

Growing and Excelling: A Living Strategic Plan for Holy Apostles School

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Holy Apostles School is an exemplary Catholic School in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee that has consistently prepared students with the foundations of faith and service as well as for the rigor of academic life at the high school level. There is a wonderful faculty with great longevity at the school and a desire to do what is best for students. Upon entering Holy Apostles School as principal a little over a year ago, it became evident that the long range strategic plan and school improvement plan were not truly living documents that were embraced by parents, teachers, students, and the parish community. In addition, the focus was directed mainly on policy and factors that did not impact the school culture, student learning, and partnership with our parents and parish. Not only were there gaps in the focus of the long range plan, but the parish council and finance council were not thoroughly engaged in understanding the direction and goals of the school. Holy Apostles School is at a pivotal point in which we are embarking on shifting our culture from one of maintaining to the mindset of growing and excelling.

As any administrative preparation program will tell you, it is important to take time to build relationships and understand the “what, how, and why” of the functionality of a school before embarking upon deep change. This dynamic was amplified by the fact that Holy Apostles is a parish school and not an independent entity. The majority of my first year at Holy Apostles was spent getting to know my team, families, and parish while taking the time to ask many questions as the new administrator to get a handle on where we were as an educational institution. Through my interactions a few items became very clear:

1. The parish and school have a rich historical tradition in the community. The school is coming up on its 130th anniversary and the parish views the school as an important ministry, while also being cognizant of the support level that the parish contributes to subsidizing the school.
2. Holy Apostles School had a thriving enrollment in 2005 of over 500 students but has seen a consistent decrease in student population to 354 current students.
3. There was a feeling of disconnect between the school and the parish by staff and parents.
4. The school faculty was not aware of the 10 year long range goals for the school that were directly attached to our certification through the Archdiocese of Milwaukee and the Wisconsin Religious Independent School Association (WRISA).
5. The school faculty did not play an active role in the creation of school related goals and planning.
6. School organizations such as the School Commission and Home and School Organizations were looking for clarification on their role within the school community.
7. The parish has started moving forward with reworking the Holy Apostles mission and vision while the school is working on the final stages of refining the mission and vision.

With these items raised to the forefront, the following questions needed to be answered in order to effectively move forward with change:

1. What were some of the challenges and issues that impacted the decrease in enrollment for Holy Apostles School?
 - a. How could we learn from these challenges and use the information to determine the right size for our school?
 - b. What is the perception of Holy Apostles School in the broader community?
 - c. What makes Holy Apostles School unique in our market place?
 - d. How are we helping to position our school as an exemplary faith based school through marketing?
2. How do we go about breaking down the “silo effect” of the school being a separate entity from the parish?
 - a. How is the school working towards alignment with the parish mission and vision?
 - b. How can the school find opportunities to work more collaboratively with the parish as one of its largest ministries?
 - c. Are the parish and school aligned seamlessly with their vision and mission?
3. How can teachers be invited and supported into roles of leadership within the school and within the Archdiocese of Milwaukee education forum?
4. How can our key school committees clarify and embrace their role within our school ministry and our larger parish community?
5. How can we better communicate with our parents and present opportunities for involvement in all ministries?

The task began by conducting a parent survey that was collaboratively worked on with the School Commission as well as by gathering information from the school faculty, school parents, and School Commission through a SWOT analysis. Through the analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats as well as the feedback on culture that was received through the broader parent survey, the categories of communication and continued growth and improvement rose to the surface. As this was fleshed out a bit more, the detailed areas of focus looked as follows:

- Communication
 - Improving communication with Holy Apostles Parish
 - Improving communication with the community of New Berlin
 - Improving communication with our cluster parishes (Elizabeth Ann Seton and St. Luke)
 - Improving our school presence in the community through marketing with the purposes of increasing enrollment and growing the school
 - Addressing the need for intentional advancement opportunities with parish members and school families to continue financial support to Holy Apostles School
- Continued Growth and Improvement
 - Ensuring alignment with our parish mission and vision

- Working with Faith Formation to move out of our silos and work collaboratively as ministries that support children and youth
- Working with Charity and Justice to develop more cohesive parish wide service opportunities that actively engage our children and youth
- Working on providing opportunities for young adults and families to be engaged and supported in the parish and during the weekend worship experience
- Involvement
 - Improvement of presence of priest involvement in the classrooms and school
 - Improvement of parish member involvement in the school
 - Improvement of parent involvement within the school and the parish
- School Improvement Plan
 - Involving teachers in the analysis of data and setting of school goals
 - Developing a teacher leadership team that is involved in developing the staff professional development during the school year
 - Improving teacher professional learning teams to serve as areas for leadership within staff development and school planning

