

Growing a Culture of Giving

Stephen Sprague

Headmaster, Trinity Christian School, Kailua, HI

VLC Consulting Partner: Zach Clark (Development & Leadership Coaching LLC)

Trinity Christian School, located in the Windward community of Oahu, Hawaii, was founded in 1981 and by 2013 had expanded to serve 360 students and 250 families in grades PK-12. In order to accommodate this expansion, the school now rents a second campus on property a few miles away from its original campus. As our school continues to expand and mature, we recognize the need for a more permanent solution on a combined campus, which will prove extremely expensive. While the school is on good financial footing, being 97% cost-based, it has not cultivated any significant giving in the community, the kind of giving that the future growth of the school demands.

The aim of this project, therefore, was begin growing a culture of giving. With previous fundraising efforts only bringing in \$20K a year through Spring Galas and Fall Festivals, this project endeavored to get giving essentially off the ground. To that end, I began consulting with Zach Clark from Leadership and Development, whose lessons immediately resonated with me. He coached me away from my idea of a more generic Annual Fund to work on a Development White Paper that defined Donor-Driven Steps, which then led to a renovation project and a vehicle for growing giving (and educating a School Head).

An important first step of the project led me through a rapid assessment of our mission, vision, and values. I had already articulated many of these statements for the school, but I had not put them together into a clear, succinct development message. This was a very helpful thought exercise, and the consequent Development White Paper served me well through this project (and will likely for the years ahead). The process of crafting the White Paper led me to identify the next Donor-Driven Step for the school: the \$180K renovation of a building for the addition of four classrooms to our expanding school.

Following the advice of my consultant, I personally engaged with people in our community to invest in the future of our school. Armed with some initial commitments, I publically announced the project in December and began construction in January. Many of the lessons I had learned via lecture and consulting were validated through my experience of asking for donations. As of the end of May, we had raised \$85K toward the project, which is more money than we had raised in the last four years combined, and with much less effort! At the same time, we have made very good progress on the renovation, now expecting to finish it by the end of June.

The school has enjoyed some great outcomes as a result of doing this project: 1) our enrollment in the Secondary School is significantly up for next year, 2) I have identified and vetted a new Director of Advancement beginning this summer, 3) we now have a list of donors on which to build, 4) I reconnected with some foundations who will likely support some future efforts, and 5) it has galvanized excitement and support for our school in our community. But, perhaps the greatest long-term benefit of doing this project is what it has done for me personally. It challenged me to do what I had never done before (and avoided in my first two years as a school head): directly asking people to give toward the future growth of the school. I found this personal and genuine approach to soliciting donors was not only more effective, it also forced me to be more personal and engaging with parents in my school. Contrary to my fears of repelling people, I found that identifying partners and asking them to invest in our school actually deepened relationships with them.