



Executive Summary

Grace Community School

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Introduction

Every school has its own story to tell. The context in which teaching and learning takes place influences the processes and procedures by which the school makes decisions around curriculum, instruction, and assessment. The context also impacts the way a school stays faithful to its vision. Many factors contribute to the overall narrative such as an identification of stakeholders, a description of stakeholder engagement, the trends and issues affecting the school, and the kinds of programs and services that a school implements to support student learning.

 The purpose of the Executive Summary (ES) is to provide a school with an opportunity to describe in narrative form the strengths and challenges it encounters. By doing so, the public and members of the school community will have a more complete picture of how the school perceives itself and the process of self-reflection for continuous improvement. This summary is structured for the school to reflect on how it provides teaching and learning on a day to day basis.

Description of the School

Describe the school's size, community/communities, location, and changes it has experienced in the last three years. Include demographic information about the students, staff, and community at large. What unique features and challenges are associated with the community/communities the school serves?

Grace Community School ("Grace") is located in Tyler, Texas. It is the largest private school in East Texas, serving approximately 1,000 students on two campuses. The elementary school is located on an 11-acre campus on Old Jacksonville Road, and includes grades kindergarten through 5th. The middle school and high school are on 55 acres, located on University Boulevard. The middle and high school include grades 6th through 12th.

Grace is a ministry of Grace Community Church. The school shares facilities with the church. Approximately one-quarter of school families are Grace church members, with the remaining 75 percent representing dozens of churches throughout the greater Tyler area. The majority of Grace students come from Tyler, but many commute from Whitehouse, Lindale, and surrounding communities. Approximately 90 percent of the student body is Caucasian, with the other 10 percent a combination of African-American, Hispanic, and Asian origin.

The school currently has 72 part-time and full-time faculty, up from around 68 over the past several years. The school enjoys a high annual retention rate among faculty, historically above 90 percent. The faculty is a healthy combination of veteran teachers, some who have been with the school for over 25 years, and relatively new teachers. The school celebrates its 40th anniversary during the 2013-2014 school year.

There are many charter and private school options within the Tyler area, as well as the local public schools. There are four private schools within the Tyler community with 500 or more students, a large number for a city of 100,000. There are several smaller private schools, as well. There is also a strong homeschool ethos in the area. A recent bond election means heavy upcoming capital investment in Tyler public schools. Tyler has a large energy and medical community, and a fairly well-educated local workforce. The community has historically placed a relatively high value on education. The proliferation of schooling options in the Tyler area presents challenges for recruiting students.

Over the past five years, the economic recession has had an impact on private schools in Tyler. Although the energy and medical industries have buffered Tyler economically, relative to some other parts of the country, the economy has challenged enrollment at our school and others. Some families have had to leave the school for economic reasons, such as a job loss or transfer. Grace's enrollment has remained steady over the past five years, fluctuating from a high of 1018 two years ago, to a low of 975 four years ago. Grace has averaged a 93 percent retention rate over the last three years, and projects its enrollment this fall to be around 1,000. That being said, the school is awarding more financial aid to families in need than at any time in its recent history. Currently, 20 percent of Grace students receive some form of financial aid.

Despite all of these challenges, Grace continues to thrive in the local community, enjoying a strong reputation for excellent academics from a Christian perspective.

School's Purpose

Provide the school's purpose statement and ancillary content such as mission, vision, values, and/or beliefs. Describe how the school embodies its purpose through its program offerings and expectations for students.

Grace's mission is to assist Christian parents in educating, equipping and encouraging their children to influence the world for Christ. In short, Grace exists to glorify God by "teaching Jesus" in everything it does--not only through its curriculum and pedagogy, but through its policies, procedures, prayers and relationships among parents, faculty, administrators, and students.

Grace accomplishes these purposes through maintaining those core values most sacred to the school: redemptive community, educational sanctification, and "life as worship".

The first of the Grace core values is redemptive community. We serve a God who exists in eternal relationship. The Triune God has always existed in community-as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As image-bearers of God, we are also made for community. We thrive in it; we can only function to the truest extent of who we are when we live together, work together, and do life together. Education is an inherently relational process. It is a form of discipleship, and like all discipleship, the closer and more trusting the relationship, the more effective the educational process. At Grace, we believe that teachers must love and care for their students. When students sense that caring and concern, they respond to it and genuine learning can take place. Teachers work best in an environment where there are strong relationships among the adults in the building.

