

moving from Formative to Flourishing

By Steve Dill

The importance of ongoing school improvement processes has been thoroughly documented. When people visit a flourishing Christian school, they rarely see the past journey that led to the present success. During the years I served at what many would consider a flourishing school, I often reminded visitors that the school they see today did not appear overnight. Every experienced school leader knows that school improvement is a journey as well as a destination. Unfortunately, if a leader thinks the school has fully arrived, that leader has lost his or her way. No school fully “arrives”; school improvement goals and strategies will be a component of effective Christian school leadership until the Lord comes.

We also know a well-written curriculum scope and sequence does not, in itself, produce an excellent school. It is not difficult to find examples of flourishing Christian schools that eventually dissolved due to governance conflicts or poor executive leadership. More common are schools where poor financial management and/or a failure to adjust to changing financial realities caused school declines or closures. A failure to think long-term about adequate and permanent facilities has contributed to declining enrollment in some schools. Flourishing schools pay attention to all these variables, and more.

Exemplary Accreditation and Flourishing Schools

During the 2014/15 school year, ACSI piloted a new “blue ribbon” accreditation protocol with five schools. Fully approved by the ACSI Accreditation Commission in July, Exemplary Accreditation details higher standards for schools in six key areas. At the same time, ACSI staff developed an overall framework specifying a continuum for each of those standards. The resulting model, illustrated on the next two pages, provides a visual rubric of the key elements in moving a school from its formative early years to a thriving, sustainable maturity. The Exemplary Accreditation rubric was the tool used to define the categories and the elements of the “flourishing level” listed on the right-hand column of the model.

A Conceptual Framework

The *Formative-to-Flourishing School Continuum* (pp. 7–8) provides a tool for schools to self-assess in these six

key elements, and then consider ways in which the school could “move to the next level” in that category. Few schools will be in the same column in every area. For example, a school may have excellent student outcomes but struggle to have adequate financial resources. A school with this combination may be producing excellent results at this point in time, but run a great risk of closing in the near future. Other schools may have outstanding student outcomes and viability, in both finances and facilities, but a board that does not understand the importance of building a strategic board, doing board professional development, or completing board evaluation processes. Long-term viability is at risk without strong board governance in place.

Accreditation

There is a strong correlation between the components of the *Formative-to-Flourishing School Continuum* and accreditation processes. The red line separating the first two columns (Formative and Maturing) from the last two columns (Effective and Flourishing) represents accreditation: schools in the right-hand columns have achieved accreditation. Consider the spiritual formation component: while even a formative emerging school cares deeply about the spiritual growth of its students, ACSI accredited schools must meet certain requirements, which are outlined in the REACH accreditation manual (Standard 9 in REACH 1.2; Standard 7 in the newly revised REACH 2.0). However, schools seeking to achieve Exemplary Accreditation have a higher expectation to use an external assessment in analyzing the spiritual climate of their school, and then use those results to strengthen the school’s spiritual climate.

Formative-to-Flourishing Continuum 1.0

This initial version of the model has been labeled Version 1.0, and ACSI will continue to refine this framework. ACSI regional directors will be seeking input from school leaders at district meetings this fall. We anticipate that Version 2.0 will be improved with input from leaders on the frontlines of school leadership.

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Formative-to-Flourishing School Continuum: Moving to the Next Level, Version 1.0; June, 2015

This model provides a high-level summary for school improvement. Few schools are likely to fit every category within a level: this is a continuum from a formative level of school characteristics to a flourishing level. Schools may meet flourishing standards in some areas but operate at a formative stage in other areas. All schools should strive to reach Effective or higher. The red line down the middle of the chart separates Formative and Maturing schools from those who have achieved accreditation.

Domains	Elements	Formative Level	Maturing Level	Effective Level	Flourishing Level
Board Governance	Foundations	Undocumented mission, vision, values, or philosophy	Developing vision and mission, core values, and philosophy	Clear statements and full alignment of mission, vision, values, and philosophy	Clear statements, alignment, regular review and refinement
	Policies	Little or no written board policy; functioning on bylaws	Basic board policies in place	Clear and written board governance policy; consistent implementation	Board policies systematically reviewed and revised; policy guides key decisions
	Board Development	Board directly involved in management decisions; little review of board function, future planning, or board profiling	Board growing in its understanding of proper role; some future planning in place; general board profile in place	Clear board recruitment and nomination processes; some board PD, strategic plan and profile in place	Functioning strategic board that reflects board profile, ongoing board PD, annual board evaluation (of the board), and ongoing planning processes
	Roles and Head of School	No clear delineation of board and HOS roles	Clear definition of board and HOS roles; clear HOS job description	Stable, positive board–HOS relationship; clear HOS evaluation process	Ongoing Board–HOS communication and positive relationship; comprehensive and systematic HOS evaluation process
Executive Leadership	Framework	Limited expertise in the Christian School Leadership Framework (CSLF)*	Qualified/credentialed HOS; utilizing the CSLF to build the school and governance culture	HOS who demonstrates many “heart, relational, and strategic competencies” of the CSLF; keeps board informed	HOS who embodies the CSLF, contributes to the Christian school movement, supports board; regular strategic plan reporting to board and community
	Personnel	Limited capacity or support in recruitment and evaluation of school personnel	Some recruitment, support (coaching or mentoring), and inconsistent evaluation processes	Developing recruitment strategies, employee support, annual performance reviews	Intentional recruitment strategies, robust formative and summative performance reviews, linked to professional development
	Stability and Engagement	High turnover in HOS position	Reasonable stability of HOS; engaged with some stakeholders; effective board engagement	Stability in HOS position; strong engagement with all stakeholders; engagement with external communities	Consistent HOS leadership; inspires the community; high levels of respect by stakeholders; networks with and blesses other schools; vision for kingdom support
School Viability	Operating Systems	Lax financial controls; no external reviews; no attention to risk management; little to no tuition assistance	Feasible financial plans in place; some external financial review; limited risk management; tuition assistance available	Review/audit by external CPA; clear budgeting, reporting, attention to risk management; tuition assistance implemented and assessed; strategic financial plan	Hard-income driven; regular audits; meet ECFE standards; significant funding for tuition assistance; thorough risk-management process; rolling strategic financial planning process
	Advancement	No formal admissions or development processes or staffing; use of fundraising sales/events	Beginning donor cultivation; written admissions process	Some advancement staff in place; some successful fundraising efforts; mission-driven admissions policies	Mature development/admissions functions; successful annual fund, capital campaigns, endowment
	Financial Resources	Financial viability in question; cash flow and debt concerns; no formal budget process	Formal budgeting process; debt manageable;	Financially viable; balanced budget evident; growing cash reserve; debt reduction plan in place	Cash reserves >5% of budget; debt service < 5% of budget; long term financial viability evident
	Facilities	Inadequate, insufficient facilities; low-level functionality	Adequate facilities; developing educationally usable spaces	Well-developed and appealing physical plant; branding evident	Physical plant supports all programs; distinctive presence and branding

