

From Start-up to Continued Success

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Introduction to Bellstone Christian School

Bellstone Christian School is a vibrant K-8 school with 120 students and a total of 12 teaching and support staff. The school opened its doors in September, 2017 after about 7 years of planning. Timothy Christian School in Hamilton was bursting at the seams, so the membership voted unanimously to begin a second school to the south of Hamilton. Rather than operating as a satellite location, the membership decided to begin a second school that operates independently of Timothy Christian School.

Bellstone is a school that serves the members of the Canadian Reformed churches as well as the United Reformed churches in the area surrounding Mount Hope, Ontario. There is a strong commitment within the school community to maintain the unity of the Home, Church, and School. Our school seeks to remain Christ centered in it's approach to education, while providing academic excellence in the educational process, as we prepare students to go out and serve both God and the neighbour in their daily calling. Our school operates independently of the church, but it does only serve the members of these two federations of churches.

In many ways, the Bellstone community is a family. The size of the school, and the culture developed by the staff, students, and parents, makes Bellstone a place where students across the grades feel comfortable interacting with each other on a regular basis. Parents are very involved in their children's education, in their interactions with the staff as well as in their volunteer work, which helps the daily operation of Bellstone. Numerous stories have been shared by students who, in the past, were extremely anxious about going to school in a large school setting. Coming to Bellstone, a school that was

much more intimate, allowed them, and in a sense perhaps even caused them to shine in their confidence as well as in their academic performance.

What did you do?

The question is, “How do we take what we have and maintain it at very least, or build on it and grow into the future?” In the first year of operation, there were hiccups and wrinkles that need to be worked out. The membership and staff were very forgiving in the first year of operation because there was a “we’re all in it together” mentality. Even in the second year, this was still evident, but after three years of operation, there is a certain expectation that policies and procedures will be well developed in order to allow a school to run smoothly.

When I approached my Board about enrolling in the VanLunen program in order to help lead the school forward in a positive direction they supported me in this venture. They recognized the need to think strategically and to plan the way forward in order for Bellstone to succeed.

Fast forward to July, 2019 where I had the privilege of attending the first week of VanLunen in Grand Rapids. Listening to the different presentations on Strategic Planning and Board Governance models had me all excited and raring to go. In August I presented a plan to my Board to begin looking at developing a strategic plan so that we could intentionally plan where we would like to see our school at in two, five, or even ten years from now. My major consideration was the fact that I felt that we were in a state where we were managing the day to day operation of our school. This is necessary to a large extent, when a school is first starting out, but this cannot go on indefinitely.

The response I received from my Board was not what I expected. I was anticipating that my proposal would be met with enthusiasm, but this proposal fell flat. I was rather discouraged by this, thinking that

they really did not appreciate what I was doing, and that they really did not see the need for strategic planning.

After much prayer and reflection, God gave clarity in my mind and I was able to work through it. Many members of the Board were involved in setting up the mission and vision of Bellstone only a few years earlier. The idea of going through the process of strategic planning was overwhelming, and the energy, understandably, just wasn't there. That was an 'aha' moment for me because I realized that I was at a different stage than the Board. I also recognized that the Board did support me, and that they were correct in their perspective that we were not ready to begin the strategic planning process quite yet.

Naturally, what that meant is that I needed to take a different approach to get us to the point of being ready. When Bellstone started, we received a detailed handbook from Timothy Christian School that we were able to borrow and plagiarize as needed. The Board decided to replace the name Timothy with the name Bellstone and operate for one year before making any official changes to the handbook. This would allow for meaningful changes since we would practically know how the school would operate after a year. The problem was that after two years the handbook had not been changed.

My next proposal to the Board was that as a team we address the Handbook. I came up with a methodic way of going through the Handbook so that we could review / revise it and make it a meaningful document for Bellstone. I split the Handbook up into different sections and passed them on to subcommittees to review and take care of. Deadlines were set, and everything was on track to review and finalize a large portion of the Handbook when the world came to a halt with COVID-19.

We were faced with a crisis that needed the attention of our Board so the work that was about to be completed with the handbook was put on hold. Plans are now being put in place to have this completed next school year.

At this point in the project, there is very little tangible evidence of the work that has been done. The plans that were shattered by COVID-19 are now being rescheduled. Over the course of the next school year, it is our goal to have a handbook with policies and procedures put in place that do not need to be questioned, but rather will be policies and procedures that will guide us into the future. With this in place, the Bellstone Board will then be able to take the next steps in strategic planning, and under the Lord's blessing will be a place where God's covenant children will be trained for many years to go out and serve both the Lord and their neighbour in their daily lives.

What did I Learn?

As I have been working through this project, my biggest takeaways involved conclusions about working as a team. I learned to appreciate the incredible amount of work that the Board has done to establish a Christian school, and to keep it operating. I am learning that different opinions around the table strengthen the future direction of a school. The challenge is in bringing everyone together so that we can move forward in a unified manner. It was through working together that we were able to keep moving forward. Even though the project that I had envisioned did not work out yet, I came to understand the importance of laying the groundwork properly before tackling the project of strategic planning.

What difference do I think it will make?

Now that the ball is rolling in terms of finalizing our policies and procedures, I believe that there will be more clarity about the task of Board, Staff, and our parent community. The work that we are undertaking now, is a necessary step to creating Bellstone's unique identity. I believe that with persistence and dedication, under the Lord's blessing, the work on the Bellstone Handbook will help to lead this school in a clear direction as we head into the future.