

Strategic Plan for Carbondale New School

Ratified by the Board of Directors

January 26, 2010

Introduction

Preface

This report details the process and findings of a strategic planning process conducted during the 2008/2009 academic year. The process was initiated to address the acute issues of low enrollment in the 2007/2008 academic year and a stalled capital campaign, as well as to draw focus on the long-term strategic goals of the school.

Background

The Carbondale New School (CNS) is organized as a not-for-profit parent owned corporation that was established in 1974. According to the By-Laws, the foundation of CNS is based on providing regular instruction to an enrolled body of students with an emphasis upon innovative and effective teaching methods. The school maintains a flexible approach to education that is not often available in mainstream public schools. A unique and effective characteristic of the school is that parental input and assistance is a core aspect of the daily operation of the school. In fact, volunteer work from parents and staff is so important to the operation of the school it should be viewed as “human endowment”. The school serves the pre-kindergarten through 8th grade with a capacity of 87 students. Recent enrollments have been in the range of 50-60 students.

The CNS operates on a budget that is dominated by tuition based income. The 2009 fiscal operating budget is \$285,041, with 72% originating from tuition and fees. Other sources of income are the before/after school programs that typically support ~4% of the budget. Regular fundraisers and charitable donations typically generate ~3% of the budget. The summer program also generates ~4% of the budget. Total expenditures per pupil are currently ~\$5K. This is significantly less than that of regional public elementary school that range from \$11-17K. Members of the teaching staff are a significant asset of the school. Some of the teachers have been with the school for many years, but there is a significant turnover rate. Salaries are and have historically been significantly lower than equivalent positions in the public school system. The school has and continues to be a “labor of love” where great things are accomplished on a small budget.

Current Situation

Significant strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities have been identified during the planning process based on the current operation and mission of the school. While the school is arguably succeeding at the essence of its core mission, it is doing so in a less than inspiring environment

with an inadequately compensated staff and an inequitable sharing of responsibilities by members of the Corporation. Hence, the Carbondale New School faces challenges in its mission to provide high quality education. Despite these inadequacies, magic happens in the classrooms and on the school grounds. Children are filled with an excitement of learning, instilled with a culture of kindness and responsibility, and the parents, staff and students come together to ensure and effective learning community. Based on the challenges and opportunities that currently face the school, it is a critical time for the CNS to set strategic and operational goals that adequately support the mission of the school.

Methodology

In April 2008, the Carbondale New School (CNS) Board of Directors initiated a strategic planning process. During the preplanning phase, the Board chose to use a strategic planning model that utilizes a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis. The Board hired an outside facilitator who conducted the SWOT analysis in September 2008. The results of the SWOT analysis were made available at that time and are included in this report (Appendix I). A steering committee was formed in September and charged with forming the Strategic Planning Committee and developing a timeline for the planning process. The timeline that was developed is shown below.

April 2008	CNS Board of Directors initiates a strategic planning effort
September 2008	SWOT Analysis conducted
September 2008	Steering committee formed by Board to set a preliminary timeline and outline of the process
November 2008	Preliminary timeline and outline of process presented to corporation; invitation to participate in the Strategic Planning Committee
December 2008	Formation of Strategic Planning Committee
February 2009	Strategic Planning Committee to report on progress of plan
May 2009	Completed draft of Strategic Planning document presented to corporation; Launch of the Strategic Plan

During the spring of 2009, the Strategic Planning Committee developed the Strategic Planning document based on the results of the SWOT analysis and internal discussions. While a large number of critical issues and potential goals were identified in this process, the committee

chose to focus on a smaller number of Strategic Goals and Objectives that were deemed most important and critical to achieving future goals. A comprehensive list of critical issues and goals is contained in Appendix II.

Executive Summary

Overview

This Strategic Plan represents a year-long effort aimed at identifying effective ways to (1) improve the current operation of the School and (2) expand the scope of the facilities in order for the School to meet its long-term potential. The CNS Board of Directors chose to use a strategic planning process that began with a SWOT analysis that was used to identify and organize Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats to the organization. The SWOT sessions were carried out by the external facilitator in the form of focus groups. One session was held for Faculty and Staff and the second was held for Parents.

