

Cultivating Enrollment Growth in a Small High School

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Project Background:

Although our K-12 school has been gradually increasing in enrollment over the past three years, our high school enrollment (grades 9-12) has been relatively stagnant during that time. High school families have greater demands than lower school families, with pressure to go to particular colleges and receive scholarships. High schoolers are often looking for competitive athletic opportunities, advanced classes, and a large social circle and are looking for “more” in general than their lower grade counterparts. It is difficult to grow a high school until you have reached a “critical mass,” as smaller is not necessarily seen as better (as it is in elementary school).

What did I do?

Christian school growth is dependent upon word of mouth, and for word of mouth to be effective, current families have to be pleased with the school. I chose to focus on three P's: improving the **product** (academic quality, facilities, and atmosphere), better engaging the **people** (meeting with our families in small group settings, creating a culture of giving, and expanding our community through outreach and Grandparents Day), and addressing **public perception** (through consistent and strategic messaging, a vibrant and active web and social media presence, and giving prospective families more personal attention when they visit campus).

What did I learn?

I learned that the harvest only comes after years of planting and cultivating, that my instinct to focus on becoming excellent (“better tomorrow than you are today” as Jim Marsh says) was indeed the best strategy for drawing in new families and keeping current ones. I learned that like ripples in a pond- first you must make sure your product is the best it can be, second you must engage with people, and third, you must encourage a positive public perception through the savvy use of online media and being careful about your internal and external messaging.

What difference did it make?

While our high school enrollment is still not where we would like it to be, we have several reasons to rejoice:

- 1) Our rising freshman class is full- 13 of 16 eighth graders re-enrolled and we also received new applications for this class. Our junior high enrollment is also larger than it has ever been. If we can keep a full freshman class every year, in four years we should reach critical mass.
- 2) Current high school enrollment is up 9% for next year and may go higher.
- 3) Our atmosphere in both junior high and high school is excellent, as reported anecdotally and through online survey data. There is a sense of momentum.
- 4) New families are coming to visit our campus every week and many of these are reporting finding us through the web or through current families.
- 5) We have raised \$60,000 so far towards a \$100,000 strategic goal.