Accreditation Self-Study
Grace Christian School
Spring 2014

Dual accreditation by
Southern Association of Independent Schools and
AdvanceED – SACS

Grace Christian School’s mission is to assist Christian parents by providing a sound academic education in a Christ-centered environment, designed to prepare our young people to know God and to live in obedience to His will for their lives.
Section I

Introduction and
General Information

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SAIS-SACS Accreditation Team
Schedule for April 6-8, 2014

**Sunday, April 6th**
4:00 pm Team members check into the Stonewall Jackson Hotel
4:45 Welcome and tour of all GCS facilities (meet in hotel lobby)
6:15 Visiting Team dinner and organizational/orientation meeting

**Monday, April 7th**
7:30 - 8:30 am Breakfast meeting - Visiting Team and Board of Trustees at Stonewall Jackson Hotel
8:45 - 9:30 Business meeting - Team Chair and Business Manager
Other team members - Begin classroom visits; administrators available for one-on-one meetings
8:45 - 10:45 Classroom visits - Two campuses (elementary/middle campus and high school campus)
11:00 - 12:00 pm Team review of supporting documents (Team Room); administrators available for one-on-one meetings
12:15 - 12:50 Lunch with high school students and available teachers
1:00 - 2:15 Meeting with Steering Committee (MS Library)
2:30 - 3:15 Meeting with stakeholders: GCS Parents (MS Library)
3:30 - 4:15 Meeting with stakeholders: GCS Faculty (MS Library)
4:30 Visiting Team work on reports
6:00 Dinner at High School
Attending: Visiting Team, Steering Committee, Board of Trustees, Alumni, Parents, Students

**Tuesday, April 8th**
7:30 - 8:45 am Team breakfast at Stonewall Jackson Hotel
9:00 - 11:00 Visiting Team finish reports, hotel check-out (12:00 noon)
11:15 - 12:45 pm Lunch meeting with Steering Committee; Oral Exit Report
1:00 Team visit concludes (Chair will stay to address the full faculty.)
1:30 Meeting with Cobb Atkinson, John Morrison (Headmaster), Macon Rich (Board Chair)
3:30 Team Chair - Address the full faculty
GCS Board of Trustees
2013-2014

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## Grace Christian School Administration

**Elementary/Middle School Office:** 886-0937  
**High School Office:** 886-9109

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>POSITION</th>
<th>SCHOOL CAMPUS</th>
<th>HOME PHONE</th>
<th>CELL PHONE</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>John Morrison</td>
<td>Headmaster</td>
<td>ES/MS/HS</td>
<td>886-0367</td>
<td>280-4293</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joanne Kinder</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>ES/MS</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>430-7986</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jason Bailey</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>HS</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>292-4202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Ellen Barrett</td>
<td>Supervisor of Curriculum &amp; Instruction</td>
<td>ES/MS/HS</td>
<td>885-1352</td>
<td>255-6295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cindy Mims</td>
<td>Director of Athletics, Student Life and College and Career</td>
<td>HS</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>480-1932</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Randy Knight</td>
<td>Director of Maintenance and Operations</td>
<td>ES/MS/HS</td>
<td>337-1178</td>
<td>430-6918</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lina Smith</td>
<td>Business Manager</td>
<td>ES/MS/HS</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>480-0207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liz Middleton</td>
<td>Director of Development</td>
<td>ES/MS/HS</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>290-7711</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephanie Marshall</td>
<td>Auction Coordinator/ Administrative Assistant</td>
<td>ES/MS/HS</td>
<td>885-6542</td>
<td>292-1756</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandy Wells</td>
<td>Receptionist</td>
<td>ES/MS</td>
<td>887-6110</td>
<td>290-1451</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marilyn Knopp</td>
<td>Purchasing/Receptionist</td>
<td>HS</td>
<td>886-8637</td>
<td>292-9638</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa Cullinan</td>
<td>Purchasing/Administrative Assistant</td>
<td>ES/MS</td>
<td>337-7577</td>
<td>292-8687</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Documentation

The below-listed documents are available for viewing in the SAIS-SACS team room located in the high school building. Additional documents are referenced below and in the School’s response to the SAIS-SACS standards and indicators.

