

Midwest Conservative Christian School

A Strategic Planning Study Based in Fact and Theory—Overview

Midwest Conservative Christian School embarked on a broad Strategic Planning journey during the 2008/2010 school years. Due to a change in administrative leadership, school board removal following a church split, and accreditation renewal plans, the Strategic Planning process was determined to be essential for clarification of needs and renewal of a specific course towards new growth and stability.

This journey included the Accreditation Renewal Process with Christian Schools International (CSI). This study allowed the school to go back to the first School Improvement Plan (SIP) developed five years earlier. The administration and new board became acquainted with former goals, checked for completion of goals, affirmed work that was completed, and then continued with developing other areas of focus.

The administrative team and board chose the Middle School as one area of focus because it was new since the last Accreditation. The Resource Center for students with learning challenges and assessment needs was the second area of focus. CSI required the school to focus on two other areas, the development of Professional Growth using best practices and continued in-servicing in Biblical Integration.

These Accreditation focus areas became the starting points of the Issue-Based or Goal Based Strategic Planning Process chosen by the Board of Directors. As the study progressed, funds continued to be tight and enrollment continued to drop which suggested that there were other areas needing attention and strategic work. This Strategic Planning process was short-circuited when the School Board made the determination that immediate action was required to increase enrollment and create financial stability. A decision to reduce the size of the administration team was made in October as one step in dealing with the finances. Following the change in the administrative structure, the Strategic Planning study became more academic.

This study is a combination of the actual process completed to December, 2009, and a proposed completion of Strategic Planning using the Issue-Based Strategic Planning Model which was not completed.

Jean Zoet
Midwest Conservative Christian School

The Goal-Based Strategic Plan in Theory and Fact

In Theory a Strategic Planning Steering Committee consisting of two board members, two teachers, one administrator, and two parents, appointed to determine up to six focus areas that need review and strategic planning to move the school forward and stabilize enrollment and finances. The Board may determine additional members and areas of focus.

At that planned meeting, the Steering Committee would do the following: (1) conduct a brief analysis of the school's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (S.W.O.T.) as seen through the surveys or propose an actual meeting of key community people; (2) review the Site Team suggestions that had been compiled by the school's accreditation self-study report and school board determined areas; (3) begin to organize the broad outlines for the Strategic Plan; and (4) construct a timeline for accomplishing their work. The summary report was to be given to the board within the month.

The following major issues were discussed as areas requiring goal setting/planning.

The major issues of Midwest Conservative Christian School were:

1. Professional development in best practices and Biblical integration. (Can we do better what we now do well? How do instructors grow and improve what they do?) The accreditation document provides the outline for the next four years and includes specific assessments to determine if the goals were met.
2. Differentiated student academic needs. (Does every child have the opportunity to develop fully as they have been created to become? How do we know whether the Learning Center is doing its job?) The accreditation document provides the outline for the next four years and includes specific assessments for the program.
3. Unity of community. (Have we developed into a community that knows one another, supports each other and is unified? Is trust restored within the community and with leadership since the church split and removal of the school board and Head of School?) This area was not addressed in the accreditation document but was seen by the board as needing attention.
4. Fiscal responsibility. (Are we ready to support the work of educating students as a community?) The financial reserve was depleted two years ago. Enrollment projections were not realistic and meant that the proposed budgets were unrealistic. Over-hiring occurred with financial loss.

Why the Issue-based Model for Strategic Planning?

Research will say that there is no one perfect strategic planning model for an organization. Each school organization ends up developing its own model of strategic planning which they modify as they go along within their own planning process. The following models were listed in the work of Carter McNamara, adapted from the [Field Guide to Nonprofit Strategic Planning and Facilitation](#). McNamara provides a range of alternatives from which organizations might select an approach and begin to develop their own strategic planning process. The following models include:

- “basic” strategic planning,
- issue-based (or goal-based) strategic planning,
- alignment strategic planning,
- scenario strategic planning, and
- organic strategic planning.

The basic strategic planning model starts from the bottom and builds up. This is time consuming and takes a strong commitment of time and energy to develop a plan that reflects the collective, perceived needs of the community. Therefore, Midwest Conservative rejected this more thorough process knowing they could use the accreditation materials and the meetings with parents when the Resource Center was changed.

