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Catholic School Enrollment Talk

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The Core Enrollment Management Team

By John Cooper, ISPD Enrollment Specialist

This month's *Enrollment Talk* Newsletter is the first in a two part series on the role of an enrollment management core team. This edition focuses on an elementary school version of the core team approach. Absent from the following story "A Tale of St. Mary's Core Enrollment Management Team" is a paid enrollment staff person. In those cases where there is such a staff person, that individual assumes more of the role of organizing, convening, and directing the core team. However, the principal plays a key role of making sure there is sufficient "institutional alignment" behind the enrollment management effort. In June we will tackle the equivalent high school core team.

A Tale of St. Mary's Core Enrollment Management Team

Cast of Characters

John Cooper as "The Protagonist"
The Principal as "The Hero"
Susan Johnson as "The Perfectionist Mom"
Teresa Samuels as "The Perfectionist Teacher"
Marsha Yearling as "The Technology Geek"
Tom Jones as "The Poet"
Don Campbell as "The Cleveland Brown's Fan"
Cindy Clinton as "Hillary's Long Lost Sister"
Chuck Walton as "The Newspaper Guy"
Monica Morales as "The Quiet One"
Jessica Walters as "The Pain in the _____"

Susan Johnson didn't know what she was getting herself into last September when she agreed to be a member of St. Mary School's Core Enrollment Management Team. She was simply a concerned school parent who couldn't say "no" to the principal.

The first thing Susan was asked to do was attend an introductory workshop on enrollment

management presented by the Institute of School and Parish Development (ISPD). As she sat and listened to John Cooper, this stay at home mom (who used to be a salesperson at a local company) thought that Cooper had a good business approach to managing enrollment.

However, Susan was concerned because it sounded like a lot of work, especially for the principal and her core team. She knew they would have to get organized in order to move forward.

After the introductory workshop, Susan told the principal that she would be willing to come up with an outline of next steps that the principal and core team needed to take.

Susan organized the list into two categories based on what John Cooper presented as the 10 steps to enrollment management. Susan recognized that he had laid out both a tactical system for managing enrollment as well as a planning process to make sure that the system engaged new and current members of the school community.

Susan realized that faculty and staff needed to be on-board and fulfill their important roles within the enrollment system. She was happy to hear that John Cooper was going to be separately working with both faculty and staff. She realized that the core team might need a little help getting faculty and staff to embrace their roles in the process. Teresa Samuels, a teacher at St. Mary's, was asked to serve as the primary contact between the core team and faculty/staff. The principal was going to follow-up with faculty and staff, but it was nice to have another person cheering them on.

Susan could see from John Cooper's presentation that technology was going to be critical in delivering the enrollment system. Marsha Yearling (technology background) was invited to join the core team and support the office staff in using the ACT database. Marsha was asked to identify and work with the person who was going to be the school's web master.

Susan felt like someone on the core team needed to be the point person for developing marketing content for the school. She knew that John Cooper would provide a lot of template marketing material, but someone would be needed to "tweak" it to fit St. Mary School. Tom Jones was a member of the core team and had a bachelor's degree in English. He was asked to work with the marketing content, e.g. editing letters, web site material, brochures, etc.

At the core team meeting in December, Don Campbell said that he saw several other areas that needed attention. Don suggested that the core team ask Cindy Clinton (a financial planner by profession and member of the parish finance committee) to work with the parish business manager in answering many of the tactical questions that were raised by John Cooper about helping families finance tuition.

Don also reminded the core team that Chuck Walton was a school parent and that he worked at a local community newspaper. Don suggested that the core team ask Chuck to head up the school news bureau that was suggested as a strategy. The core team set a goal of having 4 news releases go out from the school each month. Core team members gave Chuck names of persons who would be good for the news bureau and Teresa Samuels agreed to be the faculty contact.

The principal opened the February core team meeting with an enrollment report. She noted that of the 30 kindergarten students needed to make budget, they had only enrolled 15. Of the 40 pre-school students that were kindergarten ready, only 10 had enrolled. Tom Jones, the marketing content point person, said that he would get a copy of John Cooper's retention campaign letter and tailor it to be sent out to those 30 pre-school families (that had not registered) in hopes of getting them to enroll in kindergarten.

Susan Johnson asked the principal for a year-to-date comparison report of kindergarten enrollment in February of 2007 versus February 2008. The principal said that she had not been keeping that kind of data. Marsha Yearling (the technology point person) said that this report was now being kept using the ACT database.

Teresa Samuels (core team teacher) suggested that they tap into faculty and parents to do follow-up phone calls after the retention letter went out to the pre-school parents who had not registered

for kindergarten. Susan Johnson reminded the group that John Cooper had recommended telecounseling as the #1 recruitment tactic to employ and that we should be using it as part of our year round, systematic follow-up with every prospect.

This prompted Chuck Walton to inquire about how the follow-up recruitment system was going. Chuck said that he knew of a prospective family in his neighborhood that had inquired about the school two months ago. He said that they had received a nice packet of information about the school, but he knew that they had never received a follow-up phone call or any other information from the school. The principal asked Chuck for the name of the family and said that she would follow the trail of how the communication system had broken down. The principal said that these were the kinds of things that she needed to know in order to fix the system. This exchange prompted several other core team members to share stories about how there were break downs in follow-up communication.