Key Findings

The results of the SWOT analysis were very informative and stood as the basis from which critical issues were identified by the committee. A few notable findings are as follows. Both the Staff and Parent cohorts identified communication as a potential problem. In addition, both groups perceive a need to modify some aspects of the organizational structure. An area that was perceived as a threat and opportunity was the outside perception/image of the School and the need to effectively promote the school. Both groups also identified the current learning environment and the focus on individualized instruction as strengths. Inadequacies in the facilities and the lack of adequate extracurricular activities were identified as threats. Based on these findings a list of critical issues were identified by the committee and organized into categories based on the building facilities, organizational structure and safety.

Additionally, the committee perceived a need for a general and significant focus on increasing the resources available to the school. While there are issues that don't directly derive from funding issues, a scarcity of resources seemed a common theme within the list of critical issues. There was agreement amongst the committee that the CNS budget does not adequately buffer it from unforeseen expenses or fluctuations in enrollment that threaten the long-term stability of the School.

Strategic Plan Highlights

New Mission Statement

The Carbondale New School provides quality, student-centered education that inspires confidence and a lifelong love for learning. We respond to each student's unique abilities and learning style within an inclusive and supportive community that values the intelligence, worth

and creativity of all children. We empower children with knowledge, skills, compassion and a sense of responsibility for self and others.

New Vision Statement

As a parent owned and operated not-for-profit corporation, we are committed to providing a diverse and dynamic learning environment as a leader in educational innovation. We will provide the autonomy and support to inspire excellence in the students, staff and parents of our school.

Strategic Goals

Strategic Goal 1: Create an improved physical environment that supports the mission and goals of the School, including new buildings and facilities.

Strategic Goal 2: Ensure an effective organizational structure that clearly defines the expectations and responsibilities of all members of the corporation.

Strategic Goal 3: Ensure adequate policies and procedures are in place to provide a safe learning environment.

Conclusions and Recommendations

While there are a number of challenges that face CNS in addressing the critical issues that have been identified in the strategic planning process, a common thread running through most issues is that of resources. Money cannot solve all problems but it is arguably the limiting factor in many issues that face the school. We perceive the need to increase the level of routine fund raising and to implement a significant capital campaign at the level that would enable the school to obtain new and/or improved facilities, increase staff pay to competitive levels and provide a financial buffer to fluctuations in enrollment. The acquisition of more suitable building facilities affects all three strategic goals that have been outlined and it does so in a clearly identifiable manner that will improve the image of the school. The level of funds necessary for such an effort shadows any previous CNS efforts of which we are aware. For this reason, we strongly urge the Board to consider hiring a commission based development officer that can fully focus efforts on raising the funds necessary to meet the strategic goals that have been outlined.

Other recommendations of the committee are more procedural. It seems clear that normal communication channels involving parents, staff, the director and the Board are not functioning as well as they should. In many cases it seems that existing procedures are not well understood by members of the corporation. Additionally, with some exceptions the overall committee structure has not worked effectively for some time. While this strategic plan does recommend an evaluation of some procedures and protocol, the strategic planning committee recommends

that the board produce a handbook that clearly details the responsibilities and expectations of all members of the corporation and standing committees.

Strategic Plan

Mission Statement

The Carbondale New School provides quality, student-centered education that inspires confidence and a lifelong love for learning. We respond to each student's unique abilities and learning style within an inclusive and supportive community that values the intelligence, worth and creativity of all children. We empower children with knowledge, skills, compassion and a sense of responsibility for self and others.

Vision Statement

As a parent owned and operated not-for-profit corporation, we are committed to providing a diverse and dynamic learning environment as a leader in educational innovation. We will provide the autonomy and support to inspire excellence in the students, staff and parents of our school.

Strategic Goal 1: Create an improved physical environment that supports the missions and goals of the School, including new buildings and facilities.

Component #1: To educate in classrooms that facilitate learning by providing adequate space for displaying, organizing and storing key educational materials, division of students into multiple small groups to engage in separate learning activities, presentation or demonstration of curriculum through various media methods, hosting parent-child events, and storage of student and teacher personal items.

Rationale: An organized environment with abundant storage allows the faculty to efficiently make use of educational materials and interchange items as topics are changed or diversified. Individual classrooms that are used for students over a range of grade levels must be capable of providing space for the entire group to engage in an activity at the same time (such as art or science) as well as adequate space to divide the students into small groups for more individualized instruction based on the student's ability level in a given subject. Faculty need to be able to engage multiple styles of learning through the use of various demonstration and media methods. Classrooms should be able to accommodate parent-student events to further the involvement of parents in the school and educational activities. Faculty and students need to be able to efficiently store and locate basic school supplies, clothing, and other personal

items so that valuable educational time is not wasted locating basic items. Students and faculty need convenient access to water fountains and restrooms. Restrooms that are adequate in size and designed to accommodate the needs of students will increase instruction time by minimizing the time spent during transition periods. Transition time is reduced when frequently used rooms (such as the lunchroom) are physically close to the main classroom.

