

**Van Lunen Fellow 2009
Applied Project**

Aligning Planning and Implementation

A model for ongoing, efficient, and effective school improvement
at Christian Academy in Japan

Due to staff turnover, the tyranny of the immediate, a rapidly changing demographic, competing agendas and other complicating factors it has been difficult to maintain focus and momentum on school improvement initiatives. CAJ was identified by a WASC accreditation team 3 years ago as being a place that was not planning well. CAJ's staff does value school improvement and has been willing to actively engage in the process over time, but many have noted that they often do not see or understand the results of their efforts, understand their role, or know the big picture.

In response, CAJ has developed a process which integrates: 1) The board's vision via a fully integrated "ends"-based governing system (policy governance/Carver model). 2) Continuous strategic thinking applied to day-to-day operations rather than an occasional strategic planning cycle. 3) A sustainable, focused, usable and well-maintained school improvement plan. 4) An easy to maintain accreditation cycle: A WASC approved process that allows CAJ to engage in ongoing self-study and produce reports that serve its unique needs.

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Project Focus

Christian Academy in Japan is a place where excellent education happens, but this has often been accomplished by the intense effort of individuals rather than being the product of successful organizational planning. This often resulted in the lack of a sustained and clear direction for school improvement as well as overlapping and repetition of efforts.

This is not because leadership did not provide good opportunities or programs, but in a challenging international setting and in a school undergoing a significant demographic shift and staff turnover, we often reverted to the tyranny of the immediate. We had become institutional fire stompers rather than visionaries and innovators.

A number of these concerns were addressed by this project which seeks to align school improvement systems. These concerns and the needs of the various processes to be aligned led to a set of design parameters:

- 1) Sustainable
 - a. Easy to understand
 - i. Reports understandable by average middle school student
 - ii. Language and explanations not restrictive or exclusive
 - iii. Can be understandably described in a short presentation and represented by one graphic/design
 - b. Built into daily operations – part of the fabric of what we do
 - c. Approved by board, WASC, Leadership Team, and staff
 - d. Built into policy and standard operating procedures
 - e. Built to embrace changes in administration, staffing, student demographics
- 2) Easily maintained
 - a. Avoids repetition of efforts
 - b. Avoids multiple processes (for example strategic planning AND accreditation review cycles)
 - c. Is not an additional burden or stressor for already busy staff
 - d. Long range implementation cycle
- 3) Continuous
 - a. Avoids the need for ramping up/restarting the boiler for school improvement processes such as strategic plans or accreditation visits
 - b. Avoids the need to stop one thing to do another
 - c. Avoids inadvertently being too ambitious: too many plans at once
- 4) Valued
 - a. High level of staff buy in
 - b. Involves entire community
 - c. High level of reporting and accountability
- 5) Valuable
 - a. Effectively drives school improvement
 - b. Directly and positively impacts student learning

The processes to be aligned are:

- 1) The board's visioning and operations utilizing a fully integrated "ends"-based governing system (policy governance/Carver model).
- 2) Continuous strategic thinking applied to day-to-day operations rather than an occasional strategic planning cycle.
- 3) A sustainable, usable and well-maintained school improvement plan that is focused on student learning and produces verifiable results.
- 4) Accreditation: A WASC (Western Association of Schools and Colleges) approved process that allows CAJ to engage in ongoing self-study and produce reports that serve its unique needs.

Project methodology

****Resources:**

Van Lunen consultants

The consultants were especially valuable in the early stages of this project as I sought to identify how strategic planning could be aligned with our daily operations. With the help and resources provided by Kathleen Johnson and Rob Elliot I was able to come to a level of understanding about strategic planning that allowed me to promote both a "strategic thinking" model with the board and to integrate such a model into an ongoing school improvement process.

Van Lunen faculty and peers

David Hahn, my faculty advisor, and my Van Lunen peers asked the right questions and offered an appropriate level of encouragement. A particularly valuable experience was the questions that were asked during my small group presentation at the January session that helped me identify areas that were not easily understandable by someone from outside the CAJ staff.

School improvement coordinator

Our school improvement coordinator was tasked with doing a significant amount of work on this process including making sure it aligns completely with the WASC accreditation criteria, carefully analyzing each of the materials and structures proposed (I would continuously ask him to try and "break" the ideas to temper them), and to create materials for the meetings that happened at each level from report templates to agendas and focus group leader training.