Academic Manual
Contains all current academic forms, schedules, handouts, and other important information that is given to all teaching staff at the beginning of the school year; this material is updated every year. This manual also contains the basic professional development materials used for new teacher training.


Administrative Policies, Procedures, and Regulations Manual

Business Policies, Procedures, and Regulations
Contains financial procedures including guidelines and policies for purchasing, Smart Tuition, budgets, audits, etc.

CARE Program Manual
Contains all forms, procedures, and information regarding the Center for Academic Resource and Enrichment, a program for special needs students.

Coaches Handbook *
Contains all policies pertaining to the athletic program, as well as specific guidelines for coaches.

Course Description Guide
Contains brief descriptions, including materials and textbooks, as well as the scope and sequence for each GCS course. This guide also contains MS and HS electives and integrated curriculum, as well as extra curricular activities.

Curriculum Guide (2 Manuals—1 ES/MS, 1 HS)
Contains the following detailed information regarding the curriculum for each grade and subject: overview, specific content, objectives and student expectations, textbooks and materials, evaluation criteria, and related activities.

Development Manual
Contains information about fund raising, including Partners in Education, Parent Volunteer Organization (PVO), Annual Giving, etc.

High School Student Handbook *
Contains policies and procedures for our high school students. The contents of this handbook is contained in the Parent Handbook.
High School Guidance Manual
Contains information pertaining to the college and guidance process, as well as career testing and job placement. Included in this manual is the College Handbook and the Student Path to Career and Calling Handbook.

Contains information pertaining to all aspects of employment including applications, benefits, contracts, evaluations, etc.

Minutes and Agendas Notebook
Contains minutes and agendas for staff meetings.

Parent Handbook *
Contains general policies as well as elementary, middle and high school handbooks.

Parent/Student Athletic Handbook *
Contains information for parents pertaining to policies and procedures for the GCS sports program.

Professional Development Notebooks
Contains the formal and annual plans for professional development.

School Board Manual
Contains board by-laws and policies.

School Board Minutes
Contains minutes and agendas for all board meetings.

Staff Policies and Procedures Handbook *
Contains Staff Handbook, Parent Handbook, applicable school policies, regulations, and procedures.

High School Student Senate Manual
Contains the High School Student Senate Constitution and minutes of meetings.

Survey Notebook – Includes parent, faculty, high school, middle school, alumni and exit surveys taken in the past two years

*Included in the Administrative Policies, Procedures, and Regulations Manual
Also available at the accreditation team room in the high school building library:

- **Prospective Parents Information Packet**
- **Quarterly Newsletters**
- **SAT Information – Including scores from 2002 to present**
- **Special Events and Outreach Notebook**—Includes planning for special events and outreach projects in the school
- **Yearbooks**
- **High School Student Handbook**
- **Faculty/Staff Directory**

The following folders are mentioned in the standards and indicators and are available in the designated offices:

**Personnel Profile Folders**
These contain all qualifications for employment including application and personal profile sheet. These are located in the business office at the high school.

**Staff Evaluation Folders**
These contain all observations, surveys, input forms, and self-evaluation forms. These are located in each principal’s office.
Overview of Self-Study Process

Steering Committee

The accreditation self-study process was directed by a steering committee consisting of the following administrative staff:

- John Morrison – Headmaster and Committee Chair:
- Mary Ellen Barrett – Supervisor of Curriculum and Instruction and Accreditation Coordinator
- Joanne Kinder – Elementary and Middle School Principal
- Jason Bailey – High School Principal
- Liz Middleton – Director of Development

The committee began its deliberations in the second semester of the 2011-2012 school year with a number of in-depth meetings evaluating the School’s fundamental mission and its effectiveness in achieving its educational goals. In addition, the School conducted a series of online surveys directed towards parents and staff. The in-depth dialogue of these meetings, along with the feedback received from the surveys, helped identify what the steering committee felt to be strategic issues to be addressed in greater detail in the larger self-study process engaging the entire Grace community.