Redemptive community, community that is God-glorifying and Spirit-breathed, is the catalyst, the medium through which great Christian education happens, through which great living happens. But, it does not JUST happen. It must be fought for, prayed over, contended for, struggled with, celebrated in, reconciled with, unified together, forgiven for, repented over--it is a LOT of hard work; however, it is good, life-giving work.

The school lives out redemptive community by committing to care for and love one another. This means listening to each other, and making decisions that are team-focused and oriented. It means keeping short accounts with each other, and working to promote healthy conflict resolution when issues arise. Teachers believe that part of their role is to mentor and disciple their students. Teacher-led Base Groups at the high school and Caritas Groups at the middle school are small groups, whereby teachers and students can be connected, where students can build relationships with teachers that equip students and enhance learning. Parents pray for each other and care for each other when one has a need. Parents support teachers, and good communication and effective conflict resolution is the norm.

Educational sanctification is the second core value of Grace. "Sanctification" captures the idea of holiness, to be set apart, completely other from the world. It also connotes the idea of a Holy Spirit-led, continuous process of moving forward, of becoming more in the image of Christ: better, purer, more holy, than we once were. Educational sanctification is the idea that God's Word- the written, revealed Word and the Word made flesh through Jesus Christ- is the foundation of everything that we do as a school. Our policies, our procedures, our practices, our curriculum, our ways of dealing with each other, and everything must proceed from the gospel. Teachers and administrators must see all of life and learning through the eyes of our Father, and must guide our students in the transformation, the renewal of their minds. The goal is for students to understand God's Word and His perspective on all of life and all of creation. We believe that only through this transformation are we able to fully glorify God and enjoy Him forever to the greatest extent He created us to do so.

Educational sanctification is also the idea that we will be continually seeking to be better than we once were, by the power and wisdom of the

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Holy Spirit. We will ask ourselves the hard questions, challenge the status quo, and be lifetime learners. We will model a passion for learning to our students by reflecting it in our own lives. We will not assume that something is better simply because it is new, but neither will we so assume simply because that's the way we've always done it. If we make mistakes or if we've been slow to change, we'll seek forgiveness and move forward, never being afraid to engage in this continuous process of becoming better than we once were.

Educational sanctification means offering an outstanding academic course of study. While the course is challenging, the school works to provide the support necessary so that students can be successful to the greatest extent that God has wired their minds. "Curriculum" is defined as everything the school does, and school teachers and coaches work just as hard to provide an outstanding array of athletics, fine arts, and other activities that develop all of the aspects of learners made in the image of Christ. All of the school's curriculum is biblically integrated, and God's Word and His Truth is the foundation of everything the school does.

The final core value of Grace is "life as worship", capturing the idea set forth by Paul in Romans 12:1, when he encourages Christians to "present your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God; because this is your spiritual act of worship." As followers of Christ, we are called to be God-worshippers, to be restored to that rightful state of being in pure, good and holy relationship with God. As a school, we will continuously and constantly submit everything that we do- whether it be a student's performance on the field, a teacher's lesson in the classroom, or a difficult conversation between principal and parent- to our God as an act of worship. As a school, we will declare the worthiness of God to be praised, and acknowledge His place as the Lord of our lives and the center of the universe. This school, our studies, our performances, our gifts, talents, and resources, are our sacrifices that we will lay daily before Him, for His use and His purposes. Our entire lives and this entire school are entirely at His disposal.

Human beings are created to worship, and if we are not worshiping God, we will worship something else. Anything, whether it be high grades, strong athletic or fine arts performances, good looks, a great sense of humor, can become an idol if we or our students look to these things as our source of identity. Accordingly, every conversation, presentation, chapel service, teachers' conference, parent seminar, newsletter or update is an opportunity to focus our hearts and minds, our identity, on our relationship with Christ. The school works hard to reinforce this truth by communicating it, and through its faculty and administrators modeling it for our families and students.

Notable Achievements and Areas of Improvement

Describe the school's notable achievements and areas of improvement in the last three years. Additionally, describe areas for improvement that the school is striving to achieve in the next three years.

