



## Managing and Sustaining Growth: A Real Story about COVID-19

by Tom Wrege

**M**arch 13, 2020 will go down in history at Zion Lutheran School in Georgetown, Texas. School was set to let out for spring break. The previous ten days or so had been wrought with uncertainty and growing anxiety. What is this thing called COVID-19, and will it affect our school, community, state, and nation as it has so many others? It was not as if we could make plans for “what ifs,” but



even in the midst of what we had hoped was some much deserved time off, Governor Greg Abbott of Texas issued an executive order to halt face-to-face instruction. As school leaders, faculties, staffs, and boards wrestled mightily with what to do, it became clear that any sense of normalcy would soon disappear.

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### Uncertainty

In the fall of 2019, the Zion Board of Christian Education had established tuition and fees based on an enrollment of 185 students. We had no certainty about the accuracy of our ministry plan numbers. The faculty created a unique remote curriculum called a Continuous Learning Plan. They put it together in just four days. Would our families support this plan? By May, it became clear that we should lower the number for projected enrollment. Six families withdrew for various reasons. Between that period and the start of the upcoming new school year, there were incredible unknowns—especially in relation to our early childhood families and the difficulty of having a truly effective instructional program in place – especially if learning continued to be remote.

At the end of the school year, the staff dutifully reflected upon the fourth quarter to be ready for whatever type of learning we would need to implement in August. It had to be both effective and truly instructional. This meant new professional development and more training/collaboration. The Zion staff pushed forward with incredible fortitude and perseverance. An important decision was to name our new school year theme, “Sustained by Grace.” The underlying foundational Scripture became one that we have come to cherish, the abundance of this grace given to us and our common faith in Jesus Christ and our bond of love with our Savior. At times like this, our hope was secure within our frame of faith.

*The grace of our Lord was poured out on*



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**Review, Reflect, Resolve**

- How closely do you work with your admissions staff member to create and promote a philosophy that includes retention?
- Do you have a dashboard that stores and updates important data to assist you in making informed decisions?
- Can you name the ways in which you support your school staff?

*me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. 1 TIMOTHY 1:14*

## Confidence in our Direction

In early July, after the congregation had passed the ministry plan, the Zion staff moved forward with confidence, following the orders of the governor. Our summer camp program went six weeks with record enrollment and the added bonus of the beauty of having children once again on our campus. It was a time of joy! Parents could not enter our building, but sharing the love of our Savior was prominent in every part of our day, and the children brought it home. Later in the summer, we discovered that word had begun to spread about this program. It was defying the odds. Many who had never heard of our school began to inquire.

Still...we kept our financial enrollment goal at a conservative but what we thought was a realistic 175. We also began to give tours once again in June, with all safety protocols in place. The inquiries started out slowly, then they became more frequent. Everything changed on July 17. Texas Attorney General, Ken Paxton, sent out a legal ruling that all non-public schools could begin the school year with face-to-face instruction. The staff, school board, and I worked together to make an informed decision. The choices were face-to-face only, a hybrid model, or remote only. We unanimously agreed, based upon our end-of-year reflection, that we would do face-to-face only. We were prepared to do remote only with our Continuous Learning Plan, but we knew the most effective way for teaching and learning was to be together on campus. The other big reason was to sustain the health of our teachers and support staff. How could we overload our church workers and expect them not to burn out, be stressed, or otherwise have a multitude of daily duties, way beyond their respective callings? We prepared and did so with confidence.

## The Back-to-School Plan

On July 27, the Zion Board of Christian Education released its "Back to School Plan," filled with an incredible amount of information and the actual plan that we would employ. It was all about a safe return. And then the floodgates opened.

