

Beyond a Band-Aid Thinking Strategically –Fueling the Future

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There is a song from the 70's that repeats the following chorus:

Do you know where you're going to?
Do you like the things that life is showing you?
Where are you going to, do you know?
Do you get what you're hoping for?
When you look behind you there's no open door.
What are you hoping for, do you know?

Those are some good questions, and when I discovered that we at San Jose Christian could not answer those questions with confidence and unity, I knew that we had some work to do. Fortunately, the Board of Trustees agreed, and although a good work was started a couple years ago in revising our mission statement and formulating a set of Core Values, that work was interrupted when a new Head of School (me) and a new Board President came on simultaneously. A work that the entire school community had been involved in got lost in transition, and the Board and I got bogged down in school management and problem solving instead of focusing on the future of our school. We were trying to maintain and manage facilities while also trying to balance a budget for the first time in years instead of creating plans for the future. All that has changed through a focused year of strategic planning.

Brief History

San Jose Christian School opened its doors in 1959 (grades 1-4), largely supported by families in two local Christian Reformed Churches. By 1970, a full K-12 program was in place, but the high school closed in 1986. Since then, SJCS has remained a JK-8 school, although we now have a robust preschool. Reaching an enrollment high of more than 300 students (JK-8) in 2000, the Tech bust in 2008-2009 intensely affected enrollment, and we have not fully rebounded from that. Current enrollment at that level is 200, although an additional 85 preschool students have positively impacted our financial stability. Even through financial struggles, the Board of Trustees has maintained the founders' initial commitment to being a covenantal school, even in the Bay Area where fewer than 3% of the residents are believers.

San Jose Christian School has never owned its own property; we have rented from various churches or schools since our inception. This has been a constant strain on our budget, especially in what has now been identified as the most expensive location in which to live. (San Jose is the first city in the country where the MEDIAN home price exceeds \$1 million.) For this reason, it has been challenging to focus on future growth and facilities improvement. However, through the strategic planning process this year, we have come to the decision that our location and the operational expenses that go along with it are truly our best option, and we want to own that decision and move forward with it.

Recent History

A great work on identifying strategic objectives was begun in 2014-2015 with the school's interim Superintendent. Four strategic objectives were identified, but a long-range plan was not developed, nor was a method to implement the objectives formulated. In review of these objectives, an overriding theme becomes clear-the school's sustainability is directly linked to its financial stability which is directly linked to enrollment. This is not an epiphany, but in order to grow, serious focus and planning was required to insure long-term financial stability.

In 2015-2016, San Jose Christian was fortunate to be up for re-accreditation with Christian Schools International and up for initial accreditation for Western Association of Colleges and Schools. I say fortunate because an intense review and assessment of who we are was done by the full collaborative work of the faculty, Board, and other key stakeholders. From that assessment and data, our School Improvement Plan was generated and lo and behold, it identified many of the same objectives from the prior year, along with a number of instructional areas in which improvement was needed. The faculty and staff were key contributors to this plan, building a true sense of community as we identified these improvement areas. The accreditation visit was a success, and the team substantiated our self-assessment and encouraged us to take the School Improvement Plan one step further to formulate a cohesive Strategic Plan. It seemed that a full effort by all stakeholders was in process to plan for the future, providing clear evidence that we MUST do.

The Process

Immediately after returning from the first week in Grand Rapids at the Van Lunen program, the Board determined that an ad hoc committee of the Board would be created to work closely with me in two areas. The first would be in analyzing the information that the school had worked on in the previous year and the second would be in analyzing the current state of the school. This was done by using small group discussions and by using parent and teacher surveys. Simply by having this committee meet and report back to the full Board, the process of thinking strategically began. Of course, we didn't all agree, but finally, we were

looking past today (and yesterday) and looking forward. We did not have a clear picture of what we wanted our graduates to be or what our goals for students were. Having the teachers working concurrently on learner outcomes was a huge part of this process, and as we had a chance to work together, we saw that God was leading us in very similar directions. That made it easy to have an agreed upon big picture of where we wanted to go, but we still had to consider roadblocks and opportunities.

To do this, the Board invited a third party consultant to join us in November 2016 to lead us through a process of analysis and focus. For some, this was a giant shift in thinking, really, and intense conversation and discussion marked that meeting. For the first time, Board members were looking at a full picture of identifying San Jose Christian today, taking off their parent hats and considering a bigger picture. From that, though, some of the past, traditional methods of meeting and decision making were noted to be just that; things of the past that needed to be improved. Some of the Board's processes were bogging down progress, and we realized that together. That meeting was a turning point.

The November 2016 daylong offsite was perhaps the most intense work that I have done with the Board of Trustees since I arrived in July 2015. On that day, we looked closely at our strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats as we did a SWOT analysis. This was perhaps the first time that each voice in the room was heard and shared. As we took our ideas and compared them to what our community had shared, we could see that there was a pretty clear understanding of who and what SJCS is today, along with common thoughts of our perceived stumbling blocks in moving forward. With all of this information, the Board began designating time at each monthly Board meeting beginning at the December 2016 meeting, and that time continues even today.