Marketing, Recruitment, and Retention

Work on the areas defined above has been taking place simultaneously, but one of the first areas addressed was school enrollment and marketing. With enrollment showing a historical downward trend, it was important to better understand what makes Holy Apostles unique, where we fit in the market place and what our possible enrollment capabilities are at this time. Besides for baptismal data, sacramental data, our personal enrollment data, and basic census information from New Berlin, Holy Apostles did not have clarity on our unique qualities and how our school compared to surrounding private, parochial, and public schools within the market place. Although there is a volunteer school marketing ministry, there was no cohesive and intentional plan for marketing our school. With budget concerns being at the forefront, the parish has committed to a 3-year window to allow time for the school to actively work on marketing and determine if the school has the capability to grow enrollment. If the school is not able to grow enrollment, the planning for right sizing will need to be implemented. Through the generous contribution of an anonymous donor and our Home and School Committee, we were able to hire a consultant that specializes in Catholic school marketing to conduct a market analysis, comparative school analysis with area public, private, and parochial schools as well as facilitate a school value proposition with our parents. We were also able to hire a part time school marketing and communications director to help develop and carry out a focused plan for our future. Areas that have been of priority focus are:

- Brand Identity and Consistency: Identify and ensure consistent visual brand identity in all school materials and touch points.
- Development of a New School Website and Increased Web Presence: Creation of a streamlined and user friendly site for parents and prospective school families that consistently focuses on our brand identity, promise, and character values. Pursue ways to increase our web presence through the use of Google + and other online tools.
- Development of a Marketing Communication Process and Timeline: Actively manage marketing, communication and engagement programs.
- Message Prioritization and Transparency: Identify the most important messages/data points to support the school's brand identity and determine existing/new opportunities to share.
- Marketing Ministry Coordination: Refine the marketing ministry roles and responsibilities, and maintain ongoing support through regular meetings and individual coordination.
- Increased Community Presence and Visibility: Research local organizations, events and publications with which to develop relationships and raise the profile of Holy Apostles School as a part of the wider community.
- Advancement Strategies: Develop a plan to engage current and potential donors to increase overall giving.

Through our intentional work with marketing this year, we have been able to make strides towards building our funnel into our school by adding a second 4K classroom and a new 3K classroom. Our enrollment goal was to stabilize and plateau our population for the 15-16 school year and then look for a 5% increase in enrollment for the 16-17 school year. As of today, we have matched our current enrollment for next year and we are hopeful that we will be able to go above our projected enrollment. We have also moved forward with offering collaborative events with Faith Formation, such as our Fall Fun Fest, that reach out to our community and provide opportunities for families to celebrate with us and learn more about our parish and school. We are currently collaborating on a Halloween Fun Run for the fall as our next major collaborative event that will outreach to our community while also bringing in additional revenue.

School Improvement Planning

The second area of focus was related to the involvement of teachers in the development of the school improvement plan and long range goals. As a school staff, we started from scratch and revisited our school mission and vision to confirm that it was still relevant and in alignment with our parish. From our discussion, we determined that there was some refinement that needed to be completed in order to bring clarity to our mission. We also took time as a faculty to revisit our priorities and goals.

Revised School Mission Statement: The mission of Holy Apostles School is to live and share the teachings of the Catholic Church by creating a compassionate atmosphere which develops faith, service, and academic excellence in all children.

Our Core Beliefs:

- Modeling Jesus
- Teaching and demonstrating life skills emphasizing morality and faith
- High expectations/Challenging
- Differentiated experience for all students/Student centered
- Development of life-long learners
- Student centered environment
- Nurturing innovation and creativity
- Providing a safe environment (emotionally and physically)
- Striving for continuous growth and improvement

13-14 Overall Priorities

- Development of Common Language Across All Areas
- Positive Behavior System
- Vision for Technology
- Focus on Math Skills

14-15 Overall Priorities

- Focus on Math Computation Skills
- Common Language within Literacy Across All Areas
- Implementation of Love and Logic as a school wide discipline philosophy
- Archdiocese Standard Updates-Alignment Grids for Reading and new Writing and Speaking & Listening Standards

15-16 Overall Priorities

- Continued Focus on Math Computation Skills
- Improvement on Literacy with a Focus on Reading Strategies and Support to Achieve Grade Level Benchmarks for Students
- Focus on Demonstrated Growth in Reading for All Students

A hand selected group of faculty members that were representative of the school were invited to create our first building leadership team. This team of six teachers has become a working team of teacher leaders who are taking ownership in helping to craft and carry out our yearly and long

term goals as a school. We have started by meeting on a quarterly basis to analyze building wide data to set goals and identify areas for growth and areas of weakness. This team helps each individual teacher in the building understand the data and how it can be used as well as how it fits into our school wide goals for the year. This team also collaborates to set the agenda for our 10 professional development days during the year. With our accreditation coming up in the 2017-2018 school year, this team will take the lead on learning the new accreditation standards, breaking our staff into standard teams, and starting our self-study process so that we can begin looking at our 10 year long range plan that must be submitted to the Archdiocese and WRISA. There is still much work to be done in this area, but we are proud of the strong foundation we are setting for the future. Through the work of this team, we have had our most successful set of professional development based on faculty feedback. The professional development scheduling process has already started for the following year. As we approach a new accreditation cycle, we have incorporated three additional early release days into our calendar to allow for team standard planning. Data analysis has also allowed us to begin a strong framework for refinement of our School Improvement Plan and planned support for teachers next year.

