



Governance for Sustainability and Continuity

Van Lunen Fellowship Applied Project 2019-2020

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Project Summary

The focus of this project was to create and adopt a functional governance manual for the Board of Education of Luther Memorial School.

Project Rationale

The Luther Memorial of today is vastly different than when it was founded. (See our history below.) Because of the growth and revitalization of this ministry many of the policies, manuals, and handbooks quickly became outdated and irrelevant to current practices. Throughout my time in administration, it has been my goal to update and implement new policies, manuals, and handbooks to meet the needs of the school and to ensure adherence to our mission and vision, as well as the current needs of our organization. The last remaining piece to overhaul is the school's board governance manual as a way of improving the functionality of the Board of Education. Looking back, it should have been the first step!

A new governance manual has been the last on the list because it is the one that I felt the least equipped to handle and the most challenging project to get momentum on from our current school board members. What started with reluctance on my part, quickly took on new meaning as I started to think about what it meant for the future of the school. In my seven years of administration at Luther Memorial School, I have gained the trust and respect of our board members. This allows me a great deal of freedom and makes it easy for the board to function in more of a "rubber stamp" role. I have put a great deal of time and effort into creating strategic plans and setting LMS up for success long into the future. A future that I am not sure how long I will remain a part of. Without a strong board of education to ensure the completion of our strategic plan and even to ensure adherence to our mission and vision, what will the future of LMS hold? More than just another policy, creating a strong governance plan and getting buy-in

from all the members of the school board is a clear way to provide for the long term sustainability and continuity of Luther Memorial School - a very worthwhile endeavor.

Luther Memorial History

Luther Memorial School was founded in 1948 by an association of three Lutheran churches to care for and educate the children of their congregations. The student body was primarily made up of the children of German immigrants living in the city of Cleveland. Enrollment reached its height in the 1970's with the thriving industry in the city. Over the next few decades, people began moving out of the city and enrollment dwindled and Luther Memorial struggled. In 1996 the Cleveland Scholarship and Tutoring program began, allowing for low-income families in the city of Cleveland to have access to private school education. In 2002, the school board took bold steps to rebuild Luther Memorial to adjust and serve the people of these neighborhoods that have faced so much change. Luther Memorial began accepting the Cleveland scholarship and relaunched with a combined kindergarten and first grade class of 12 students and 2 full time staff members, adding a grade each year. Enrollment grew and Luther Memorial moved into St. Mark church - a larger and nicer facility. The growth in enrollment allowed for the expansion of programming and an increased focus on the arts. Partnerships with area organizations began providing high quality instruction in visual arts, drama, music, and orchestra. Luther Memorial continued to thrive and by the 2014-2015 school year, a waiting list had grown to over 30 students. To address the continued growth of the school, the school board voted to open a second campus. Renovations at Mt. Calvary Lutheran Church began in 2015 with the support of many faithful donors. Luther Memorial West opened in 2016 with 83 students in kindergarten-6th grade and is now serving students through the 8th grade. Renovations and expansion continued at both campuses including an updated gym at Main Campus and additional classroom space in both buildings.

Luther Memorial continues to follow God's call to serve His children and families in the city of Cleveland and enjoys increased enrollment, programs, and ministry offerings each year.

Project Methods

Research

Board governance and what should be included in a governance manual is not something that just comes instinctively. Finding best practices takes time and research. The board governance sessions at the Van Lunen conferences were a great place to start with what a functioning board can and should look like.

Spending time sitting in on board meetings at others schools was incredibly beneficial. Whether it was a well run, functional board or a poorly run, ineffective board, there were always a few major take-aways and plenty to reflect on. Initially, I was concerned that it would be difficult to get administrators or school board members to agree to let me sit in but it was less of an issue than I expected it to be. By explaining what I was doing, and throwing in a bit of flattery, for most it was not an issue. There were some times that I was asked to leave when they were discussing financial information or more sensitive topics, which I was happy to do. Sitting in on

a board meeting during this research phase, was the first time I had seen the use of a consent agenda. Just that practice made use of the meeting time much more effective and more focused.

The most challenging part of the research phase of this project was reading examples of board governance manuals of other schools. Our superintendent was very helpful in gaining access to the governance manuals of other schools. Once I had the manuals of several other schools of similar size and purpose, it was just a matter of time, focus, and a whole lot of caffeine!

Getting the Board on board

My reluctance is not the only reason that our governance manual and policies are the last to be updated. It is a challenge to get board members, all of whom are volunteers and have other full-time jobs, excited about learning more about governance models and talking about what policies and practices we want to implement. I had some help getting buy-in through our accreditation visit last school year. One of the action items that was required to be part of our follow-up action plan, was the creation of a board policy manual. We now had the “had to” but how do we get to the “want to” or at least seeing the greater purpose of looking at how Luther Memorial is governed? This remains an obstacle to overcome.

Educating the Board

Prior to each of the school board meetings, all board members were sent short, easy to read articles on school governance which would be discussed at the meeting so they each had at least some background information coming in. We then spent time discussing what makes up an effective school board and how it can impact the school. While not as effective as I would have hoped, these discussions gave me an idea of where the board members stood and what direction I should go in drafting our governance manual.

Drafting

In “working smarter, not harder” I picked the governance manual that most closely fit our needs and our organizational structure and used it as the basis for the development of a draft manual. Adding in policies from other manuals and taking out policies that did not fit for LMS, lead to a promising first draft. Before sending it to all our school board members for review, I highlighted areas where we did not have a current practice or that covered material we had yet to discuss as a school board. Those were left for a more detailed review at an upcoming meeting and amended following that review. Due to COVID-19 and the more pressing issues Luther Memorial faced as a result, the governance manual remains as a draft and will need much further discussion, review, and revision, prior to formal adoption.

Project Takeaways

My biggest takeaway from this project is that if there is to be significant and truly impactful change in the way the school board of Luther Memorial operates, there is a great deal of work that needs to be done in training the board members. It is one thing to have effective policies and practices, but for them to make any difference they have to be implemented effectively and consistently. It would be hugely beneficial to make use of a consultant to finish up this project and help get the Luther Memorial Board of Education moving forward for the benefit of the long term sustainability and continuity of this thriving ministry.