These meetings and surveys served as a springboard for a paper by the headmaster summarizing some of the committee’s most fundamental concerns. This paper was then shared with the governing board in the spring of 2012 and, with board input, served as a further springboard for organizing the more broad-based self-study by the larger school community. (This paper is included as an appendix under the title “Strategic Observations and Proposed Strategies.”)

In January 2013, after taking advantage of an on-site accreditation workshop conducted by SAIS vice-president Damian Kavanagh, the steering committee organized a comprehensive plan to conduct the self-study beginning in late 2012 and carried on through the fall of 2013. Whereas, in the School’s first accreditation sojourn five years ago, there was primary reliance upon a number of self-study committees, each consisting of a cross section of representatives from all of the School’s interest groups, the steering committee determined that it could possibly do a more thorough job by utilizing the following self-study strategies:

Parental Input

Parent perspectives were elicited through the following means:

1. A series of parent surveys were undertaken in January 2012 to better ascertain parent perspectives on a number of strategic issues. Copies of those surveys are included in the “Survey Notebook” located in the accreditation team room.
2. To obtain a general sense of parental perspective on the overall “state of the School,” and at the recommendation of SAIS vice-president Damien Kavanagh, the School administered an SAIS-crafted parent survey via the Internet in the spring of 2013. The survey results, which largely indicated very positive parental perception concerning the School, are contained in a the “Survey Notebook” available in the accreditation team room located at the high school.

3. In order to obtain more specific grade seventh through eleven parental input (an area of special interest to the steering committee and governing board), the School took the unusual step of inviting each individual set of parents to meet with designated administrative, high school and middle school staff. Each of these staff followed a prepared “script” eliciting specific input from the parents concerning their perspectives of the middle and high school programs. A copy of the script used for these interviews is contained in the “Survey Notebook” and “High School Guidance Manual” located in the accreditation team room.

4. As a further means to obtain input from high school parents, a high school Parent Advisory Board was established in the late winter of 2013 and has now met five or so times in order to give further input to the high school administration.

5. A second parent survey was administered in the fall of 2013 to grade one through grade eight parents to gain further input on specific issues regarding various parent attitudes and perspectives concerning Christian education and their commitment to it through the middle and high school years, along with a number of other specific queries. A copy of this survey is included in the survey notebook located in the accreditation team room.

6. Further parental input was received through individual parent/teacher conferences conducted several times over the past year and a half by pre-k through grade twelve staff.

7. The headmaster conducted two “coffees” hosted for all first year school families in the fall of 2013. These meetings were helpful in gaining input from new school families in terms of their transition experience from their previous school situation into Grace, along with their “fresh” perspective on such issues as our academic standards, homework expectations, and similar aspects of school life.

8. A copy of this larger self-study document has been posted on the School’s website, with further parental input invited in response.

**Staff**

Rather than dividing staff into a series of static committees as was done in the School’s previous accreditation effort, a series of meetings were conducted by various steering committee members on the two campuses with a variety of staff groupings, including general staff, elementary, middle school, high school, and various departmental meetings. We believe that the cross-over, so to speak, in allowing staff to focus on a broad spectrum of areas rather than on
limited topics (as is usually the case with a static committee), resulted in a greater diversity of input on most issues than was our previous experience. Beginning in the fall of 2012, staff were engaged through meetings and questionnaires to identify and discuss various concerns and potential strategies for school improvement. While these suggestions, along with those from other stakeholders, have been distilled by the governing board and steering committee into two primary, strategic foci, a number of important initiatives have resulted or are pending as a result of this process in engaging staff. (See Appendix entitled “Recent School Improvement Initiatives.”)

In addition, staff were asked to carefully review and give input on the several revisions of the steering committee’s response to the SAIS Standards and Indicators. This staff input has helped ensure accuracy and integrity in the School’s response to these all important SAIS criteria for accreditation.

As a precursor to the formal self-study, in January of 2012, a series of on-line surveys were distributed to staff to gain a better understanding of staff perspectives on a broad ranging scope of issues. Copies of the survey are included in the “Survey Notebook” located in the accreditation team room.

Students and Alumni

Our attempt to gather relevant feedback from our student population represents, by design, the least formal informational gathering aspect of our self-study. Furthermore, our focus has been concentrated on feedback from our high school students.

