

Starting a Christian school: best practices

You might be successfully pastoring a church and thinking the “next step” for your ministry is starting a school. CAUTION: Your skill and experience with operating a church *might or might not* translate into the unique challenges that schools present.

Who wouldn't be interested in finding new ways to reach the local community while impacting the lives of children, youth and families? Seems like a no-brainer, right?

If you're been thinking about these questions, it's likely that you and your church are considering starting a daycare or school operation. Establishing childcare and / or education can be an excellent way for your church to create cultural impact and offer families a viable alternative to public or private (non-Christian) education. However, before launching into this new venture, there are several things to consider.

In an effort to arm your team with some real-world “boots on the ground” advice on this topic, we've enlisted the expertise of Robert “Bo” Gutzwiller. He has spent his life infesting in private Christian schools as the superintendent of Foothill Christian School and serving on various boards. Most notably, Gutzwiller serves as an international executive board member for the Association of Christian Schools, International (ACSI) and Western Association of Schools and Colleges. ACSI is a Christian education organization that serves 3,000 member schools and more than 5.5 million students.

Here, Gutzwiller helps bridge the gap between what a lender will want to see and some of the issues a church can encounter.

Where to start: prayer

Like any new ministry, starting a daycare or school must begin with prayer and a process of seeking God's vision for the church and its development. This new ministry will require a tremendous amount of research, planning, financial consideration, staffing adjustments, and possible capital / building improvements. This will certainly have an impact on the culture of the church.

According to Gutzwiller, successfully launching a daycare or school operation requires a pastor-led and fully supportive board to commit to the vision that has been cast.

He also advises that *just because you can, doesn't mean you should*. The new ministry can be incredibly impactful, but this requires staying true to its vision through the ups and downs.

Additionally, Gutzwiller advises churches to listen to the specific call on



the church and to be open to the opportunities in your local community. Not every church is called to start a kindergarten-thru-high school ministry, so a daycare might be a good starting point, depending on the vision of the leadership team.

Next steps: internal & external assessments

If the senior pastor and board are aligned and want to explore this opportunity, the next step is to complete an assessment of your local community and identify a need that your ministry can meet. An after-school program or daycare might fit this need.

Your path could be slightly different than others, as was the case for Gutzwiller and Foothill Christian. In 1964, they felt their calling and had the opportunity to start a K-6 grade school. They began with 64 kids and have grown each year.

Although a K-6 school is not the easiest way to enter the market – due to the high staffing cost, regulation, and possible accreditation demands – the church has remained committed to its vision and has found significance and success in its ministry.

Next, an internal skills assessment is critical to determining if the church currently has competent staff with the leadership, as well as the organizational and administrative skills, needed to operate a school. Staffing requirements and costs will increase in accordance to the level of education, which is why most churches begin with a daycare; these costs are generally low and do not require advanced degrees or accreditation.

Similar to the internal staff assessment, you should complete an internal facilities assessment. Ideally, your church campus should have adequate classroom space that can be used during the week by a school or daycare operation. Using your existing campus provides far greater use of your facilities and also exposes new young families to your church. If you don't have available space, your team will need to plan for adding modular facilities, leasing space, or possible starting a building project.

As you can see, there are a lot of issues to think about when starting a school in your ministry. This series will help you unpack several key questions before taking the next step.

In our next article, we will incorporate more of Gutzwiller's thoughts and advice, while discussing what to do if your church does feel called to start a new ministry – but lacks staff.