Implementation:

1. Form a committee to evaluate the current classroom facilities with regards to the aforementioned issues through personal inspection as well as faculty and parent interviews.
2. Based on the committee's evaluation, identify areas of concern and propose methods to correct any deficiencies.

Component #2: To have buildings which promote new student recruitment and current student and faculty retention and provide for the safety of students and staff.

Rationale: For some parents, decisions about school selection are influenced by the visual presentation of a school's buildings and their perception of the adequacy of the facilities with respect to other schools in the area. Similarly, student retention is influenced by the capability of the facility to offer extracurricular programs. High quality facilities will aid in the recruitment and retention of quality faculty. Safety is an important issue for parents and faculty and buildings/playground areas should provide for the safety of children during normal school activities and during emergencies.

Implementation:

1. The committee will evaluate current and future building needs of the school. The committee should be authorized by the Board to determine the current and future needs of the school. A cost-benefit analysis should be developed in consultation with an architect. The analysis should consider various plans and alternatives to improve the facilities of the school and allow the Board to gauge the scope of the capital campaign that will be required to implement the plan.

Component #3: To have adequate facilities for before and after school activities, opportunities for student meals, school-wide gatherings, extra-curricular activities, and public events.

Rationale: It is more efficient for staff to assist and monitor students during before- and after-school care and lunch time when the majority of students are centralized in one location with

adequate space to allow student and staff movement throughout the room as well as necessary equipment for lunch and/or after-school activities. The presence of a library room would be especially beneficial to upper level students seeking a quiet place to complete homework, do research, or study. The ability to offer extra curricular activities on school property and comfortably host school wide events may enhance student enrollment and retention. Hosting public events or activities at the school would create a greater bond with the general public and facilitate interest in the school.

Implementation:

1. The building committee will consider these extracurricular aspects of the facilities and take the requirements into consideration when implementing the building plan.

Component #4: To practice good environmental stewardship in the operation of all facilities as a “green school”.

Rationale: In addition to the long-term financial benefits associated with operating all facilities in an energy efficient manner, demonstrating good environmental stewardship practices serves as an educational model for students and the community. In addition, operation as a “green” school will have a positive impact on public perception of the school and places the school at the forefront in addressing environmental and energy issues such that it may capitalize on forthcoming grant opportunities as the nation moves toward energy self-sufficiency.

Implementation:

1. A subcommittee shall be created that will specifically research and advise the building committee and the Board how to best plan for and meet accepted green building standards, such as those of the U.S. Green Building Council.

Strategic Goal 2: Ensure an effective organizational structure that clearly defines the expectations and responsibilities of all members of the corporation.

Component #1: To define the rights and responsibilities of parents as part of a parent owned and operated corporation.

Rationale: To become and maintain a thriving and vibrant parent-owned corporation parents should be well informed of the benefits they enjoy as well as the expectations they must meet

as members of the corporation. Information, ideas and contributions must flow seamlessly and effectively amongst all members of the corporation in a way that maximizes the effectiveness of the organization and builds a strong sense of community.

Implementation:

1. Assign a committee to develop a handbook that details the expectation and rights of various members of the corporation. A particular emphasis should be placed on defining the proper methods and protocol for various activities carried out in the operation of the school.
2. The By-laws should be evaluated and updated as necessary to clearly define the rights and responsibilities of corporation members and to ensure that policies and requirements are properly implemented and a mechanism of action when performance of a member do not reach a minimum level of responsibility.
3. Develop and implement conflict resolution guidelines and procedures that encompass all members of the Corporation. The procedures should be highly compatible with those in the school rules that apply to students.

Component #2: To develop an effective method(s) for the communication of information between various groups within the corporation.

Rationale: Policies can only be as effective if all members are aware of the policy and the mechanisms to utilize the policies. In this day and age of increasingly instant electronic communication, the CNS stands at a crossroads with regard to moving forward with effective means of communication. This refers to communications within the bounds of the corporation, but also communication and public relations with those outside of the school community.