The School’s high school population (approximately seventy grade nine through twelve students) is small enough to suggest that anecdotal input may be our best means to sense the pulse of student life. In particular, our high school principal has relied heavily upon representative input from his student leadership class (the student senate) as a hopefully reliable means to gain a reasonably accurate sense of student sentiment. Indeed, this anecdotal input reinforces our findings obtained in a more formal on-line survey conducted in 2008; thus, in our high school student profile (Section II), we make reference to some of the statistics gained from this previous survey.

In terms of our alumni, we conducted an on-line survey in the fall of 2013 with those former students for whom we had contact information. We believe we received enough feedback to gain a reasonably good sense for gauging alumni sentiment (which was fundamentally positive and affirming). A copy of this survey is included in the “Survey Notebook” located in the accreditation team room.

We also continue to rely to a significant degree upon anecdotal feedback from both alumni and their parents concerning their perspective on their time as students at the School. Such input, happily, is often unsolicited and spontaneous, but very helpful.
Board of Trustees

The governing board has been engaged with the self-study process since the second semester of the 2011-2012 school year, primarily through its dialogue with the headmaster, along with its more informal dialogue with parents and staff. The board has reviewed and given input on all aspects of the self-study and has been the primary body in working with the headmaster and steering committee in determining the final draft of the School’s “Strategic Initiatives: A Plan for School Development” (see section IV of this document).

A Final Note

We believe that an additional area of helpful input could come from our larger community and would hope, in future studies, to gain a better sense of the greater community’s perceptions of the School. With the goal of improving this area of self-study for the future, it is our hope that we will be able to expand our development department in order to better cultivate greater relationship with those not directly related to the School. We address this in the second category of our School’s “Strategic Initiatives: A Plan for School Development” (see section IV of this document).
Section II
School Profile

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General School Profile

This section presents a general profile of Grace Christian School, including its history, governance, economics, local community, parents, students, programs, and related information.

School History

The School was founded in 1980 as a ministry of Community Fellowship Church based on the leadership’s conviction that children from Christian families should receive an education rooted in the Christian worldview. The School’s current mission statement—*To assist Christian parents by providing a sound academic education in a Christ-centered environment designed to prepare our young people to know God and to live in obedience to His will for their lives*—has remained essentially the same through the School’s approximately thirty-five year history.

Beginning with seven children in a combined kindergarten and first grade, the School added one grade each year through the addition of grade twelve in 1992. Enrollment grew at a steady rate through the School’s first twenty-five years, reaching a high of approximately 360 students in the 2006-2007 school year. Beginning in 2008, the student population has contracted by about twenty percent, apparently, in large part, in correlation with the national economic downturn beginning that same year. The current enrollment, pre-k through grade twelve, is 280 students and has remained fairly static over the past two years.

The School conducted its first commencement in 1992, conferring diplomas upon five graduates. Since that initial graduating class, 365 students have received diplomas, with the School’s largest graduating class of thirty-seven students represented by the 2007-2008 school year. The class of 2014, one of the smallest classes in recent years, is projected to graduate seven. In contrast, the class of 2015 is projected to graduate twenty-four.

Begun in a parent’s home, the school moved in its second year into a rented church facility before purchasing an eight classroom, former public school facility in downtown Staunton in time for its third year of operation. In 1996, after being pressed for space, the sponsoring church was able to purchase the former city library building, which presently houses the high school. In January 2003, the school purchased the historic Beverley Manor Elementary School (a former public school facility) from the Statler Brothers country music group, who had been using it for their offices and museum. After conversion back into its original school configuration, this four building complex allowed the school to experience further growth, and it currently houses the elementary and middle school programs.

In 1999, the School completed a gymnasium and activities center at a third location. This facility is used to host sporting events and physical education classes, as well as general activities, including the school auction.
Governance

One of the significant changes in the course of the School took place when the School’s founding and sponsoring church transferred governance responsibilities to an independent board. After operating throughout the School’s history under the governance of the Community Fellowship Church Board of Elders, church leadership concluded in the spring of 2007, after much prayer and deliberation, that the interests of the School and Christian education in the community would be best served by transitioning to an independent school model. Several factors led the church Board of Elders to this conclusion.

