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Are We Better Together or Apart? An (e)Merging Story of Two Christian Schools:

Summary

This project centered on merging Surrey Christian School (a large, Christian PreK-12 school rooted in the Reformed tradition) with Cloverdale Christian School (a small, parochial PreK-7 school formerly affiliated with Zion Lutheran Church). In the spring of 2016, I was completing my 5th year as principal at Surrey Christian School. The board of Cloverdale Christian approached the Superintendent and board of Surrey Christian asked about the possibility of a staff member taking on a leadership role for one year after their principal resigned late in the school year. A decision was made that I would serve at Cloverdale Christian for the 2016-2017 school year.

Soon after I began, the Cloverdale board again approached Surrey Christian and asked if they would consider merging and taking over operations of the Cloverdale school. A task force was formed, and their mandate was to put a process in place that would allow them to make a recommendation as to whether the schools should merge. Our guiding question was simple: would Surrey Christian and Cloverdale Christian be stronger together or apart? My project focused on answering that question and leading the Cloverdale school community through a potential merge process.

The context of this project is imperative to understanding its significance. Surrey Christian School is a PreK-12 school of over 1,110 students located in Surrey, British Columbia. Surrey Christian School has a 60-year history. Although a small group of Dutch immigrants started the school and it continues to be rooted in the Reformed tradition, the school now has over 140 churches represented and is one of the most diverse Christian schools in Canada. Cloverdale Christian School was a PreK-7 school of over 200 students also located in Surrey, British Columbia. A small group of German immigrants in the Lutheran tradition began the school over 60 years ago, and they had a vision to share

the love of Jesus by starting a Christian school which initially was the primary mission of Zion Lutheran Church. Cloverdale Christian School has struggled for a variety of reasons over the last 10 years. Although there is not one specific reason for this, a few examples include high turnover in leadership, apathy of some church members to support the school, financial sustainability issues related to low tuition rates and high tuition assistance, the rapid increase of PreK-12 Christian schools across the region, and educating in a silo due to not being affiliated with any larger organizations that could offer tangible support.

Over the course of the 2016-2017 school year, townhall meetings were held with church members, teachers, parents and the larger community. After a year of hard work and relationship building, it was clear that schools had similar visions and shared a common understanding and a recommendation was put to both boards recommending that the schools merge. The recommendation was then taken to the Zion Lutheran congregation and the Surrey Christian School community. Our hard work was validated when, in December 2017, Zion Lutheran Church passed the motion to merge with Surrey Christian School and allow them to take over operations of the school, effective January 1, 2018. Although we were hopeful and optimistic the church would want to proceed with the merge, what was not anticipated was the nearly unanimous support of the community.

The relationship between the school has been strengthened through this process as neither takes the other for granted. Although no longer affiliated with the school, Zion Lutheran Church remains committing to helping the school fulfill its mission and, through God's grace, has committed over \$80,000 towards tuition assistance for the coming year. The Cloverdale campus has already benefitted from the merge in the form of additional resources in areas such as special education, technology, promotion and development, transportation and curriculum development.

Although we formally merged on January 1, I understand that merging two school communities with similar but somewhat unique narratives and vision will take many years. That said, both schools have been strengthened by the merge and I believe the work we have done could be a model for other schools who might think they would be stronger together than apart.

