

Van Lunen Fellowship Applied School Project

Preparing for the Creation of a Five-Year Strategic Plan Through A School Wide Survey

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For my Van Lunen Project, the focus is on the long-term direction and success of our school program. The best way to accomplish this is through a five-year strategic plan, however, Our Redeemer Lutheran School of Dallas needed some preparation before we moved forward with creating that plan. My project was to launch the strategic planning process for Our Redeemer. The project had four parts. Each of the four parts will be explored below by using the questions: What did I do? What did I learn? What difference is it making in my school?

Part 1: Understanding the Leadership Structure

What did I do?

Part one was to gather datapoints on the leadership structure of Our Redeemer Lutheran Church & School. Our Redeemer is a member of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, so there are levels of leadership, above the school, within the church. Learning more about the structure of the school was accomplished by asking questions of church leadership and by carefully reading the twenty-two-page constitution of the congregation.

What did I learn?

Our Redeemer has a complex leadership structure. We have a Head of School working in conjunction with the School Board. All authority of that board is delegated to them by the Church Council. That same council also selects the chairman for the School Board. Above the Church Council, and with ultimate authority, is the Congregational Voters' Assembly. In addition, we have the Elders, who oversee spiritual matters. We also have boards like Trustees, who over see physical property. These roles, along with other boards, come together to make governance over all matters of the church and school.

What difference is it making in my school?

Understanding the complex structure of governance at Our Redeemer will be helpful in moving the school forward in ministry. For example, I am now aware of the steps needed to have our strategic vision approved by church leadership.

Part 2: Creating the Survey

What did I do?

Part two was to create a school survey. We accomplished this by partnering with Grace Works. We were able to customize a prebuilt survey to fit our needs for both Early Childhood and Elementary data.

What did you learn?

From the survey creation process, I learned that there are some neat “if then” statements working within Grace Works’ system, allowing participants to receive different questions depending on the previous answer. I also learned to have the survey company email a test run before they push out the survey. This is because of an error in one of their survey modifications.

What difference did it make?

The data was valuable to us and we are committed to repeating a similar survey with our stakeholders this coming year. It is a joy to improve our program based on stakeholder input.

Part 3: Gathering Input From Stakeholders

What did you do?

Part three involves asking for input from all our stakeholders by inviting school families, faculty and staff, school board members, congregational members, and alumni to complete a survey. This data was then collected and reviewed to assist in the creation of a five-year strategic plan. We created awareness of the survey by promoting it to our students during weekly school assemblies and by publishing it in our weekly school newsletters. Then we ensured strong participation by adding gift card incentives for adults and a “Star Party” for students. This included a special dress day, meal, and movie with popcorn. We enjoyed 96% of our elementary households completing the survey, which gave us an excellent picture of our parent perspectives.

What did you learn?

After the survey participation window was complete, the school board, our assistant principal, and I went through the data with the help of Grace Works. Under normal circumstances, the company recommends that any survey item with a “quality gap” score of .50 or greater should get acknowledged as an area that needs focus. Our program had very few parts of the survey fall into this category. This was great to boost our ego, but not as helpful when you are trying to find areas to improve. So, our school created a higher standard and used a “quality gap” score of .38 or greater to help us find areas to improve. The data results were very similar for both the Early Childhood Center and the elementary school. The following four areas could be generalized from the results.

- High Academics (Early Childhood & Elementary)
- Character and Leadership Skills (Early Childhood & Elementary)
- Facility/Safe Learning Environment (Early Childhood & Elementary)
- Foreign Language (Early Childhood only)

The items on this list were ranked high in importance and ranked slightly lower for perception of school execution. This means one of two things, either an area needs to be improved or an area is not weak, but the school has done a poor job of communicating what we do to the parents. Either way, there are actions that can remedy/improve all four areas.

Regarding “High Academics” ...

This finding is a joy to our teachers. As a teacher, you are always concerned about overwhelming your students and walk a fine line between covering as much data as possible versus

overwhelming/frustrating your student and families. This score is essentially parent permission to cover more, expect more, and push these students to learn at a more challenging rate while in our classrooms.

Regarding “Character and Leadership Skills” ...

This was a real shocker for our staff. Two years ago, we created and initiated a school wide program called the “Wildcat Wills”. This program specifically focuses on Character and Leadership development. We focus on a topic at the end of each weekly chapel service, and again at our “Fun Friday” meetings. We focus on topics like Kindness, Integrity, Eye Contact, Grit, and more. So, through this data point, we learned that we should be doing more communication with our families about the topics their children are covering at school. This data point is certainly telling us that we need to let our parents know the topics as we learn them as well as give them an overview of the entire program as they begin each school year.

Regarding “Facility/Safe Learning Environment” ...

This makes total sense. Although we have been planning upgrades to our facilities in the last year or so, our parents have concerns and are ready for us to move forward. Our buildings are not connected, so teachers and students must sometimes go outside our secured facilities to enter another building. Although we have some fencing, our campus is not completely secured with fencing to separate students from the public.

Regarding “Foreign Language in our Preschool” ...

This one surprised our team as well. We offer weekly Spanish with an instructor for age one through four-year-old students in our Early Childhood Center. Additionally, we offer introduction to Mandarin for our four and five- year-old students. Knowing that our program has built a very robust foreign language program for an Early Childhood Center, we can see that our parents are not aware of the program. Efforts must be made to make families aware of the program during orientation and keeping them in the loop by including the information in our lesson plans.

What difference did it make?

Because we have the survey data, we have started working to correct these areas for the coming year. Moreover, we have clear data from our stakeholders that will guide the creation of the five-year plan. Some of the thoughts shared above will make it into that plan. Additionally, the board and teachers will be looking for new insight that can be gleaned from this data as we seek continuous improvement for our program with the help of a five-year strategic plan.

Part 4: Assessing Current State

What did I do?

Part four was to “look at the current state of our school.” This includes spiritual, financial, curriculum/academic, meeting needs of our population, and school mission statement. This process, coupled with our survey data, will help guide our improvement and will be completed before we produce the strategic plan. Unfortunately, at this point in or process, we were forced to pause. Covid 19 caused us not to be able to return from spring break. The decision was made on Tuesday of our spring break that we should move to distance learning. By that weekend, I became ill and was later diagnosed

with Covid 19. We also had others in our school community that were affected by the virus. We opened our campus up to essential worker care in May. We began a summer care program in June. We will resume our strategic plan efforts this fall.

What did you learn?

We learned that the best laid plans sometimes don't work. We learned that sometimes the board and teachers must change course quickly to better serve our families. We learned that getting Covid 19 is not fun.

What difference did it make?

We now have additional procedures and plans in place for the return to campus. We intend to write additional policies in mid-July. We also ran a one-year-old through sixth grade campus with distance learning from March through May. This has added new learning opportunities and tools for our teachers. These tools can be used again if required.

Having completed $\frac{3}{4}$ of my original project plan, I look forward to having a fully operational campus in a post covid era. I also look forward to a time when our school board and teachers can return to reflection, discussion, and creation of a five-year strategic vision, in person, instead of by Zoom. I want to thank the wonderful team at Van Lunen for this opportunity and for their support.