

NEWS LOCAL

Huron Christian School amazed by capital campaign success



By Justine Alkema, Clinton News Record
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A projected photo of the school after the \$3 million construction project. (Contributed photo)

Huron Christian School had a fundraising goal for their building expansion project – \$3 million dollars. They expected their wider community would support the initiative, but they didn't expect to blow past their goal only eight months into their 18-month campaign.

HCS principal Nick Geleynse, who has been the principal at the school for eight years and taught at the school 18 years before that, walked the *News Record* through the story of the campaign.

"The story goes back to 2003, 2004," he said. "That was when we felt the need to do something at the school to recognize that the whole education process is changing. We need possibly more room, we need to modify what we have here, and so forth."

For example, there's more information now about how kids learn, which changes the space required. Some of their classrooms have flexible seating instead of desks in rows, or maybe some students work better standing, or in a different room. Students' school work is increasingly collaborative, so group work areas need to be created. Massive progressions in technology are a part of needing different space as well.

So, they hired a capital campaign consultant around that time in 2003, and that consultant did an assessment of the school's supporters. They came back and said the community was not ready to support a project of this scale. At that point, the goal was around \$2.5 million.

"We were extremely disappointed, and the idea kind of died. But there was always the conversation in the background of 'what if we could, what if we could.'"

The idea came back on the table around three years ago. It partly came from staff who were recognizing again that the space they have and the way the school was designed back in the 50s and 60s hasn't kept up with how radically education has changed.

The staff came up with a wish list of how they wanted to see the school modified. Some staff members did a tour of other schools under renovation. It went to the board, and they backed the idea.

They hired consulting organization the Dennis Group that did another assessment of the community. This time, they came back with the news that the school's supporters were very ready to support this type of project.

They set a goal of \$3 million dollars for the project, and the campaign was launched in September, 2016.

The Dennis Group recommended they don't go public with the campaign until they reach around 50-60% of their goal, which is not unusual for a fundraising campaign. That way, they could hit the ground running when they opened it up to more people.

So, the school consulted their database of some people who had donated to the school over the past number of decades and approached them first.

“Up until this point of the story, this is a very typical campaign,” said Geleynse. “But this is where the story goes completely off the normal path. What has been completely atypical is the incredible response.”

Typically for a \$3 million campaign, the Dennis Group recommended it be over an 18-month period. So, the school made that their goal.

“However, we quickly recognized the campaign was going way faster than a typical campaign.”

Only a few months into the campaign, they were already at 60% of their goal.

“It became very clear to us very early on that when people said they were supportive of this campaign, they didn’t just say they were, but they backed that up with writing cheques and making pledges.”

Back then, in late 2016, they knew they had an upcoming membership meeting on May 8. They made that their goal of when they would go public.

That would be eight months into the campaign, a normal timeline for when to go public.

The meeting came around last Monday night. The school invited members to come to the meeting for an update on the capital campaign project. However instead of just going public, they revealed that they had already raised \$3.1 million dollars.

As for the members’ reactions, Geleynse said, “They were just blown away. They were in awe.”

“It was something we could have never imagined,” said Geleynse. “We’re just stunned by it. But on the other hand, we’re so thankful. Our board chair, Paul Vandendool, said it well. He said, ‘our humanly set goal is history.’”

Yet Geleynse said they are not close to being done their campaign. One of their campaign goals was to give everyone who has been connected to the school over the years the opportunity to donate. They are not even close to reaching everyone at this point.

Campaign chairperson Agnes Waanders said, “God’s story for the capital campaign is not over. We will continue this campaign with the same passion that we started with.”

“The whole process has been about seeking God’s will for the school, and bathing the whole campaign in prayer,” said Geleynse. “What we had planned as for what the school should look like is maybe not what God has planned, and that’s what we need to discern in all of this – what’s the new reality for Huron Christian School?”

All funds raised will still be used for the building project, but they may need to redefine what that will look like.

They originally planned that construction would begin in 2018, and they are still projecting that date at this time.

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