

The Vision for Excellence with a Strategic Action Plan

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<http://www.stjosephchristian.com/>

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Consultants

Jim Marsh – Strategic Action Plan

Zach Clark – Advancement Coaching Contract Approved

Henry Conant – Board Professional Development Day Pending

Background

In May of 1988, God gave Joe Gregory a great desire to see an accredited Christian school established in St. Joseph, Missouri. Joe was unaware of how to make it happen, but he prayed and sought the Lord for His guidance. The Holy Spirit led Joe “Let the children come to me and don’t hinder them.” Matthew 19:14

I assumed the superintendent role in June, 2014. It has been terrific serving the St. Joseph and surrounding communities in Christian education as the 4th leader at St. Joseph Christian School. God blessed SJCS with an amazing mission, purpose, and vision. However, Christian education can include seemingly insurmountable hurdles at first glance that must be strategically eliminated to usher in growth and impact the community for Kingdom education. Among the greatest of these challenges is the pertinence of re-igniting the mission and purpose to stimulate sustainable growth to overcome long-standing traditions, financial instability, and a greater vision of purpose for St. Joseph Christian School.

What did I do and What difference is it making at SJCS?

It is clear to me how God has orchestrated His plan at SJCS. I have no doubt God brought me to SJCS to use my entrepreneurial and business background skills to ignite SJCS. SJCS has a significant role in the St. Joseph community by way of being the only non-denominational institute for miles. Although this sounds wonderful, and it is by way of competition, it also presents major Christian education hurdles. God put me in a Christian school with a season of enrollment decline and financial instability as initial challenges to overcome.

The first targeted area of improvement was the task of building community rapport. Thankfully, the SJCS school board unveiled a new job description for me as the superintendent to be a face in the

public. My role was to build relationships with pastors, church leaders, chamber of commerce leaders, and non-profit organizations that could become optimistic for Christian education in St. Joseph.

Through this effort, I listened to stakeholders in the SJCS community. The SJCS community enjoyed having a Christian school, but wanted more from SJCS. The community wanted a quality arts and athletic program along with a rigorous academic program that could rival and compete with the local school district. Retention reports, board comments, and family surveys verified this desire for better programs at SJCS in the arts and athletics departments.

In addition to promoting SJCS in the community, we sought to streamline the admissions process. Little change was needed, however, the order of importance in the admissions process needed a complete reconstruction to ignite more applicants toward enrollment. The admissions process also needed an innovative plan to capture families on their own time schedule. The administration began to cut out unnecessary admissions forms and “fluff” and focus on the mission and purpose. Families began meeting with principals immediately after completing an application. From there, the principals presented SJCS as experts marketing and providing a service or product for each family. The new admissions focus ignited acceptance of students immediately as SJCS has grown by over 33% during the Van Lunen Program timeline. FACTS tuition services streamlined the enrollment process to offer convenience for families to enroll, pay, and have oversight over their financial agreements. I am convinced the process was as important as anything altered to increase enrollment.

The need for sustaining growth instituted the plan to re-brand and market SJCS. The board and I decided to use innovation to pick a new identity of school logo and mascot. The process allowed SJCS to utilize technology to pose suggestions, surveys, and comments to improve the current logo and mascot. Within 3 months, SJCS unveiled a new logo, mascot, and school seal that included not only school-wide but also community wide ownership of our new brand. This was an enjoyable process and relatively headache-free.

In addition to admissions and recreating our school brand, SJCS needed to be impactful with the SJCS mission and purpose and school vision. Social media became the target for impacting our community with the SJCS story, mission and purpose, and vision. Facebook specifically, but other media outlets were implored to promote SJCS. It is evident SJCS is creating a small word-of-mouth army of advertisers amongst our families, churches, and business in the St. Joseph and surrounding communities. SJCS has created a culture on the social media platforms that is leading the way in the community.

The SJCS board and I decided to utilize digital media to ignite the city with what is going on inside of our building. Since SJCS is the only Christian school in the community, it is crucial we communicate what goes on inside of SJCS to all those outside of SJCS and communicate the heartbeat of Christian education. In the fall of 2017, we renovated a conference room into a digital media studio and

hired a digital media director. The purpose of this position is to oversee all marketing, promotions, and digital media for the public. The role of this position has been to turn SJCS inside out to our community. I want them to see our academic classes, athletic programs, and arts events as we strategically communicate the mission and purpose of SJCS through Facebook live stream, media advertising videos, live cast of athletic and arts venues, and frequent videos that highlight students, faculty, parents, board members, and community. The community not only hears the story from a friend or family member, but they can also see the mission and vision of SJCS on social media outlets.

Increased enrollment and a strategic plan for marketing SJCS has been an excellent revenue source for the school. The additional funds have created new opportunities that have created a plan to begin building financial stability.

In September of 2016, increased enrollment stabilized our financial stability enough to begin perusing the weaknesses at SJCS. The September, October, and November board meetings were utilized to challenge the financial structures at SJCS. Ultimately, several debate sessions led the board and I to determine a tuition-based budget Christian school. The board agreed to create a culture for modestly increasing tuition annually. In addition, a formula line item was created to increase financial aid with enrollment increases. It was urgent for all of us to understand that the ministry at SJCS was only as effective as the business practices of SJCS. Although it came with some disdain among the board, SJCS was seeking to become a ministry governed by stable business practices.

The school board changed 29 years of history of a budget deficit towards a balanced budget that included an annual fund to contribute to the financial aid program. The financial aid program was refocused to align with two new goals – 1. Increase revenue for the SJCS budget and 2. Increase enrollment. Included with these two goals was the intent to plan to decrease aid to families over time to encourage creating full-paying patrons as the mission and purpose penetrated hearts progressively with values noticed at SJCS. The use of a tuition management service, financial outlook meetings with the superintendent, and a board decision committee has paved the way to strategically accomplish this financial aid program.

