

Creating a Preferred Future Building The Sunday School of Your Dreams Together

Unless you've been living in a remote cave for the last decade, the expression "preferred future" must have a familiar ring to it. It's the term development officers and strategic planners use when they invite you to think ahead and *like* what you see: a future you'll be happy about instead of one you'll be stuck with.

And that takes planning and commitment and work to achieve.

Many of our schools feel they are far from where they'd like to be, but don't quite know how to start the journey to get there. Some think it's impossible without the off-the-Richter-scale changes needed across the board. But that's not really true. It is indeed possible to see the Sunday School of our (and God's) dreams begin to blossom before our eyes.

First, you need to discuss – with a small group of think-tankers, an Executive Board, the entire school staff, or a parent/teacher meeting and always with the involvement of pastor and parish council liaison -- what that School looks like. To quote Larry Shallenberger in an article on institutional growth and change in a recent issue of *Children's Ministry* magazine, "you can't lead anyone into your preferred future unless you can recognize it when you get there." Here's a how-to for dreaming a dream together and then working to make it come true:

1. Brainstorm what your preferred Sunday School would be like. When would classes meet? How long would classes be? What does the schedule look like? What would be the important elements of the program? Who would teach and how?
2. Select together a single challenge currently facing the school and preventing it from being the Sunday School you envisioned, e.g. enrollment is declining (and not because families are moving away; they're just not coming); teaching staff is weak, etc.
3. Now work together to make two lists. List One: The forces that resist changing this problem and 2) the forces that can promote change. Here is one example in each category for the two problems listed above:

Problem 1: Enrollment is declining

Forces resisting change: Sunday School families are cliquish and unwelcoming.

Forces promoting change: A core of parents who are loving and committed.

Problem 2: Teaching staff is weak

Forces resisting change: Lack of involvement in school by parish leaders; pastor and/or parish council.

Forces promoting change: High number of parents are professional educators.

4. Then devise ways to make use of the positive forces and weaken or eradicate the negative forces. Here is one example in each category for the two challenges listed above:

Problem 1: Enrollment is declining

Strengthen Support: Maximize visibility of that dynamic core by sponsoring family-style events for the parish with them as planners.

Weaken resistance: Do repeated icebreaker/bridge-building exercises at parent meetings.

Problem 2: Teaching staff is weak

Strengthen support: Form a think-tank committee of parents who teach professionally to help support teachers' work with specific techniques. This committee may also serve as a pool for recruiting teachers.

Weaken resistance: have a special meeting with pastor and/or parish council to map out a strategy of deeper involvement in staffing of school.

5. The forces working for and those working against a situation together create a stalemate and that's why things won't change *unless you shift the balance so that positive forces become stronger than negative ones.*

Good luck!