## Confidence

Word spread quickly that Zion was one of the only local schools to be opening totally face-to-face. Our tours went from one or two a week to five and more. We spent hours sharing our school and concluding with an educational consultation and prayer with every family. The role of our admissions director became incredibly important. By the first day of school, 202 students had applied and been accepted. The phone did not stop ringing. By September 15, we had reached record enrollment at 211. We had 60 new students in our school. How does one manage such growth? How will these students and their families be retained beyond this year? We still do not have answers to these and many more questions, but we have confidence and belief in our mission. It is simply to "connect with others, to grow for the sake of sharing the Gospel, and to serve others in the name of Christ." Through this lens, we have planned how we intend to manage and sustain this growth.

## Challenges

Some of the challenges we faced included putting new restrictions on our classroom capacities due to distancing guidelines. That meant we had to start waiting lists or turn families away. Our Academic Success Program (resource room, plus gifted/talented, through Lutheran Special Education Ministries) became full. This significant program has allowed us to enroll students with both special needs and those who need more academic challenges. Managing growth includes transition strategies, connecting with families, extremely effective communication and a listening ear, and daily kneeling at the foot of the cross. Each week our goal at school is to provide a culture of love and relationships.



## Ways to Bless our Families

**Extreme safety measures.** These include the use of a daily temperature app, mask-wearing for every child, plexiglass barriers where needed, extra "outside" time, sanitizing, hallway distancing marks, and a closed campus.

**Weekly check-ins.** Teachers touch base with 2 to 3 families per week to give them a sense of how their child is doing in school, and it also provides an opportunity to share feedback—both ways.

**Some sense of normalcy.** We can do athletics. We make recess fun. Lunches can be outdoors. We have normal programs like National Archery in the Schools, very creative chapels, and dynamic service projects. We can even do field trips by bringing organizations to us!

**Mentor families.** Aligning families with a support system where they can ask any question they desire, receive important feedback, and have a family that prays for them too!

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**Weekly communication from the principal.** It is all about staying ahead and sharing very important information about “opening up” opportunities, telling what accreditation is, and why we do it, and important bullet points like appeals for scholarship needs. These have been so well received.

## The Goal as you Grow

Every organization needs a goal. Ours is simple and yet profound. It is based on attention to detail, an effective communication model, and developing and sustaining a culture of Christian care and spiritual support. It begins with the administration fully supporting the teaching team and support staff. This means many check-ins, ways to encourage, always fighting for what’s right, and many professional development opportunities and resources. *Attention to detail* is a military term, and it means assessing everything with a keen eye to ensure it is done correctly. Facilities must be in excellent repair and constantly improved. Parents notice. It needs to become routine. When communication suffers, everyone notices, and grumpiness and whining result. Not fun. Unhappy families.

A strong communication model affects excellence. Teach, don’t assume a culture



learning lessons from this pandemic year.

**At every turn, teach the students, the teachers, and all who are part of the school culture how to act and what to do. It becomes part of the norm and is embraced and cherished.**

of Christian care. At every turn, teach the students, the teachers, and all who are part of the school culture how to act and what to do. It becomes part of the norm and is embraced and cherished.

## It is All about Relationships and Continued Support

Within the body of Christ, we need to love one another with all humility and with ready, forgiving hearts. We also need to be open about how our human spirituality allows us to practice love, power (see the Scripture reference below), and self-discipline as workers with the church. The writer of 2 Timothy:1:7 reminds us of this important promise: “For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline.” May each of us take to heart how God guides and leads us to love one another and others. Our Lutheran schools, indeed, give us such opportunities. Pray that we can use the gifts He has given us to both manage and sustain growth as He blesses us with insight and great

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*Thomas Wrege serves in the Texas District. One of his goals is creating and sustaining healthy Lutheran teams, with humility and grace. He is deeply involved with those he serves alongside, and he continually seeks to bless others with coaching, resources, and prayerful support. He works closely with Lindsey Rochner, Zion’s admissions director. Tom shares, “She has made an incredible difference in every aspect of the culture and positioning of Zion Lutheran Church and School.”*

Photos courtesy the author.



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