Parish Mission Alignment and Collaboration

Since Holy Apostles School is a ministry of the parish, it is important that we keep the mission and vision of the parish in the forefront as we plan, while also looking for opportunities to collaboratively work with the other ministries that exist to serve our parishioners. There are ten ministry directors within Holy Apostles Parish. As a group, we have been working towards clarifying our vision and mission as a parish. The vision has been framed around discipleship and our mission reads simply as:

As Disciples of Christ:

- We give thanks and praise to God
- We study the Word of God
- We serve God
- We go and make disciples

This has assisted us in grouping our ministries in categories of Giving Praise and Thanks, Learning and Growing, and Serving. As leaders within our ministries we have been working on the use of a discipleship map that allows us to better coordinate and collaborate with each other so that we are in unison instead of going in different directions and forming silos. The school has also made additional efforts to form stronger relationships with the Parish Council and Finance Council through more frequent meetings and sharing of goals and data.

The school has been working more closely with our Faith Formation Ministries to see how we can better serve our children, youth, and young families as a whole. Our focus on children and

youth is also extended into work with Charity and Justice to see how we can more closely work in service together while also extending education on social justice issues to our children in both the school setting and faith formation setting. This work has led to exciting collaborative efforts for our Christmas and Lent service focus for the 15-16 school year. Together, all ministries will be supporting All Saints Parish, our new sister parish in Milwaukee. This will allow us to move forward with connecting our students with both service opportunities and the ability to educate them on social justice concerns. In addition to this, I have been invited to be part of a parish leadership team that will work with Fr. Don as he moves forward with strategic visioning for the parish as a whole.

Communication and Involvement Between Parish and School

Over the course of 1 ½ years, our School Commission, which serves as an advisory board to the principal, has taken a more active role in setting goals as well as taking an active lead in developing and carrying out an action plan to achieve these goals. Through our parent survey, the School Commission has identified strengthening the relationship between Holy Apostles School and our parish as its main goal. The School Commission has developed the following goals as part of their strategic plan work:

1. Increase visibility of students and school activities and accomplishments among the parish community
 - a. Regular school presence at Mass:
 - i. • Students participate in weekend mass/holy days of obligation – as greeters and/or music
 - ii. • Announce key school milestones and accomplishments
 - iii. • Invite parishioners to upcoming school events
2. Show gratitude for the support of the parish community
 - a. Distribute thank you cards/bookmarks to parishioners
 - b. Develop relationships with parishioners who contribute to PCE (Partnership in Catholic Education)
 - c. Hospitality events after Mass sponsored by school families with information about the school
 - d. ALTERNATIVE: School Commission members attend monthly fellowship events/table tents with timely school information on all tables

In addition, we have started the process of intentional messaging to our parish and cluster parishes in regards to school events and news. Through this messaging, we have also reached out to encourage parishioners to find an area of passion within our school that they can volunteer to help out. We have had a greater response from our parishioners than in previous years and we have been able to secure volunteers for our health room, playground, lunch room supervision,

and reading aides within some of our elementary classrooms. We hope to continue expansion of this program through our ministry fair and presence at fellowship after masses.

Advancement

Perhaps the area that provides the greatest opportunity for growth is in advancement. Since 2012, Holy Apostles Parish has reached out to parishioners through a program called Partnership in Catholic Education (PCE). This program encourages parishioners and school families to donate additional funds to help support Catholic education through a donation to the parish, school, or faith formation. These funds have been crucial in helping the school to sustain the current staffing while we move towards growing our enrollment, but there has not been an effort to keep these donors informed about the use of the funds and how thankful we are for their donations. Currently the parish has one part time staff person and an administrative assistant that handles all advancement for the parish. As a school we have started to work on advancement strategies to make connections with these donors and open up lines of communication. We have started out small this year by writing personal thank you notes to each donor. We are planning on coordinating a donor specific day that we invite these families into our school to see the wonderful programs and materials that their funds have helped support. We have also been discussing how to better inform our parishioners and families on different ways they can donate to our school while also receiving positive tax benefits.

Impact

This year has definitely been a year of patience, perseverance, and prayer. There are always anticipated growing pains as any institution undertakes large scale, deep change. This statement would prove to be true for Holy Apostles School as well. The steps that have been taken this year have called me out of my normal presence with the students in the school more than I would like, but the work that has taken place will allow us to move forward with mission and purpose as our guiding framework. Through the work on our parish vision and mission and well as our discipleship map, we are able to bring focus to our decision making process within the school. Our marketing has taken shape and we are yielding a higher percentage of new students than we have seen over the course of the past 10 years. Our School Commission is stepping up and taking an active role in developing an action plan to help build stronger bonds between the school and parish. Our teachers are taking on more leadership responsibility and holding each other accountable for meeting school wide goals. We have started to meaningfully think about our donors and the role that they play in our future of bringing more families to Christ and continuing to provide a Catholic education to any family that wishes this for their child. Although we have just scratched the surface of the work that needs to be done, Holy Apostles

School has stepped out of the maintenance phase and is allowing our mission to drive our ability to grow and excel as a Catholic school in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee.