

School Connectedness: How to Ensure that Two Campuses Stay Connected

Calvin Christian Schools serves over 530 students in Kindergarten through Grade 12. Calvin has two campuses, the Elementary (K-6) with 300+ students and the Collegiate (7-12) with 230+ students. In addition there are 40 teachers, 15 educational assistants, 3 secretaries, 2.8 administrators, and a full-time business administrator.

Having two campuses, and having them be 20 minutes apart, has impacted the connectedness between our two buildings with respect to teaching staff, parents, and students.

As an administrator, one must be very intentional about organizing events that allow for interactions between the student body, the teaching staff, and the parent community of both campuses, otherwise they will simply become two independently run schools. I don't believe that this should be the direction we should go.

Several factors drew me toward this theme for my project. In the fall of 2008, I had the opportunity to be the administrator of both campuses of CCSs when normally I served only as the elementary principal. Going between the two campuses on a weekly basis from September to January, I gained first hand experience in the operation of both buildings. Elementary schools differ from secondary institutions in many ways. It was evident that the level of connectedness between the parents and the school at the Collegiate was lower than that experienced at the elementary. This was certainly not because the parent community there was disinterested.

As an elementary administrator, I wanted to investigate what could be done to keep the two campuses connected, how the parent community at the Collegiate could feel more connected to their child's campus, and how these interactions could be promoted and achieved.

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The Project Begins

In the fall of 2007, the Board of Directors of Calvin Christian Schools, initiated discussion on the development of a Strategic Plan. As the Board was developing the major themes to be addressed in the Strategic Plan, I made the recommendation that the theme of School Connectedness be included. The Board appreciated the suggestion and indicated that some parents had expressed concern regarding the lack of communication and connectedness between the two campuses. Parents had indicated that a different level of home communication and connectedness existed at the elementary, and that there was a desire to have this same connectedness be experienced at the Collegiate.

Upon further deliberation, the Board approved the following directions/strategies to be developed into action plans:

1. Connectedness Between the Two Campuses
2. Connections with other local Christian Schools
3. Hang Out Space for students at the Collegiate
4. Finance-working toward surplus budgets
5. Review of the Mission and Vision Statements at CCSs (Specifically, to investigate if the use of the word 'Reformed' is a barrier to enrolment?)

During the summer of 2008, after completing the first of the three VanLunen Fellows sessions, I changed the theme for my project from a study on Assessment practices to school connectedness. Based on what I had heard from our faculty speakers, as well as in my discussions with fellow colleagues, it was clear that this is where God was directing me. Helping our schools develop and grow into institutions that serve the students and their parents faithfully and affectively has become a new passion for me.

In the fall of 2008, after the Board had spent several Saturday mornings fleshing out the key components of each of the themes and had begun work on developing an action plan, it was decided that the membership of the society be invited to become involved in the form of 'round table discussions'. This would provide the parent community with the opportunity to voice their thoughts and concerns on all five themes. The "round table discussions" proved to be very worthwhile. As the host of the table discussing School Connectedness, I not only gained valuable insight into the various concerns parents and staff were struggling with, I also had opportunity to seek out staff members and parents who would be willing to serve as members of a Focus Group. After approaching several key individuals, a Focus Group – made up of four teachers (two from each campus), five parents, and myself – was formed. The Focus Group then unwrapped the concerns that had been expressed by parents and began to sketch out an Action Plan to address those needs. Once established, the Focus Group met five times during the 2008/09 school year.

Through discussion with the teaching staff, administration, and parents, the group developed several recommendations that were presented to the Board of Directors and school administration in the spring of 2009. Some of the recommendations were implemented immediately, others have been tabled or dropped, and yet others need additional investigation and time to be developed before they are presented.

What became the focus for the Focus Group?

After hearing the parents at our 'round table discussions', the following areas became the key components of our work:

1. To improve student/parent comfort levels during the transitioning phase from the Elementary to the Collegiate campus at Grade 7.
2. To decrease the attrition rates from Grade 5 to 6, 6 to 7, and 9 to 10.
3. To improve ownership or the sense of belonging at the Collegiate campus.
4. To embrace a common pedagogical philosophy among our Middle Years teachers.
5. To improve communication with the parent community, particularly at the Collegiate.
6. To increase the opportunity for more inter-campus learning experiences for both students and teachers.
7. To develop strategies to connect with other independent schools within our area of the city.
8. To enhance our present promotional materials for prospective parents.

One instrument the Focus Group utilized to gain further perspective on and to confirm the concerns expressed at the "round table discussions" involved preparing two surveys. One target group to receive the survey was the present Grade 7 and 8 students at the Collegiate. The other survey was presented to the parents of these same students. The surveys confirmed the findings and it validated the work that our group was now involved in.

Project Results

The Focus Group prepared recommendations in the areas mentioned above and presented them to either the administration or the Board of Directors for approval. The recommendations we presented were:

A. Transitioning:

1) Recommended that the Grade 6 Visit Day to the Collegiate be revamped. On their visit in March of 2009, the Grade 6 students were integrated into the regular classroom for the majority of the Collegiate school day. This experience proved to be more worthwhile than having the students sit through presentations by administrators. The students received a true insight into the learning atmosphere within the school and they were able to connect with the teaching staff in a more interactive setting. The Grade 6 class returned to the Elementary excited and enthusiastic about their experience. This was confirmed by their parents in our discussions with them a week later at Parent/Teacher conferences.

