

## **A Contrarian's Journey Through Strategic Planning**

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### **Project Description and Outcomes**

For the past two years I have served as the Executive Director for The Prairie Centre for Christian Education. PCCE, in various forms, has served Christian schools on the Canadian prairie provinces for almost 60 years. It is a relatively new organization, having its start seven years ago when three long-standing organizations merged. Through the work, study and mentorship of the Van Lunen program, I hoped to engage in two important tasks:

1. The creation of a strategic plan for PCCE that would direct our future work for the next 5+ years.
2. Gain a deeper understanding of the strategic planning process, so that I could assist PCCE schools in the process. In many ways, my two goals were achieved but not necessarily in the ways that I anticipated.

*PCCE's Playbook:* I came into "strategic planning" with a bit of negative attitude as I had been a part of strategic planning processes that were time and resource consuming, then "sat on the shelf" until it was time to update the plan. I was open to looking at different ways or structures for PCCE to set a direction for the future. Two books gave me a glimpse of a different way. *The Nonprofit Strategy Revolution: Real Time Strategic Planning in a Rapid-Response World* by David La Piana, and *The Advantage* by Patrick Lencioni in which he references the development of a Playbook. The concept is a highly dynamic, flexible and responsive document that is living and breathing, continually being updated and modified to meet the organization's needs. A key conversation with Zach Clark focused the work of the Playbook as it allowed me to clearly articulate the "why" of PCCE, moving away from the "what." Zach's careful listening and astute compilation of thoughts provided us with the structure of our Playbook moving forward.

### **What I Learned During the Process**

- Creating a traditional strategic plan through the hiring of a consultant and following the "regular" path didn't work for me. Not being satisfied with the status quo and regularly looking for something different is something I see in myself, both in this project and in other things as well.
- Engaging our community/member schools in the process was difficult. Teachers, school leaders and board members are highly engaged in the work in their local community/school; PCCE is one step removed, so it is challenging to have people participate in the hard work of envisioning the future. Our first engagement strategy was the distribution of surveys. We had good uptake from teachers and school leaders, but minimal response from board members. The scheduled time at our Annual General Meeting was cut short due to an urgent and important issue that needed our time and attention. Because of these factors, the Playbook does not have the level of community input I was hoping for.
- When an organization begins strategic planning, it brings to light lingering issues not necessarily related to the new project, but have been simmering under the surface. When a community invites conversation and discussion, these issues arise. We experienced this; and while the issues were not a total surprise, we are now dealing with them.

### **The Difference This Project Made in My Organization**

The true difference in our organization will only be known in three to five years when we look back and see if PCCE is moving in the direction of being our schools' "essential partner." The gathering of the PCCE community to talk about our purpose and future has been helpful and healthy. It opened up conversations and topics of discussion that, while not always pleasant, were important for our growth. The actual process and work of creating the Playbook, required me to think deeply about the organization. In the busyness of regular work life, leaders do not often take (or make) the time to reflect, to dream, to listen, to plan, so this process was very good for me as a relatively new leader in the organization.

In terms of the Playbook itself, I am really looking forward to working with it. It gives me clarity in terms of the organization's focus and future direction. I am excited about the new things on the horizon and the anticipated

benefit to the schools in our PCCE community. There is also a bit of apprehension as to whether we will be able to accomplish our goal of being “essential,” but that is what will keep me and our organization focused and intentional. Overall, the process has been one that has led to significant personal and professional growth for me. I am looking forward to diving deeply into using the Playbook to guide and leading our organization into an exciting future. I am thankful to the Van Lunen program for the opportunity and its support of Christian education, both on the Canadian prairies and beyond.

## Prairie Centre for Christian Education Playbook (A VERY Abbreviated Version)

**Goal:** to be your essential partner in Christian Education

### Three Priority Areas

#### **Learning Experiences.** Description:

- Learning within environments that provide more than just content
  - The experience connected to the learning is key
1. Study tours for PCCE community, with key priorities and locations for learning experiences. Possible tours: Israel, Alberta Indigenous Community Immersion, Australia, EduDeo Study trip to Zambia, etc.
  2. Executive/Senior Leadership Group: Facilitate regular meetings for school’s executive/senior leaders.
  3. Support new principals, provide opportunities to learn about Christian education within the community
  4. Increase the Teaching for Transformation capacity of PCCE schools through the creation of a “fidelity” program that would allow schools to assess and address where they are on the TtT journey.

#### **Thought-Leadership.** Description:

- Learning together, as a group, within a group; expanding perspective and thought-patterns
  - Not just staying “on top of things,” but being leaders in the Christian school context as we reflect, learn and grow together
1. Establish a think tank of 6-8 PCCE people who convene twice each year to see the lay of the land, anticipate issues and provide direction and support.
  2. Book Club: Select one book a year for PCCE. On a regular basis, facilitate discussions.
  3. High School Learning Group: Determine factors that contribute to enrolment challenges; consider new ways of doing high school, enhancing vision of Christian education and increase enrolment/retention.

#### **Relationships.** Description:

- Opportunities for flourishing relationships
  - Strengthening partnerships within and beyond PCCE
1. Hire a part-time consultant/facilitator to support and provide leadership for the independent schools in Alberta around topics such as government relations, regulatory changes, policy development & revision.
  2. Engage in research connected with developing formal relationships with “preferred partners” for PCCE and its schools.
  3. Organizational partnerships strengthened where mutual benefit is possible.
  4. Board Development: develop workshop sessions that boards would find helpful by continuing discussions with Christian Schools Canada and Christian Schools International.
  5. Facilitate the establishment of electronic collaborative interest groups
  6. PCCE board members will play an active in connecting with our member schools to support the schools in our organization, “keep an ear to the ground,” be aware of current and emerging issues, highlight PCCE information, updates etc. to the schools

### **General Operations**

To facilitate growth in the above listed areas and to ensure organizational health, PCCE will also address the following topics:

1. Convene a task force to investigate our current membership and fees structure
2. PCCE Board will engage in focused discussions around PCCE’s identity and clarify our core values
3. Update our communications profile.
4. Determine a plan for the use of the “Intellectual Property” fund that is the result of Teaching for Transformation partnerships