The school has seen exciting changes in the past three years. In the 2009-2010 school year, the school saw the opening of facilities that were all part of a \$7 million capital campaign, including a science and computer wing in the high school, building renovations in the junior high school, a field house and weight room in the high school, an additional classroom wing at the elementary campus, a football/soccer/track stadium, and a junior high school gym. In the 2010-2011 school year, both the high school and elementary school enjoyed the addition of environmental science gardens. The school also purchased a building adjoining its Upper Campus property, and converted that building to house its administrative offices, an art room, and a science lab. The 2011-2012 school year saw the addition of a dedicated girls' softball field, and the school renovated its baseball field during the 2012-2013 school year.

During the 2011-2012 school year, the school earned recognition among excellent Christian schools throughout the country by meeting the standards for certification by the Council on Educational Standards and Accountability ("CESA"). As a part of that audit process, the school identified several areas for improvement, and began putting plans in place to accomplish effective changes. Specifically, the school began a biennial auditing process by a certified public accounting firm, rather than merely a financial review of agreed upon procedures. The school began a plan to build up cash reserves in the equivalent of ten percent of its annual operating budget. The school is currently halfway there, at just over five percent.

Also as an outcome of the CESA audit, Grace began to develop a "value-added" model of achievement to analyze assessment data. This system will allow student achievement to be evaluated through meaningful improvement over time, as well as annual benchmarking in mission-critical subject and skill areas and annual reporting demonstrating progress or regress in those areas. It also allows for more effective curricular adjustment and modification by grade level based upon disaggregated achievement test data. Thus, the school is becoming much more effective in tracking student progress, and in modifying its practice to improve such progress.

The school has also developed an in-house professional development program to support every member of the faculty, whereby the leadership team, with feedback from the faculty, creates a professional development calendar for the following year. The professional development opportunities, most of which occur on Friday afternoons during the school year after an early student release, are designed toward addressing areas of perceived need according to best practices of curriculum design, instruction, and assessment. Professional development is also geared towards spiritual formation and discipleship.

The past three years have also seen the development of strategies to better facilitate meeting the needs of students with learning differences and who need greater levels of academic support within our school. While the school has had aides and a language processing specialist at the elementary school for several years, the Upper Campus had no such in-house resources. Last year, Grace opened the Academic Services Center. The center assists students at the Upper Campus by providing additional tutoring and support, as well as referrals for additional assessment and outside support, when necessary. The school is better equipped to meet the needs of all of its students than before.

Over the next three years, in addition to hopefully achieving reaccreditation, the school has several other plans. On the spiritual formation front, the school hopes to provide greater focus in working with families to provide more opportunities for parent education, including a parent-focused weekly blog by the headmaster, quarterly parent education gatherings, and the use of video, technology, and a revitalized

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website to bring an online parent education presence to the school. The school hopes to increase its professional development budget to help teachers work to obtain their masters degrees from colleges and universities that teach a biblical philosophy of education, as well as developing compensation structures that encourage such growth. Furthermore, the school hopes to be even more intentional about using its small group focus to build spiritual intimacy and discipleship among its students within the school.

From an academic perspective, Grace intends to seek Blue Ribbon status from the U.S. Department of Education. The school plans to put into place better mechanisms for identifying and working with students on building those competencies that lead to higher college entrance exams, with an eye toward increasing the selection index number over the course of the high school years for identified students, resulting in a planned increase in National Merit Scholars. The school also seeks to continue to improve its college preparatory initiatives, with an eye toward ACT average scores that exceed the college readiness benchmark scores for English and math and science. Grace realizes that these plans, standing in a vacuum, do not guarantee academic excellence; however, continuing to be recognized as a top-notch college preparatory school in Tyler will bring more families with whom we can work to weave the knowledge and love of Christ into their children.

The school has a strong heart to increase the diversity of its school community. With that in mind, the school has a goal of working intentionally with churches and pastors who shepherd predominantly families of color, in order to actively recruit families of all socioeconomic backgrounds. The school has a goal to mirror the socioeconomic, demographic background of the Body of Christ in the Tyler area within the school community within the next five years.

From a financial standpoint, the school aspires to engage in strategic practices that will position it for long-term sustainability. Specifically, the board intends to build the school's endowment from its current level of just under \$1 million, to be equal to or greater than annual operating budget (currently \$8.2 million). The board also desires to continue building cash reserves, with a goal of \$1.8 million. Finally, the board plans to continue to develop its school families to see giving to Grace as a regular responsibility, with a goal of increasing family participation by 10 percent over the next three years. The school has begun working with the Generous Giving organization to engage school families in thinking and praying about what it means to be a generous giver in their lives, not solely to increase giving to the school, but to help equip our families to be more joyful, contented worshipers of Jesus Christ.