As the School has grown over the years, its enrollment has increasingly reflected a larger spectrum of the local Christian community. While the church leadership was largely able to avoid the narrower theological and doctrinal emphasis in the School that is generally associated with a particular, local church or denomination, it was felt that an independent board would be better able to ensure the “mere Christianity” emphasis of serving and appealing to the larger Christian community than it could accomplish as a single, local church.

Furthermore, the church leadership concluded, after years of significant investment of church personnel and monetary resources, that it was appropriate to wean the School from dependence upon a single, local church and broaden its base of support in the larger Christian community. It was agreed by church leadership that this was best accomplished as an independent rather than church-sponsored school. It is noteworthy that this decision was made, not in the context of the church wanting to withdraw its support, but in the realization that the long-term, best interests of the School were represented by a broadening of its governance.

In addition, in the context of the School’s leadership consisting of essentially the same board and headmaster over its first thirty years, it was concluded that the inevitable transition to new leadership would be best accomplished by a broader, independent board made up of individuals from within the existing school community who had a proven track record of commitment to the School and its stated principles and vision for Christian education. It was felt that the establishment of such a board, under the tutelage of the seasoned administration, would provide for a pro-active (rather than a reactive), healthy transition to not only an effective, independent governing board, but eventually to the next generation of administrative leadership.

The School board presently consists of eight seasoned individuals who are responsible for the governance of the School. In order to help ensure the independence of the board from its previous church governance, Community Fellowship Church legally transitioned all governance authority to this new board, without any conditions or requirements that a set number of board members be from the founding church. The board is fully independent and responsible for the governance of the School per Board of Trustees’ By-Laws.
FACILITIES

The Lord has blessed Grace Christian School with several pleasant and utilitarian properties. These combined facilities, when coupled with a Christian student body, faculty, and staff, enhance the quality of the total Grace educational experience.

The **elementary and middle school** buildings were originally built as the Beverly Manor Elementary and High School. Before being purchased by Grace Christian School in 2002, this facility was headquarters for the famed Statler Brothers country music quartet. Located adjacent to the beautiful Gypsy Hill Park, this campus offers an ideal setting in which our elementary and middle school-aged children can thrive. The facility is comprised of four buildings. The two main buildings house classrooms, as well as a complete library, computer labs, cafeteria, music and art rooms, and a gymnasium. The third building is home to our pre-kindergarten and after-school care programs, with the fourth serving as our bus garage and maintenance facility. Classrooms are expansive with large windows, and modern upgrades throughout.

The **high school** is located on Gospel Hill, in the heart of historic downtown Staunton. The facility was built in the 1730s as the “Manor Mansion House,” and was home to the Staunton Public Library for many years. The high school is conveniently located across the street from the Blackfriar’s Theatre, a popular field trip destination for many of our classes, and a block from President Woodrow Wilson’s birthplace and site of his presidential library. The stately brick structure includes modern classroom upgrades, while retaining its historic charm. The building features classrooms, administrative offices, a computer lab, auditorium/all purpose room, and locker room.

The **Activities Center** is used for physical education classes, school-wide sporting events, and larger special events. The property was donated to Grace Christian School, and over a several year period, construction of the Activities Center was completed. School families helped accomplish much of the construction work. Of special note is the fact that the Center’s flooring was acquired from the old Gunn Coliseum, home of the Cleveland “Cavaliers” NBA basketball team.
Parent Community

Consistent with its mission statement, the School serves parents who share its fundamental philosophy and traditional, Christian faith values. In this 2013-2014 school year, school families represent sixty-five plus churches, evidencing the school’s commitment to serve the larger Christian community rather than emphasizing a particular, singular denominational tradition. The leadership views the diversity of school families from many different denominations and independent churches within the larger Christian community as a healthy dynamic for the School.

The School’s facilities are located in Staunton, Virginia; however, the bulk of the enrollment is drawn from the larger Staunton, Waynesboro, and Augusta County area, with a few families traveling from as far as Rockbridge, Rockingham, Albemarle, and Nelson counties.