Implementation:

1. The office should be updated and modernized with respect to electronic forms of communication.
2. A committee should be formed that evaluates and makes recommendations to improve the effectiveness of the web site, both from the perspective of usability for corporation members and effective recruiting/public relations outside the school.
3. A mechanism should be implemented to allow for both electronic and paper distributions of communications from the office.
4. A more effective method should be implemented to make minutes from corporation and board meetings and Bylaws available to members of the corporation in a form convenient to the members.

Component #3: To modify the committee structure to ensure that necessary committees perform effectively and eliminated unnecessary committees.

Rationale: As a parent owned corporation, a majority of operations at the school fall to work are performed by volunteer committees. A few of these committees have been and are currently functioning well, but most are not effective in their current configuration. In a school of our type with a limited budget it is of utmost importance to maximize the effectiveness of volunteer hours by ensuring effective and well-defined committee structures.

Implementation:

1. A committee should be formed to determine the number and type of committees that are necessary for to support the school. This committee should provide a clear description of the responsibilities of that committee, as well as the basis for standard operating procedures for the tasks charged to each committee. A standing committee for on-going strategic planning must be created to monitor and implement planning.
2. Modify the mechanism for filling positions on committees to ensure that committees are formed and regularly meeting within the first month of the school year. The committee will report in writing to the Board the current goals and accomplishments of the committee prior to each Corporation meeting.
3. Parents should be clearly informed of the expectations and an effort must be made to utilize the skills and interests of parents.
4. Each committee should report on activities at monthly board meetings.

Component #4: To create a diverse and dynamic learning environment as a leader in educational innovation.

Rationale: In order for the School to emerge as a leader in educational innovation, the scholarship of the faculty, leadership of the director and the educational practices need to be outstanding.

Implementation:

1. Evaluate and modify as necessary the job descriptions of all staff positions, including rebate staff and volunteer positions to clarify the duties and emphasis of each position. The balance of responsibilities between the Director and the Development Officer (new position) should be given careful consideration. An example job description for the position of Director is included in Appendix III.

2. Evaluate and modify as necessary the evaluation procedures for all staff positions. The evaluations could include interviews with parents. The evaluations should be carried out in a timely manner such that the results can be taken into account when making hiring decisions.
3. The compensation of staff must be increased to competitive levels to effectively recruit and retain excellent staff. Opportunities for staff development (workshops, conferences, etc.) should be encouraged on a regular basis.

Component #5: Improve the effectiveness of communication between parents and the Board.

Rationale: The Board serves the members of the corporation and is comprised of volunteers that devote countless time toward maintaining and bettering the school. There can be a disconnect between the actions and meetings of the Board and the perceptions and interactions with parents and other members of the corporation. In order to improve this relationship it is important to incorporate effective mechanisms for members and parents to communicate ideas and concerns with the board. While the board meetings are always open to and receptive to corporation members, it is important to make sure both the reality and perception of this openness is maintained.

Implementation:

1. Ensure the Handbook described in Component #1 (Strategic Goal #2) clearly describes the relationship between members of the corporation and the Board.
2. Ensure that the agenda and minutes for meetings of the Board are effectively communicated to the corporation in a timely manner.
3. Evaluate the effectiveness of the structure of Corporation meetings.

Strategic Goal 3: Ensure adequate policies and procedures are in place to provide a safe learning environment.

Rationale: We must strive to maintain a learning and recreational environment that is safe, healthy and secure.

Implementation:

1. Develop a clear organizational framework of accountability in the area of safety. The responsibilities of the board, director, staff, parent and student responsibilities need to

be clearly defined. If a parent has a concern or an incident occurs it must be clear who should address and resolve the issue, including how it is reported and recorded. This protocol should be clearly stated in the parent/student handbook.

2. Develop procedures that ensure all staff (morning, lunch, classroom rebate staff, aids, after-school staff) receive adequate training before they are charged with the care of students. The training should include but not be restricted to school safety rules, dietary restrictions, equipment use, etc. They should also be regularly updated on issues that arise throughout the year.
3. Formation of a standing committee that focuses on issues relating to safety is recommended to evaluate hazards or safety issues and make recommendations for remediation to the Director or Board.
4. The safety committee and Board should evaluate and implement the most effective system for supervision of the playground, such as a zone system. In such a system, staff members would be required to actively monitor the safety of all children and equipment within their zone and report periodically on incidents, equipment condition, etc. A Safety Coordinator position may be created to oversee this system and facilitate the flow of information between parents, staff, the Board and Director.