Although the most important aspect to improve financial stability was the increase in enrollment and a revenue producing financial aid program, other factors are beginning to contribute to the financial stability of SJCS as well. In 2016, SJCS held the inaugural elementary sports community basketball league. The league began with 16 teams and filled a viable void in the St. Joseph community. The goals for the league were to encourage families with elementary students to have an opportunity to participate in an organized “prime-time” basketball league and market SJCS to the community. The elementary sports basketball league has grown to 53 teams in two years and has been the single most important factor in creating an SJCS brand in the community. The elementary community sports program allows SJCS

students to have a natural feeder athletic program to the secondary school, affords a \$40,000 increase in revenue each year to the SJCS budget, and creates a dynamic marketing approach to the community of St. Joseph. In each week SJCS touches over 15,000 people on social media, game attendance, and word of mouth advertisements. A small marketing army was created through the origin of the elementary basketball league. The board is now looking considering my proposals for creating a baseball and track and field program for the community of St. Joseph. The real value for the elementary sports league is enormous.

Multiple conversations with my board on the Van Lunen philosophy opened conversations to increase salaries and benefits for the 2nd straight year for the 2017-2018 school year. SJCS now includes a retirement program, salary matrix, life insurance, and health coverage. Creating a salary and benefits program that is competitive with other private schools has and will continue to assist greatly with recruiting and retaining top talent that God brings to SJCS. In a recent board meeting, conversation began to include the opportunity to include a dynamic merit-aspect matrix to our most valuable teaching professionals. A sub-committee will be created to begin conversation about how best to pay valued professionals in a consistent and equitable way.

SJCS is beginning to think more strategically past the next year or two and into the future. Although there is much more fine tuning work to be completed for current program began this past year, school leadership is now beginning to pray about what God has for Christian education in St. Joseph. Several new initiatives are underway because of the Van Lunen program.

What Did I Learn?

The Van Lunen program was a terrific opportunity for me. I believe God placed me at SJCS for a reason and I also believe SJCS was placed in my life for a reason. Van Lunen was a catalyst and a resource for blessing SJCS. Among the number of lessons learned from the Van Lunen program are the following:

-Need for a strategic vision: Although changes have been made to improve SJCS, it has not come without major hurdles. Change has taken a major toll on SJCS. Communication to the stakeholders, focusing on the importance of the great work done in the past by SJCS leadership, and appreciating the current core values of the school are crucial. A strategic vision will allow SJCS to consider the past, communicate missional changes in the present, and provide a blueprint for an excellent Christian school in the future. This has been a major challenge at SJCS, but a welcomed addition by the school board and leadership.

-Need for an advancement program: The Van Lunen program has taught me to eliminate the financial hurdles in man's mind that frequently limit God's plan. Currently, God's plan is to build a school that facilitates 100% growth over the next 5-8 years. A 6.5-million-dollar building campaign in a

blue-collar town stands in the way. Van Lunen taught me to include Christian consultants, counselors, and encouragers to assist with this difficult task. I learned to use a multitude of counselors as we progress forward with our vision.

-Need for implementing change strategically: Unintended consequences have plagued SJCS over the past year or so. Although SJCS has grown over 33% in students, created a culture of excellence in several programs, and paved a way financially to improve in every category, SJCS has also lost 33% of its current staff. We are experiencing morale issues. Several long-term families are not in favor of some of the changes to increase financial aid, tuition, and provide excellent arts and athletic programs. Negativity is beginning to creep in stating SJCS has “lost its way” or is no longer Christian. Included with these naysayers are false accusations arising against new staff. It is as if Satan has put an all-out affront on SJCS. In 20 years, I have never been more discouraged. I have learned that Van Lunen will help improve a school, but Satan hates it. It is critical we implement change with excellent communication and with thoughtful strategy. That is difficult for an entrepreneurial, visionary leader. The board supports and recognizes the need for change, but even some of them are beginning to wonder if SJCS has moved too quickly with change.

-Need for crucial conversations and necessary endings: Most staff at SJCS are long-time veterans that have not been at other institutions. This is terrific; however, challenges have been met with every change to improve the school. An administrator, donors, faculty, and staff have been met with appropriate but highly stressful crucial conversations. Van Lunen taught me to make the right choices not the easy choices. Crucial conversations and 1 or 2 necessary endings for key long-term staff at SJCS have resulted in heartache and morale issues amongst the SJCS community.

I entered the Van Lunen program understanding that financial stability, enrollment growth, and financial aid needed to be evaluated. I could pinpoint the problems, however, I never realized how difficult change would be to a 30 years old organization. Van Lunen has afforded me the opportunity to walk through these changes with a multitude of professional development at the precise moments. God’s providence was evident as we began to read books on change and how to implement change, hold crucial conversations, conduct necessary endings, and create a dynamic leadership team. The timing is almost comically accurate and a non-believer would say coincidental. However, as I was reading every book, listening to each workshop, or working on a change agent, the professional development I gleaned from Van Lunen was instrumental in each decision.

This program and project have set the school board and I on a quest to carry out a strategic plan and fund it through advancement. Jim Marsh was utilized to walk SJCS through a strategic plan. Zach Clark has been recently hired to help me grow as a leader in developing my skills and qualities that will

no longer hinder God. We will be utilizing his developmental coaching to begin capturing more relationships to reach the strategic vision at SJCS.

I am honored God would choose to use me for His kingdom work. It has not been easy, but through each step, I have learned that if I could do it God would not need to do it. He is teaching me to rest in Him and get out of the way. I am merely intended to take advantage of every opportunity to help Him with His plan at SJCS.