Finally, the school hopes to complete another capital campaign within the next three years. The upcoming campaign would fund the replacement of the current junior high building to create a combined intermediate school (5th and 6th grade) and middle school (7th and 8th grade), add additional classroom, locker room, fine arts, and lab space at the high school, and add a Kinder Center for K4 and K5 students at the elementary, together with elementary school classroom renovations.

Additional Information

Provide any additional information you would like to share with the public and community that were not prompted in the previous sections.

Grace is currently in the process of several initiatives that might be of interest in the accreditation process. First, Grace is seeking to recapture its humanities focus in its high school and junior high. When the high school was originally developed, there was an integrated humanities focus. As time went by, changes in personnel and the push of culture caused the high school curriculum to drift into more of the specialized, segregated focus so common in high schools, colleges, and universities today. Through prayer, reading, and attending conferences having as their themes the western liberal arts tradition, Grace leadership became convicted of the need to reestablish the primacy of the liberal arts, particularly in the junior high and high school. Studying the great works and minds of western culture helps students learn to think and feel and write with an eye towards what it means to be fully human, created in the image of God. When informed by and integrated with Holy Scripture, the liberal arts teach students how to live as redeemed followers of Jesus Christ. Because colleges and universities have become so highly specialized in their curricular focus, if students are to obtain this liberal arts focus anywhere, it will be in secondary school.

Two years ago, the school began the process of integrating the English and history curriculum at the high school, joining the two under one department. That process has been ongoing over the past two years, helping students to see history and literature holistically and thematically, using time as a reference. This coming year, Grace will begin integrating Bible into the humanities. The school will also begin the process of integrating the humanities at the junior high that it started two years ago at the high school. This is an ongoing, multi-year process.

Secondly, the school is working through its security plan, particularly as it pertains to intruders in the building. In the wake of the Newtown tragedy and others, the school revisited its then-existing plans. Grace had Richard Coulson train our faculty and staff and assess our school security. Mr Coulson is a nationally-known security expert, a former FBI assistant director who created the organization's Hostage Rescue Unit and who is a regular Fox News contributor. Mr. Coulson trained our teachers on best practices in securing their classrooms in the event of an intruder or shooter, lockdown-type situation. Based upon Mr. Coulson's advice, each teacher developed their own lockdown plan for securing students in their classrooms. The plans were reviewed, commented upon, and approved by a security task force. Secondary locking devices were added to each classroom by our maintenance staff, and a group of administrators received special training in dealing with intruders. The school will begin intruder drills in the fall, similar to fire and tornado drills.

The integration of technology into educational practice is another initiative that has been underway at the school for a number of years now. The school has a full-time technology integration specialist, who helps teachers use technology to enhance learning in the classroom. Realizing that expenditures on technology can be a monumental waste of resources if not well conceived, the school has developed four guiding questions, a grid through which it considers new technologies: i) does the technology in question enhance, rather than detract from, student learning? ii) does the technology enhance, rather than detract from, the relationship and interaction between the teacher and student in the classroom? iii) does the technology enable the school to teach students how to use technology redemptively? iv) is the technology robust enough and affordable enough to make school-wide use practicable?

Grace is in the process of piloting a one-to-one initiative in the high school, using iPads. The units were first introduced to the freshman class last year, and will be expanded to the freshmen and sophomores this year. The school has answered the last three of the guiding questions in the affirmative as it pertains to this technology, but it is still evaluating how effectively the devices enhance learning. This is a crucial

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question that will need to be answered this year. The school is also using Chromebook carts in the junior high school, giving students in those grades a kind of limited, one-to-one experience. Furthermore, Grace has been extremely active over the past two years in helping equip parents to review and assess software, apps, social media platforms, and other technology to which their children are exposed. Grace holds periodic parent seminars on the latest apps and social media platforms, cyber-stalking, wise internet practices, and the like. Grace seeks to equip parents to be good, well-informed guardians of their children's use of technology, coaching them in its redemptive use in an age-appropriate manner.