As this was the February core team meeting, there was discussion about the enrollment planning process that was started in January. Jessica Walters, a core team member who often displayed a critical attitude said, "I think it's too much to ask of us to be trying to set up this system of enrollment management and also simultaneously run a 3 month planning process!" Susan Johnson responded to Jessica. "When I first sat down to organize what we had been given to do at the October workshop with John Cooper, I felt the same way." She continued, "As I looked at our school's enrollment situation, I began to understand that we were not going to be able to make a couple of changes here and there and turn things around overnight. It was going to take an all out effort."

Susan rolled on by saying, "I have also realized that our efforts at creating a great system of enrollment management needed to be grounded in reality. How better to understand the reality of our situation than to invite 60 to 80 persons into an enrollment planning process from our community. We need their input to be more strategic and we need their involvement in implementation." She concluded, "From the level of engagement at the first planning meeting last month, I am convinced that some of those participants are going to be more likely to stay involved."

To this Chuck Walton said, "If anything, we now know how much work needs to be done and we need what ISPD calls "people fuel" to get it done. I think the enthusiasm at these planning meetings will help us to meaningfully connect with people who will be more likely to support our school down the road. That sense of belonging leads to believing more in our school's mission. Let's try and keep things positive!"

After the enrollment report was given at the April core team meeting, the principal directed the group to focus on the results of the three enrollment planning meetings that had just concluded in March. The core team examined and discussed the strategies that were identified and they looked at the level of priority each received in the multi-vote that took place at the end of the final meeting.

Susan Johnson pulled out the blank implementation charts that John Cooper provided. As they focused on the different strategies, she asked for persons to chair a particular strategy's implementation. They also talked about persons who could serve on implementation teams for each strategy. They made sure to include persons from the enrollment planning meetings who had agreed to help out with a particular strategy.

Core team members were reluctant to chair implementation of strategies. Jessica said, "Don't look at me. I work 50 hours a week." Don Campbell said, "The goal would be to engage people outside the core team to head up strategy implementation. The core team's role is to support those implementation chairs as ISPD had pointed out to us at the outset." Monica Morales (the quiet core team member) said, "We can't go back to the days when the principal led every effort."

At the June core team meeting, the enrollment picture for the upcoming school year was beginning to take shape. Chuck Walton said, "Why did we lose all those students in the 5th grade?" The principal said, "We administered ISPD's Parent Satisfaction Update twice this year. In both updates, parents complained about lack of math preparation in the junior high grades."

Jessica asked, "What have you done to address these concerns?" The principal responded, "I have had lengthy meetings with our math teachers in the upper grades. We feel like we have implemented changes to address the concerns of those who are upset."

Susan Johnson suggested that each family be contacted by math faculty explaining the changes that are going to be made in the upcoming year. The principal responded, "We only need to contact those who have not re-enrolled." Susan respectfully countered, "I believe John Cooper would suggest that we share this news with everyone. We don't want to assume that just because someone is registered for the upcoming year that they are necessarily going to show up."

Fade to the Future

Susan Johnson didn't know what she was getting herself into last September when she agreed to be a member of St. Mary's Core Enrollment Management Team. Today she is glad that she became involved. Susan has become more intimately connected to her school community. Even though Jessica was difficult to deal with, she developed close relationships with other members of the team.

She thought that it was going to involve a lot of work and it has. However, she likes the fact that her leadership skills have been used. Susan commented, "I don't mind washing dishes at the Fish Fry, but I wanted to contribute in a different way. Being a core team member has given me that opportunity."

Even though she values her role and the tight knit core team group that has been formed, Susan is mindful of the fact that the team needs to keep two things in mind.

- It needs to understand the limits of its authority and responsibility
- It needs to continuously look for new members ("new blood") to infuse the team

Core Team Activity Summary:

- Enrollment has increased by 10 students over last year and the core team has set a goal of increasing by 20 students next year.
- The core team has set recruitment and retention strategies to coincide with that 20 student increase.
- The core team meets monthly to review the progress of those strategies with the principal.
- The core team has set a goal of increasing its size by 5 members over the next year. The core team has identified the types of talents and experience that it needs to tap into in the coming year in order to develop its strategies.
- With a focus on developing its members, two members of the core team will accompany the principal to the 2009 NCEA convention.
- The core team receives John Cooper's Enrollment Talk newsletters and devotes 10 minutes at the start of every meeting to discussion of that month's newsletter.
- The core team spends time each year assessing its overall effectiveness.

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Spiritual Thought

Many years ago, as my final semester at the University of Dayton approached, I found myself short \$500 to cover my tuition and textbooks. Father Joe Lackner, a Marianist mentor and close friend of mine spoke to the Rector of the university on my behalf. It was arranged that I would go to meet with Brother Stan Mathews (the rector) about my situation. I was nervous and embarrassed to be asking for help. From the moment Brother Stan greeted me and led me into his office, I felt a sense of peace and calm. I was in the presence of a very holy man. At the end of our meeting, I left with more than the \$500 to finish my degree. I came away from that encounter with a better appreciation for how the Holy Spirit can work through people like Brother Stan to help those in vulnerable moments. Brother Stan made me feel like I was doing him a favor rather than the other way around. Brother Stan was laid to rest this week. May we all lead with his same wisdom, kindness and grace. Amen.

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