The School’s primary “market” area consists of the Staunton, Waynesboro, and Augusta County communities, which have a combined population of approximately 116,000. It is still considered primarily a rural and agricultural community, although eastern Augusta County and Waynesboro have, until the 2008 economic slow-down, experienced significant growth as bedroom communities to the Charlottesville and Albemarle County, Virginia, communities.

Because the local public schools have been perceived by the larger Christian community as maintaining a reasonably “conservative” values orientation, only a small percentage of the faith community has embraced the kind of education being offered by Grace Christian and several other local Christian schools as being essential for their children.

A far more in-depth analysis and profile of the School’s parent community is included in the appendix in the form of a paper entitled “Strategic Observations and Proposed Strategies” written by the head of school in February 2012. This paper developed out of a number of broad ranging discussions among the administrative team, the governing board, and research by the headmaster regarding private school enrollment trends. Part I of the paper represents much of the foundation of this current self-study and offers far greater insights into the School’s perceptions of our parent community.

School Finances

The School has operated on a balanced budget throughout its thirty-five year history and, happily, holds no current debt.

One of the reasons for the School’s financial stability over the years has been the unwavering support of Community Fellowship Church, the school’s founder and former sponsor. Community Fellowship subsidized the School in numerous ways over the years, especially through making church facilities available to house the School. While the church continues to strongly support the School, the establishment of an independent governing board has been part of the strategy to move the School away from its financial ties to the church.
A director of development was hired in August, 2001, as a part of this strategy to move the School toward increasing financial independence. Much progress has been made through the establishment of a formal annual giving program, a modest endowment fund, and a financial aid program funded by individuals, local businesses, and several local churches. Nevertheless, despite widespread participation in the School’s annual auction and other activities, only twenty-five percent of school families made an actual cash gift to the School during the 2012-2013 school year.

As is the case with many smaller schools in rural areas, there are few “deep pockets” in terms of donor history. In a 2009 parent survey, it was determined that approximately twenty-seven percent of the School’s families have a gross income of less than $50,000. Fifty-eight percent earn less than $70,000. Only approximately nineteen percent earn more than $100,000 annually. Indeed, most of the School’s families are “blue collar” workers who have a solid commitment to Christian education, but who also make fairly significant sacrifices to maintain their children in the program. In this context, the School’s leadership has worked hard to keep tuition at as affordable a level as possible while ensuring that adequate funding is made available to maintain a quality program.

In this 2013-2014 school year, nine families are receiving some level of financial aid totaling approximately $38,400.00. An additional twenty-one families participate in the School’s Tuition Work Credit Program and receive tuition credit in the amount of $38,520.

Indeed, it appears that economics represents a primary challenge faced by the School in the context of finances generally being cited by parents who exit the school as their primary reason for making a change.

**School Staffing**

Since its inception, the School has actively recruited school parents to serve as teachers and staff. While some private school consultants advise against such an approach, the School has experienced significant success in terms of achieving a quality level of instruction and administration without the conflicts of interest that sometimes characterize such arrangements. Individual staff are generally deeply committed to the school and its mission, and the rate of turnover over the years has been quite low, thus adding to the continuity and stability of the program. While recent hiring has included a larger percentage of “non-parents,” especially at the high school, the majority of school staff continue to be associated with the School in their present (or former) school-parent capacity.

With the exception of a two year hiatus, the current headmaster has led the School since its founding, gaining his initial experience in public education as a teacher and administrator. His educational and small business background, along with his experience as a pastor, have helped equip him with the breadth of skills and experience necessary for effective executive leadership. The elementary/middle school principal has served at the School for 24 years, with previous experience in public education. The Supervisor of Curriculum and Instruction, also a former public educator, has served effectively at the school for 32 years. The combined service at the School of these three leaders is 90 years, and, we believe, represents a seasoned leadership
that has been of strategic value to the School. Numerous other staff have served at the School for multiple years, as well. These seasoned educators have contributed to what we believe is an on-going consistency and stability in the program over these many years.