WASC

Our accrediting agency, Western Association of Schools and Colleges, was very supportive in this process and I had several extended consultations with them. It was imperative that they allow us to modify their "Focus on Learning" process and that we be allowed to produce reports from our new hybrid process that would be acceptable to the organization and the visiting teams. They also directed us to specific schools and individuals that were useful while developing the process.

Other heads of schools

A very valuable resource for this project was school heads from other international schools. Many of them have aligned multiple accreditation processes, for example government required certifications and WASC accreditation, WASC and IB programs, or WASC and ACSI accreditations. The challenges they faced and the processes they now use allowed us to not reinvent the wheel on a number of fronts.

Graphic design

The art teacher at CAJ, who happens to be married to this headmaster, assisted with the graphic that represents this process. In the belief that how simple and understandable a process is can be indicated by how simple and understandable a graphic that explains it can be - a lot of time and energy went into the design.

****Process:**

Discovery:

The initial steps were all about discovery. Extensive time was spent reading background materials, exploring existing systems and consulting with experts.

Aligning:

This system attempts to align policy governance (Carver model governance), strategic planning, accreditation, and daily operations. Each of these is complicated and demanding in its own right, and by far the greatest amount of energy focused on this process was making sure the requirements demanded by each of these were not only being fully met, but that the new process was indeed better (simpler, more robust, more sustainable) than addressing them separately.

Approval:

The board and WASC were involved from the very beginning, as they needed to endorse the final process. Both entities were very cooperative, with the board providing endorsements throughout the formation. The administrative Leadership Team was also involved in working on and endorsing the project from the outset.

Buy in:

Care was taken to keep the department chairs and the general staff informed about what was happening. An early endorsement and input from the department chairs was particularly encouraging and useful. Known concerns of the staff about previous school improvement processes were that they lacked a big picture understanding and they didn't know the outcomes: for example, what happened to their input following accreditation self-studies. These concerns were considered in the design process and have been openly addressed in the early stages of implementation. An article about the process has been produced in the school magazine and references to it, including step-by-step walkthroughs using the graphic, were made in multiple headmaster meetings.

Implementation:

A long range implementation cycle has been set, with a beta set of reports being produced in the spring of 2010 and a more refined set that actually drives the school improvement

process slated for 2011. In May, 2009 the focus groups were introduced to each other following a headmaster meeting that outlined their role. The first formal focus group meetings occurred in June, 2009.

“Successful implementation” will be evaluated based on criteria to be developed from the design and other parameters.

For a general description of how the processes are aligned consult the Van Lunen presentation poster.

Results

At this point, in the early stages of implementation, we believe this process has the potential to achieve our objectives. We do understand that modifications will need to be made as we implement the overall process. There is still work to be done in the area of report templates and how they are crafted into a school improvement plan by the Advisory Council and governance bodies.

Commentary

1) Making things simpler is harder. We all know this, but I was constantly fighting to keep it from expanding into a more complicated process. I assume we will need to keep vigilant on this score as we move through the implementation phase.

2) Although it is a common complaint from staff that they don't understand something, people gravitate towards wonky language - whether it is used as efficient shorthand or as the code of the club. I implemented a ban on new acronyms and dictated that the reports be understandable at a middle school level to try and counteract a human/institutional tendency to make things exclusive from a language standpoint. It will be an ongoing challenge trying to translate or embrace the language used by WASC and in the literature while keeping our process understandable to a broad range of constituents.

3) I knew the board had existing concerns about how they set vision through the policy governance model, but in some ways developing this new process fostered more discussion on their part. The board has been exceptionally cooperative while beginning to work together to align their vision setting mandate and the operational improvement plans.

4) It is an ongoing struggle to balance involving staff in the formation process so they have ownership with just giving them what they need to accomplish the task and get on with their busy schedules. There are “camps” of staff who prefer one or the other, and there are a small number of staff who will complain no matter what. People will often respond to anything, but particularly change, based on their trust levels and pre-conceived notions. Overall there has been a lot of positive response to this system based on the promise that it will make things easier to understand and avoid repetition and busy work. It is critical that this promise is fulfilled.

5) Because this was a complicated and ultimately political process it required a lot of applied effort. I was fortunate to have significant resources to apply to it, including a school improvement coordinator who is also trained in people coaching and facilitating meetings. The level of cooperation and trust on implementing change from the leadership team, board, WASC and the staff has been humbling and has inspired me to ensure that the model achieves its objectives as designed.