Note: *Executive Leadership: ACSL endorses the Christian School Leadership Framework (CSLF); a summary of essential leadership components for Christian school heads.)

Domains	Elements	Formative Level	Maturing Level	Effective Level	Flourishing Level
Student Learning	Curriculum	"Off the shelf" curriculum in use; no systematic review	Basic curriculum in place; some systematic documentation	Clear scope and sequence; fully documented curriculum; strong faculty involvement in processes	Curriculum fully mapped and fully integrated with biblical worldview; regularly and collaboratively reviewed
	Exceptional Students	Little differentiation; no ability to serve exceptional students	Some differentiation; limited ability to serve exceptional needs	Differentiation evident; programs and services available to meet needs of exceptional students	Differentiation pervasive; programs and services for exceptional students effective and assessed at all levels
	Expected Student Outcomes (ESOs)	No identified outcomes; little or no clarity or consensus on ESOs	Basic objectives/goals for ESOs documented; full ESOs not developed	Well-defined, communicated ESOs in all areas of student development; some assessments available (internal and external) for the ESOs	Well-communicated ESOs embedded into curriculum driving all programmatic decisions; analysis of ESO assessments drive school improvement
	Assessment of Learning	No external assessments of student learning	Some use of standardized assessments; minimal analysis, use of data, tracking of graduates	Annual tracking of internal and external assessments; basic data analysis and use of test results to improve instruction	Annual analysis of internal and external assessments; tracking of student success at the next level; school improvement built on student assessment information
	Biblical Worldview	Little intentional biblical integration (other than the textbooks)	Developing biblical integration; some training of faculty	Biblical integration evident in curriculum documents and in planned and unplanned activities	Biblical integration pervasive; strong evidence of a biblical worldview developed and assessed
	Cocurricular	No cocurricular options	Limited cocurricular options	Many cocurricular options	Abundant cocurricular options in broad areas
	Technology	Minimal or no technology	Limited technology available	Current technology used and integrated into instruction; regular staff training	Pervasive use and evaluation of technology; technology training for staff and students in all areas of instruction
Spiritual Formation	Climate	More incidental than intentional; control; conformity	Some goal statements, grace and truth culture unbalanced	Clear outcomes for spiritual formation; balanced grace and truth culture	Student spiritual leadership evident; embedded grace and truth culture
	Parent and Church Partners	No intentional training for parents or church involvement	Encouragement of biblical parenting and church involvement	Intentional but informal teaching re biblical parenting and church involvement	Formal teaching/mentoring to develop biblical parenting and church involvement
	Assessment	Formative; no data collected	Anecdotal data on spiritual growth	Some data (surveys, follow-up) on student and alumni spiritual growth	Ongoing external assessments of spiritual climate, student outcomes, alumni
	Ministry/Service Opportunities	Occasional opportunities	Planned but inconsistent opportunities	Students have ministry, service, or discipleship opportunities	Significant school ministry resource commitment; multiple opportunities
School Culture	Faculty Culture	Some faculty not qualified; significant employee turnover	Qualified faculty; mixed employee morale, limited turnover	Stable, well qualified, committed faculty; positive employee culture	Mission-driven, qualified faculty and admin; culture of mutual respect and support
	PD Culture	Little planning or time allotment for professional growth	Limited, unfocused professional development; individually initiated; "a la carte" approach	Faculty engaged in regular, systematic professional development; resourced adequately	Clear evidence of holistic, comprehensive, well-resourced professional development culture
	Organization	Minimal organizational structure	Some systems, policies, and structures	Documented systems, policies, structures, assessments	Actions based on ongoing assessments of student, faculty, and school cultures
	Student Culture	Fragile student culture	Developing student culture; limited sense of school pride/ownership	Positive student culture and sense of school pride/ownership	Clear evidence of positive student leadership; supportive student body
External	Little interest in accreditation	STAR, candidacy, or in process	REACH 2.0 (option for dual regional)	REACH + Regional + Exemplary Accreditation	