

## **The Importance of Reviewing your Strategic Plan**

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Did your strategic plan account for a pandemic? If you answered “yes,” then there is no need to read on and we will all look for your next bestselling book. If COVID-19 has taught us anything, it is that plans must be held loosely, and strategic plans must be a living document for heads of schools and boards of directors. Indeed, if a school has an effective strategic plan to move forward, as Alan Pue (2016) notes, they will be positioned to: set the course for their school, stay the course when things get tough, be financially sustainable, serve the church as full partners in fulfilling the Great Commission, and show God’s glory to a watching world.

While these principles are known and likely at the forefront of the planning process, strategic plans often are created, published, then filed away in a binder collecting dust. Perhaps the plan is brought out for an annual review and the dates adjusted to reflect an updated five-year plan with no real substantial review of the current reality or consideration of the future. At least that was the reality at the school I served.

An effective strategic plan had been created with much thought and care some seven years ago. This plan was effective, set clarity, updated the organization’s vision and mission, and put in motion key initiatives that the school now benefits from. Over the years, updates were made to the phrasing of the mission and vision statements of the school, but the content of the plan was not reviewed effectively by the board. Indeed, the board was spending more time on the operational efficacy of the school. To borrow an analogy from Henry Contant (2012), the board was spending more time on the ship deck

rather than in the crow's nest. The board was caught in ensuring the current ship was functioning and helping steer it at times, rather than looking ahead to where it was headed; indeed, in the busyness of patching leaks (sometimes literally), the board had not noticed that more passengers (students) were coming on board and that more passengers were lining up at the next port of call.

Going into the 2018/19 school year, we had nearly filled our campus to capacity and our high school program had grown by 42%. These are all wonderful blessings, but the need to address core aspects, such as updating our aging facilities, had become urgent. Thus, taking the time to revisit the strategic plan, and to climb back in the crow's nest, became a priority for the board.

To plan effectively, there needs to be time set aside for sustained focus. By engaging in a weekend retreat, facilitated by a strategic planning consultant familiar with Christian schooling, we were able to validate our core values, set a BHAG (Big Hairy Audacious Goal), and set 30, 60, 90, 120 day goals for the Board. With a focus on understanding our "Why" (as championed by Simon Sinek) and guided by the six critical questions Lencioni (2012) poses to ensure clarity of our vision, we were able to know what our priorities were. It cannot be overstated that understanding our purpose and articulating it was essential to updating our strategic priorities. The Board acknowledged the past reality, but understood the need to move forward and update our facility and strategic vision for the long-term sustainability of the school. We were able to have a preliminary plan by the end of this weekend.

To ensure that we would not lose momentum, the plan was reviewed monthly by our Board Strategic Planning and Governance Committee. Moreover, as head of school, I would include updates

in monthly reports to the Board. By engaging various stakeholders, we were able to refine the language of our core values and adapt our current vision statement with some updated phrasing. By having a clear sense of our why, and articulating that internally as a Board and leadership group, as well as externally to our school community, we were able to stay the course when the pandemic caused us to shift to more immediate concerns.

We were able to effectively pivot because we had “learn[ed] to move boldly forward in pursuit of our goals while holding everything loosely” (Pue 2016). Our updated core values helped us articulate to the school community why we matter and the difference our education and school program has during COVID-19. Finally, the plan has ensured all key stakeholders have bought into the long-term sustainability of the school as the plan articulates a vision to promote the long-term growth of the school with clear direction for all programs.

Interestingly enough, even with COVID-19, interest in our school remains high. Our projected enrolment trends indicate a need for a robust plan for growth. Indeed, having a clear direction for the future has proven to be essential. COVID-19 allowed the Board to take some more time to reflect and refine the strategic goals for the school. Looking at some of the fluctuations that international programs would have on long-term budget planning caused us to revisit our plans for enrollment growth. By revisiting the strategic plan, and reviewing the core purpose, vision, and core values of our organization, we were able to tweak some goals for the next two school years.

A strategic plan sets a road map, but in order for it to be effective it needs monitoring. As Pue notes, marking progress by setting specific short-term goals ensures that specific landmarks are

achieved within a timeframe, much like a GPS gives you updates about reaching your destination. Without setting these landmarks and comparing to where you are headed, you can drift off course. Setting these landmarks also ensures you pay attention to your surroundings. As reliable as GPS is, we all have experienced a time when it wants to send you down a road that may not exist or to turn where there is no place to turn. Paying attention allows you to adjust your course as needed; maybe you will see something you missed. A strategic plan is not something that happens on autopilot even with the directions given. Alan Pue gives clarity as to this process for following through with an action plan in his book *Rethinking strategic planning for Christian schools* which I would highly recommend to heads of schools to reference as they engage in updating their strategic plans.

While COVID-19 has generated a lot of urgency for immediate changes, now is the time to revisit your school's strategic plan. By clarifying your plan and vision you will continue to set the course for your school, stay the course when things get tough, be financially sustainable, serve the church as full partners in fulfilling the Great Commission, and show God's glory to a watching world. Ed Noot (2020) notes that "as leaders your task is to position your school for long-term mission sustainability; living through times of ambiguity and uncertainty are part of that journey ... Remain mission focused. Your Christian school has a distinct mission that has been supported for many years and now you need to embody that mission in a new reality." These are wise words that school leaders should heed. Revisiting your strategic plan on an ongoing basis will allow your school to navigate and plan through a pandemic, cultural unrest, or any other situation that may come our way.

## References

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