when I talk with stakeholders as opposed to the nuts and bolts of programs. Jesus told stories to communicate Biblical Truth in a way that people could understand. I feel that when I tell a story of a life that was changed by their interaction with NLCS, people understand and a connection is developed with the school.

Seeing a difference in the amount of increased giving to our school has not yet been realized. I expected to be further along in the project but I found that this was a foundational year to develop the vision statement and supporting documents that can be used to drive our relationships with potential donors. As I begin to build relationships with them I can now share the stories and they can see the momentum that is happening through increased enrollment. Currently, I am working with the Board of Education to develop a strategy to identify and approach potential donors. I will begin to incorporate time in my schedule to meet with potential donors and stay in touch with current donors.

Participation in the Van Lunen Center was transformational for me personally and my ability to lead NLCS. The knowledge I gained added value to the other groups I work with as we implement the strategic plan. I am so appreciative to the director, faculty and staff for their support and direction. The relationships I developed with other principals are providing support and encouragement. I feel that I am not alone on an island, but I now have others to offer

advice and insight. The insight that Zach Clark provided guided me to clarify my vision for the school. Thank you.