2) It was also recommended that a "new" parent orientation meeting (the incoming Grade 6's) be hosted in the spring to inform parents of the programs and procedures within the Collegiate. It was felt that bringing all the 'new' parents into the Collegiate in the spring would provide them with an overview of the Collegiate program and allow an opportunity for a Q/A session. It would be better

to do this in the spring rather than wait till the fall. This recommendation was not adopted.

3) Recommended that the Grade 7 students start school a day earlier than the Grade 8-12 students so that they can become familiarized with the school and teaching staff before the hustle and bustle of a regular school day occurs. By doing this, we would ensure that the new Grade 7 class would have a very positive “first” day of school. Accepted.

4) Recommended that the Students’ Council members wear a bright coloured T-shirt for the first week of classes. These bright coloured shirts would identify them as individuals that “new” students to the school could approach to ask questions. The students could receive support with finding the correct classroom, with locker issues, or simple procedural questions. Accepted.

B. Decrease Attrition Rates: With some of recommendations that have been made to the administration and the board, it may take some time to see if the attrition rates improve. There is also the issue of demographics; this may influence entry numbers into our Kindergarten program. On-going.

C. Communication/Sense of Ownership:

1) Recommended that our school website be revamped to make it more user-friendly. Since making those changes in January of 2009, our readership has risen thereby increasing the information flow to our parent community.

2) Recommended a review of the information system and data analysis solution used at the Collegiate. A new system, known as PowerSchool, will be installed in the summer of 2009. This system provides parents with greater access of information on their child’s performance, on day-to-day assignments, and special notes from a teacher(s).

3) Recommended that the parent community feel free to “come in” for special events and chapels that occur during the regular school day. By providing parents with the dates of these events in our newsletters and on the web site, it is hoped that more parents will feel free to attend. Accepted.

D. Middle Years Pedagogy: This discussion went in two directions and will require additional exploration:

1) Develop connections between the Grade 5-8 teachers by sending them, collectively, to workshops with a middle years focus. This would encourage more “shop talk” in an informal setting. Providing the Middle Years teachers with some ½ day sessions to “break out” and simply talk about teaching at the Middle years would also be valuable.

2) With expansion plans being discussed at the Collegiate, the Focus Group recommended that a discussion on building an addition at the Elementary, to accommodate the Grade 7 and 8 students there, would be worthwhile. Having all the Middle Years students in one campus would support the Middle Years program. An expansion at the Collegiate still remains a necessity, as a larger

gymnasium, a new library, and a band room are needed. This discussion is only at a developmental stage.

E. Inter-school Learning Experiences: It has been easier to have the Collegiate students visit the Elementary because they have less transportation issues to contend with. Collegiate students have served as Science Fair judges, helped with special events at the Elementary school, and have shared projects such as children books on Body Systems with Grade 5 students. (The books were developed by a Grade 11 Biology class and were suited for a Grade 5 audience.) There is definitely more that can be done in this area. A greater awareness of looking for those opportunities has been encouraged.

F. Connectedness with Other Independent School (The King's School, Immanuel Christian, Joseph the Worker, and St. Alphonsus): This is just beginning, but I have already sensed excitement about the prospect of having at least three meetings/year to discuss common issues and/or concerns. With the present economic times, it would be wise for us to review the opportunities that we have to share resources (equipment, specialty teachers, etc.) as well as common concerns regarding services we presently receive from our local school division. Our first meeting will be in mid-September.

G. Selling Our Product: This spring we made changes to the Grade 6 visit format. This proved to be very successful with the students. Other areas that we were intentional in creating connections included sports events (e.g. the Senior volleyball team played an exhibition game at the elementary), inviting Elementary students to the Senior High drama production, and band concerts. During the months of February and March, we hosted an Open House every Thursday. Those tours took place during the regular school day and provided parents with a true picture of the strong relational commitment of our staff toward our students.

H. Improved Communication with Parents and Increased Sense of Belonging: Improvements in this area were made, but more can be done to involve the parents in other aspects of our programs. At the Elementary campus, it has been much easier to involve and incorporate parents in the day-to-day activities within the school (e.g. noon hour supervision, library volunteers, helping in the classroom, special lunches). We are investigating ways in which Collegiate parents can be involved in supervising and hosting after school programs or clubs for the students (e.g. cycling, outdoor, and photography clubs).

I. Promotional Materials: A committee has been struck to develop a promotional CD. This teacher/parent committee will begin work in the fall of 2009 to produce a CD with various chapters that would allow parents to view the various dimensions of our school's programs. It should prove to be helpful as part of our promotion package.

The Van Lunen experience has been very rewarding. It has opened my eyes to the common challenges that we all face as independent, faith-based schools and that some of the approaches that I have been contemplating are realistic and manageable. One of the greatest challenges for me will be having the administration team at the Collegiate support the recommendations that

came forth from our Focus Group. At this time, several of our recommendations were accepted and implemented successfully while others are still in process.

What has also been rewarding is having parents come together and know that their ideas or concerns are valid and being heard. There are times when parents truly feel that the administration is not hearing them. As administrators, we must be open to criticism and listen to and speak to the concerns that our parent community may have. I have discovered that parents are more than willing to put their time and energy into the school if administration provides the opportunity for them to do so.

As I return to school in the fall, I will be contacting the Focus Group to seek their support and involvement in pursuing the additional goals related to our connectedness study. There is more that can be done and if this group has the energy to move forward with me next year, I will gladly join them in doing so.