



Revising our Financial Aid Program

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History

The financial aid program at Trinity Christian School (TCS) had become outdated. Our school is 26 years old and the financial aid policies remained largely unchanged since the school began. Families were falling through the cracks not qualifying for financial aid because our policies had not kept up with current economic realities. We were losing families from our school for financial reasons. The economy in Alberta, and especially Calgary had changed, largely due to the decline of our oil and gas industry which is the driving force behind our economy. We found that we had empty desks in our school and much of that was related to our fees and some families struggle to pay them.

Our funding model is unique as we are an alternative school within a regional school district. We receive partial government funding. This government funding along with program fees paid by our families, fund our school. Because of our alternative school model and unique funding structure we would need to develop our own financial aid program to fit our school model.

What I did

I began a collaborative process that included some of our staff, our board and our finance committee. We did research to find where we fit in within our market in regard to our fees. I consulted colleagues about the financial aid program at each of their schools. Dave Anger, a Van Lunen Fellow, was very generous and helpful in sharing the program that Bears paw Christian School had just revised and implemented.

Working with our finance manager and finance committee, we explored a few different types of aid programs. Each one had pros and cons, we continued to address the cons and work our way through the process. Along the way, we became aware of a program by ISM called FAST (Financial Aid for School Tuition). In consultation with FAST representatives, by adjusting

thresholds and adding some school based questions, we found that FAST would be a great tool to incorporate into our program. We would direct families to the FAST online application. FAST guides the family through an application process to gather all pertinent information. Once the online application is complete, our school receives a comprehensive report for each family from FAST. Our Finance Manager and I utilize these reports to discern the next steps in awarding financial aid to an applicant family. One of the next steps may include an interview with the family to address any questions or concerns that have arisen through the application process.

We ultimately received board approval to build a financial aid program utilizing the FAST online system to collect the data. Decisions regarding financial aid are made at the school level in consultation with staff and the finance committee. Our board receives monthly updates as to the number of families receiving aid and the financial impact.

We further changed our policy to allow for new families to apply for financial aid for their first year in the school, something that the previous policy prohibited.

What I learned

I learned that a financial aid program is critical to the ministry of our school. Grace must be built into a financial aid program. Grace that includes a high level of accountability along with the ability for applicants to maintain privacy and dignity, a balance that is sometimes difficult to achieve. In order to maintain good stewardship, an effective program must recognize and discern valid need versus poor budgeting choices amongst applicants. A gracious approach to both is required.

What difference did it make?

- Brought our financial aid policies in alignment with our economy.
- Utilizing FAST has saved hours of time for both staff and volunteers.
- Allowed our school to be more financially inclusive:
 - Enables a family who may not have otherwise considered TCS due to costs, to do so.
 - Provides for those we may have lost due to financial strain, to stay in our community.