Midwest Conservative Christian School is a school in crisis with a severe drop in enrollment. Something must be done to help the school stabilize and rebuild trust. The changes in leadership and drop in student numbers created a perceived crisis within the parent community, which perpetuated itself and became an actual crisis. The “good” education that is provided by the very well qualified teaching staff is not enough to keep many families. The facilities, which are very functional and spacious, are not enough to offset the “chatter and negative talk.” A shorter-term strategic plan based on the immediate emergency issues is needed. The issue-based strategic planning seemed to provide the process which is needed.



The Path must be found and the walk started.

“A Shorter termed strategic plan based on the immediate emergency issues is needed.”

Project Focus- A School in Crisis

Midwest Conservative Christian School is a church founded in the mid-west of a church community using a covenantal approach to education. The mission is to glorify God by providing a quality, biblically based, Christ-centered education, dedicated to developing students with a Christian worldview who are spiritually, socially, physically, and academically prepared to impact their world for Christ.

The school dropped from 350 students in grades Pre-school (age 3) - grade 8 to a student population of less than 200 over a three year period. The drop was affected by the struggling economic times, the change in administrative and board leadership, and the church split.

The Strategic Plan's focus is to answer the following question, "What strategic initiatives should Midwest Conservative Christian implement over the next year to better achieve/accomplish its mission and stabilize its enrollment and educational program during these challenging economic times following a very productive accreditation process?"

Project Process- Getting It Done

In 2008 the CSI Accreditation materials were obtained, teams were appointed and the self study begun to prepare for the site visit and renewal of the school accreditation. The desire was to complete this task before beginning the full Strategic Planning process. All research, surveys and small group discussions would provide the background material for the strategic planning.

The new Head of School led the Ad Hoc Board Appointed Accreditation Committee consisting of teachers, administration, parents and board members. There were four general areas of study: 1) Community, 2) Staff, 3) Students, and 4) Curriculum. The Committee asked parents, teachers, board members and administration to provide input through a survey format. The data was collected and analyzed for distribution to the board for understanding and for the committee as they redefined the school's self study. This was completed by the spring of 2009.

The four focus areas consisted of two local needs and two required. CSI required the school to study Professional Development of "best practices" and "Biblical Integration of Faith and Learning." The other two areas of focus were the Middle School Program, which had not been reviewed before as it did not exist at the first accreditation, and the Learning Center Department as it was not clearly defined and was in continuous revamping over the four previous years with significant personnel changes each year. All reports were completed and approved by the school board by September 2009

The site team visit was held in December 2009. A report of affirmations and suggestions for improvement was given to the board by January 2010. This completed the actual project to date.

Questions Suggested From the Issues and Process

1. How will the school community seek God and His direction in the midst of a crisis?

As the school moved through the initial accreditation self-study, no specific time was set aside to pray together as a community. There was no visible reliance on the wisdom of God. Individuals may have prayed. Meetings were begun with short prayer. However, would it not be important to lay all the planning and issues before the wise God to seek His way through the brokenness of the community?

2. How will the school leadership provide listening ears to the community desires?

During the school year the school board asked the community to come to three meetings. Each was given a focus by the school board/administration. Each meeting consisted of reports by the administration. Some question time was provided but minutes/notes were not taken. Questions related to an explanation of the reports. If a question asked for further research or more information there was no follow up. When will the school leadership provide a format that is more responsive to parent needs and desires?

3. How will the school decision-making body provide transparency and build trust?

The School Board makes all decisions with regards to budget, school administration, educational policy, and personnel. The leadership of the church is provided minutes and approves the budget. The parent community has no vote and is not provided with any specific minutes and budget. They are provided with policies already written, general budget summaries, and handbooks that lay out procedures of the educational community including discipline. The community does not know the school board personally and does not understand the function of the board. The membership on the board is restricted and not open to general nomination.

4. How will the Steering Committee make the goals SMART?

Goals must be framed together minimizing the number of total goals. They must also provide a time frame for completing the plan.

The Goals are considered SMART when they are:

- i. S = Specific
- ii. M = Measurable
- iii. A = Attainable
- iv. R = Realistic
- v. T = Time Sensitive

The goals that were developed through the accreditation process were SMART goals.

Closing Comments

We are each broken and live in a broken world. It stands to reason that an institution created by man would also be broken. My desire would be to seek God to heal our brokenness and help us develop a community that does education well in concert with each other. How do we encourage each other to reassess and grow in our commitment to God's way and His plans for educating our children?

Midwest Conservative Christian School has made some serious errors in the processes they use. The hearts of individuals seem to be pointed to God and serving Him but the decisions that are made reflect a secular approach to problem solving which is a disconnect with "Christian" education.