Whittling down an enormous amount of information in order to organize and focus it now became my work with the support of the strategic team of the Board. We took the SWOT analysis and the School Improvement Plan and focused on three major initiatives. By doing this, we feel that the Board of Trustees can focus clearly on what is important, keeping themselves accountable to each other and to the rest of the community. The final version of the Strategic Plan was completed in April 2017, and it will be published and shared with the whole community in May 2017. For us all to look forward together, with detailed work to do, is exciting as San Jose Christian sets itself up for fifty more years of impact on the Bay Area and beyond.

From our work together, we now have:

- A Strategic Plan with three major initiatives:
 - Strengthen Financial Sustainability
 - Maximize our current campus location to provide an optimum environment to fulfill our mission
 - Continuously improve the instructional program

- A unified Vision of what SJCS intends to be and do
- A clear Portrait of a graduate
- A focus for the work of Board of Trustees
- A clear set of goals for the Head of School

The Impact

Perhaps the simplest yet most profound impact of this project has been the unification of the Board and Head of School and entire community. The recent revision of the mission statement and Core Values was a tremendous work, but the strategic objectives had not been completely developed into a plan. Now the Board is focused on creating a RACI model that clearly assigns roles and responsibilities for the initiatives of the Strategic Plan. (RACI = **R**esponsible, **A**ccountable, **C**onsulted, **I**nformed) We will meet monthly and measure progress on each initiative. Of course, we have identified key priorities that we believe drive our most immediate future and success. For San Jose Christian School, we have identified enrollment as our number one priority, so with that in mind, a focused marketing plan is in the works already. One thing that we do not have the luxury of having too much of is time, so we must focus on improving our slowly increasing enrollment numbers, and targeting the correct demographic is critical. We are in process of working with experts in the Bay Area who can help us target our market clearly and efficiently.

I said in my proposal that this project was not going to be rocket science, and it is not. However, I liken this process to an archer who is in a wide-open, grassy field. He has a new bow, a quiver full of shiny new arrows, but no target at which to aim. He can shoot the arrows into the sky, but they will never hit a bull's eye. San Jose Christian School had identified needs yet had not put a target in front of them. Now that we have focused our thinking, clearly identified who we are and where we intend to go, our conversations at the Board level will be more strategic than tactical, and our community can get excited for the future. They are, now that we have rolled out the plan.

At the Board of Trustees level, the completion of this plan has turned their focus from maintaining the status quo to directing the plans for the next several years. Board meetings have already begun to shift to the real work of the school by moving the strategic planning topics to the forefront of the meeting time while moving the management of details later. Just that shift in agenda has brought focus. The Board has identified its work, and now we have a clear picture of what we want as we move forward. I now have a much clearer picture of what I am called to do here, the Board knows what to keep at the forefront, and we can work together in a much truer partnership of accountability.

There is still work to be done. The synthesis of ideas that came together to create a Strategic Plan was a terrific process that brought the leadership of SJCS together. However, now comes the work of making it happen. We have created

quantifiable enrollment and development goals. We have begun working on a focused marketing plan that needs to be implemented this summer. We have much work to do as we continue to improve our instructional program. However, as we discern God's will together, we continue to pray that He be glorified through the process.

Reflection

A year ago San Jose Christian School did not have clear Learner Outcomes, did not have a Portrait of a Graduate, and did not have a plan for the next five years. We were trying to hold things together day by day, yet as we have trusted God to lead our strategic thinking, He has filled the leadership with excitement at the opportunities ahead. Our faculty and community, who were recently presented with an overview of the Strategic Plan, is excited as well. The strong legacy that has been San Jose Christian School promises to continue well into the future.

Personally, perhaps one of the greatest areas of growth for me through this program was not necessarily in the areas marketing, development, hiring, advancement, or planning but in the area of soul care. One of the greatest joys and privileges of being a school administrator is being a spiritual leader on campus. Through the Van Lunen program, I learned that my frustration and perhaps my disappointment with myself in this area was because I was not taking the time to care for my own soul. As a school leader, we give and give yet often do not take the time to allow God to refuel us. I am extremely grateful that emphasis in this area was part of our program. In beginning to do this myself, I was inspired to do this for my faculty as well, giving them a day of spiritual renewal that was "off the books." I truly believe that this allowed us to build a true sense of a spiritual community as well this year.

It has been an intense year, but without the Van Lunen program and the faculty who graciously share their wisdom and experience, this project may not have been completed. As a new Head of School, I didn't know what I didn't know until I learned from the experts on staff. It has been a journey of reflection, self-assessment, prayer, learning, inquiry but most of all, encouragement to boldly fulfill the work to which God has called me. Each of us involved in the program is involved in Christian education, but our situations vary, as do our experiences. It is through the collegiality of this group that God has allowed each of us to grow in our calling. May I one day be of service to someone else in the same way as my peers and mentors have humbly served me this year.