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Confronting the Challenge of Enrollment Growth

In 1974, believing that God gives parents the responsibility of educating their children, a small group of Christian families established the Vernon Christian School Society in Vernon, BC.

Over the next 40 years the student population grew and so did the campus, through ongoing building additions and renovations. Since 2014, the school has blossomed to 400 kindergarten to grade 12 students, with an annual growth rate of 7.2% and climbing. However, the campus facility is only designed to comfortably hold 350 students, with several portables and modified interior spaces currently serving program needs.

The increasing pressures of enrolment on infrastructure and quality of learning have presented the board with two key threats: (a) diverse perspectives within the society about growth, from excitement and passion to apprehension and even resistance, and (b) strained confidence in leadership due to the absence of a comprehensive strategy for campus expansion.

Strategic Planning Response

Recognizing the critical need to establish and implement a long-term, community-endorsed vision and strategy for sustainable growth, including a clear, feasible plan for campus expansion, the board in partnership with school administration committed to developing a 5 year strategic plan over the course of the 2019-20 school year.

Deep Hopes

The following targets were established to focus the plan and its development process:

- build society-wide unity, excitement & confidence in a vision for growth,
- provide a comprehensive foundation to guide enrolment decisions and campus development planning, and
- equip the VCS Development Department with a strong foundation for approaching donors in a 2020-21 capital campaign.

Process Leadership

The plan would be written by the board of directors and administration team, based on data collected from focus groups and full-society input, then presented to the VCS Society.

Data Gathering Model

Having reviewed different models with which to gather data for development of a strategic plan, leadership adopted a community engagement model for data collection. The following focus-groups were each assembled for a strategic planning workshop, led by the principal: (a) full staff; (b) key stakeholders team, including members of each standing committee, the “Parents-in-Action” team, and sustaining donors; (c) society membership, as part of the annual general meeting agenda; and, (d) board and extended leadership team (current and recent board members with administration).

Data Collection

The principal developed the following strategic planning workshop components with which to engage each of the four focus group teams assembled for data collection:

1. an introduction, including a review of the VCS Mission Statement and vision, and an outline of the current enrolment growth context and strategic planning rationale;

2. group work, during which table groups of four to six participants engaged in a series of activities and “SWOT” (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis prompts to generate input, including a number of protocols to establish diverse, open engagement of all participants: (a) “think-pair-share,” (b) “go-go-mo” (give-one, get-one, move-on), and (c) “snow-balling” (collaborative consensus building for top priorities);
3. synthesis of input, carried out at the end of each workshop by the whole group as the top six priorities for strategic planning were identified and formalized in consensus;
4. merging of data, as the principal collated the top priorities from each focus group workshop into a master spreadsheet and distributed it to the board for review in preparation for a strategic planning retreat to interpret the data and write a strategic plan.

Building a Strategic Road Map

The VCS Board and administration then met for a two-day retreat, facilitated by the Society of Christian Schools of BC (SCSBC) Executive Director and Director of Development, to interpret the data gathered through the workshop sessions and draft a strategic plan through the following steps:

1. environmental scan,
2. long-term mission sustainability,
3. defining vision based on core ideology and purpose,
4. interpreting data from strategic planning focus groups,
5. articulating an envisioned future, and
6. drafting a strategic plan.

Strategic Plan Document

A comprehensive strategic plan was then completed, shaped by the following outline:

1. Background: mission, motto, VCS pillars & graduate profile,
2. Envisioned Future: bold goal & vivid description, and
3. Strategic Priorities, each with “scorecard goals,” timelines, and a “champion” responsible for implementation and reporting: (a) Learning and Teaching, (b) Infrastructure for Growth, and (c) Fiscal Responsibility & Giving.

Next Steps

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the school’s operations toward the end of our strategic planning process, and prevented the VCS Board and society from formally adopting the VCS Strategic Plan 2020-2025. The pandemic has also significantly impacted our planning context. The financial strain of many school families as well as the uncertainty around what kind of educational model will be mandated by the provincial government for 2020-21 has impacted confidence in the enrolment and finance projections that are crucial to the integrity of the Strategic Plan. Therefore, a careful board review is scheduled for Fall, 2020 in order for the plan to be revised as appropriate before being presented to the society.

Learning Impact

Both the strategic plan and the process of its creation have had tremendous results for school leadership. First of all, inviting the society into the planning process through hands-on, engaging workshops that solicited diverse and thorough input was highly effective. It allowed for the majority of our community and almost all of the key stake-holders to take part in meaningful dialogue around vision, goals, concerns and dreams, and this has helped to develop collective understanding and open communication, particularly in areas of conflict. The

protocols that compelled small groups to reach consensus on shared priorities also helped to establish unity and solidarity. The collaborative workshops helped to reinforce the relational, community-minded approach to decision-making that our Society so highly values.

The “SWOT” analysis prompts used throughout the process have also helped the board and administration to discern the mind of the society and to address challenges meaningfully. For example, concerns or assumptions around theology, vision, finances and curriculum have been clearly documented; however, so have expressions of confidence, support, and affirmation in these areas. Having a comprehensive collection of data has enabled leadership to discern the proportion of the challenges raised against the strengths identified, empowering the board to respond with data-driven clarity rather than anecdotal guess-work.

Perhaps the greatest impact of the strategic planning process has been to support the board in establishing clarity and unity at a critical point in the history of the school. Student population is breaching the school’s physical capacity, and so the next step must be to either retract enrolment or expand the facility. The implications of affirming and acting on a vision for growth will certainly require sacrifice and introduce risk both in terms of finances and in terms of change management; therefore, it is reassuring to have a strong strategic plan foundation with board ownership, empowered by comprehensive input from the society.

Additionally, this strategic planning process has become for me, personally, a brilliant model of community engagement and direction planning that could serve very well in other contexts, such as curriculum or policy development. As I have engaged with each different strata of the society, I have had the opportunity to share school vision and history, to reveal the heart of the board and administration, and to build relationship and trust with so many members

of the community. I am inspired by the strategic plan developed by the leadership team, but recognize that the process has been even more powerful than the product could ever be.

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