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Expanding the Mission

The Goal

Cross Trainers Academy is currently an elementary school owned and operated by the Milwaukee Rescue Mission. Started seven years ago with just K5 – 2nd grade, it has grown from twenty-six students to over 180 students, with classes that are often at or near capacity. While the original intent was to stop the school after expansion through 5th grade, it quickly became apparent that staff, parents, and students had developed a strong desire for the school to expand. Thus, for the past two years we have added one level of middle school each year, and during this next school year we will add 8th grade.

While a middle school expansion has fulfilled a need, it now appears that there is an even greater need to expand through high school. With limited high school options to pursue and obstacles in the path of many of these options, providing a quality high school option for our students would bless them in many ways. However, with limited physical and financial resources, this would be a bold undertaking for all involved. The goal of this project has been to explore the feasibility of expanding Cross Trainers Academy to include a high school.

The Process

The primary obstacle in our desire for school expansion has been finding a suitable building to house the school. Much work has gone into searching for a building, and while many

leads have been followed, most have ended in disappointment. The majority of vacant school buildings in Milwaukee are owned by the city and controlled by the Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS). Because MPS views any private school that participates in the Milwaukee Parental Choice School as a competitor, they are very hesitant to sell buildings to private schools. Thus, the market for school buildings is very limited.

At the end of 2013, however, information about a building that is very near our current facility became available. This building was a former MPS building that had been sold to a private group many years ago, and could be available for use by a private school today.

A committee has been formed to explore the feasibility of purchasing this building. Their mandate has included, but is not limited to, the following areas:

- Geographical and site suitability
- City regulations
- Funding sources
- Long-term sustainability
- Educational programming
- Community influence

Geographical and site suitability. The proposed building is located approximately six blocks from the Milwaukee Rescue Mission. This location would make sharing resources, including maintenance, security, and IT staff, a possibility. If both locations were used for school purposes, busing issues could be minimized. The new site is also further into the residential part of the city, giving the school more of a neighborhood presence. This could be an asset as we seek to minister to the community around the school.

The site includes a 3.65 acre lot with a sizeable school building that was built in 1885. It was sold to a private corporation in 1985, and has been vacant since the fall of 2013. There is a playground adjacent to the school property, and at this point it is unclear if this “park” is included in the parcel, or if it belongs to the city. The building includes 24 classrooms on two levels, with a partially exposed basement. A “daycare” wing was added more recently, but was badly damaged by fire in the fall of 2013.

Environmental concerns are high for this property. We have hired a firm to conduct an environmental assessment. Asbestos, lead paint, and buried oil tanks are all probable issues.

City Regulations. Much work remains to be done regarding the city’s view of the purchase of the property and our desire to operate a school at this site. If city officials are not in favor of such a plan, it is possible that many obstacles may be erected. We have been advised to make obtaining a building permit from the city one of the contingencies in our offer to purchase.

Funding Sources. In addition to the funding through the Milwaukee Parental Choice System, we have begun to explore additional funding sources. Foundations and individuals have been informed of our plans in order to gauge interest. Data regarding student progress is being collected and disseminated. School improvement specialists have been invited to visit and observe the good things that are taking place at Cross Trainers Academy. The response has been very positive, and we are excited about the enthusiasm that has been expressed.

We have also looked into the idea of New Market Tax Credits. We are meeting with specialists in this area during the next month and believe this might be a good option for our situation.

Long-term sustainability. Because we have been able to establish our school inside of the Milwaukee Rescue Mission on a rent-free basis, we have not had major concerns about high

facility and maintenance costs. Moving out of the building will change this. We have begun to put a long-range financial plan together, realizing that a larger school (two classes for each grade rather than one) will help make the school financially viable. However, an increase in student numbers will bring more stress to the school culture. Any increase in student population must be carried out slowly and with much wisdom. The future of our school depends not only on a strong financial plan; we must also continue to provide a positive environment where significant learning can take place.

Educational programming. Most of the private high schools in our city define their mission as college preparation. While this can be a noble goal, we have adopted a broader mission for our high school. We have been in contact with the Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC), and they have indicated they are very interested in partnering with us in a dual enrollment program. It is our goal that following their junior year, our students will pass the entrance exam into MATC and enroll in classes at the college during their senior year. They would then graduate from high school with both a high school diploma and a one-year technical degree from the college. With such a degree in hand, students could go directly into the work force, continue to pursue a more advanced technical degree, or transfer credits to a four-year liberal arts college. We feel that having several options would help meet the diverse needs of our students.

Community influence. As mentioned before, the new site is located in a neighborhood with many low-income housing units within a few blocks of the school. The MRM Board desires not only to put a school in the building, but to create a community center as well. It is a strong hope that the neighborhood can be impacted for good in many ways, and that we may influence the entire community, not only students, with the message of the gospel.

The Impact

Many benefits have resulted from my participation in the Van Lunen Fellows Program during this important time in our school's history. John Cissel has provided much wisdom and direction in the process, which has given me the confidence to make recommendations and to go forward with various initiatives. It has also been helpful to listen to the stories of other school leaders who have previously walked this path. While each situation is unique, there is a common theme of balancing renewed vision with the risk involved.

As of the writing of this report, the Milwaukee Rescue Mission is seriously considering the purchase of the nearby property mentioned above. An offer with numerous contingencies has been made and accepted. It is our goal that a renovated building could be in place for the 2015-2016 school year.

However, within the last week, we have also discovered that the building has been broken into and stripped of anything of value, including the radiators, plumbing, copper wiring, and boiler parts. This seriously impacts that value of the property, and reconsideration of all plans is currently underway. Because demolition of the current building has also been one option, we do not have to renew the planning process from the beginning – just shift the focus. We have begun contacting architects in order to determine new construction costs versus renovation. A basic needs assessment has been completed, but more work needs to be done in this area. If it is determined that new construction is the best option, it is possible that the work will need to be completed in phases in order to make sure sufficient financial resources are in place. I am encouraged by the work that has already taken place, and am excited about all that could soon occur. We continue to pray for God's guidance and wisdom as we manage this project.