However, the governing board and administrative team are also working to identify the next generation of educators who will hopefully lead the school into the future. The high school principal, now in his second year as an administrator, is a product of the School who, after his graduation from college and a stint in other jobs, returned to teach and, now, to serve as a part of the leadership team. In this current school year, the School has been privileged to see eight of its graduates come on board as teachers, coaches, etc., along with other “younger” staff who have a sense of God’s calling on their lives to serve with this ministry. We hope this will be a continuing trend in the days ahead.

Instructors are hired not only for their proficiency as teachers—their ability to effectively impart the fundamental content of their assigned subject areas—but also their giftedness to relate well with the students and to serve as Christian role models. In accordance with the philosophy of the Virginia Council for Private Education, the School currently hires only college graduates to serve as instructors. Many have previous teaching experience before working at the School. The several staff who do not hold four year degrees have significant teaching experience at the School and a track record of strong student achievement as measured by their students’ standardized tests and as monitored through careful educational supervision. They are retained because of their continuing, quality contribution to the School’s stated mission.

As a further indicator of the School’s commitment to represent the best interests of its students, funds are allocated to salary two staff primarily assigned to meeting the educational needs of the School’s “special needs” learners. Birthed through the School’s past association with the National Institute of Learning Disabilities, the School has since developed its own special needs services in the form of the CARE Program (Center for Academic Resource and Enrichment). This is an important element of the School’s commitment to meet the unique learning needs of all its students.

As is the case at many private schools, the Grace Christian staff is solidly committed to the School’s ministry to children and youth. Their inspiration is largely one of a sense of “calling,” and because of this altruistic motivation, they are a primary reason for the success of the School over its thirty-five year history.

**Student Achievement**

The School has experienced strong student achievement throughout its history. With rare exception, Stanford Achievement Test composite scores for all grade levels are in the seventieth through ninetieth percentiles. Actual achievement scores for classes and individual students are often higher than potentially projected by the Otis-Lennon School Ability Test. Summaries of the last five years of Stanford Achievement Test scores are included in the appendix.

Students have also scored solidly on the Preliminary Scholastic Achievement Tests (PSAT’s) and Scholastic Achievement Tests (SAT’s) and American College Testing (ACT’s). In
the 2012-2013 school year, GCS students who took the SAT scored on average over 200 points higher than the highest scoring of seven local public high schools (see appendix). A number of the School’s students have been named as National Merit Scholar Semifinalists, and the 2007-2008 school year saw our first National Merit Scholar finalist. In addition, many of our students are admitted into college honors programs and/or receive substantial college scholarships based on academic achievement. Even though the School does not advertise itself as a college preparatory school, approximately seventy-five to eighty percent of our graduates attend college.

Grace graduates have attended over seventy colleges and universities, including the University of Virginia, Grove City College, Elon University, Gordon College, James Madison University, LeTourneau University, Taylor University, Messiah College, George Mason University, William and Mary, and Virginia Tech. In addition, many students have continued their education in graduate and post-graduate programs, including the College of William and Mary Law School, Columbia University, Eastern Virginia Medical School, Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine, the University of Virginia, and George Mason Law School, to name a few. International colleges and universities attended by Grace graduates include Oxford University in England, Regency University in Canada, Robert Gordon University in Scotland, and the University of Limerick in Ireland. A reasonably complete list of colleges attended by GCS graduates is included in the appendix. In addition, Grace graduates have served with distinction in the armed services, workforce, and in the mission field.

Of the 14 students who took the Advanced Placement English test in the 2012-2013 school year, 12 students received a score of three or four, scores accepted at many post-secondary institutions as exemption or credit for freshman level English courses.

The School participates in local civic awards programs, where Grace students have excelled. In 2006, a Grace senior was the first private school student in the community to win the prestigious Staunton News Leader Athlete Scholar award from among eight public high schools and four private high schools. This honor was repeated by another GCS senior in the 2012-2013 school year. The School’s students have received a number of scholarships from the Augusta County/Staunton Chamber of Commerce Academic Achievers Program, the Veterans of Foreign Wars Voice of Democracy, and Patriots’ Pen writing competitions, and other such programs. Over the years, GCS graduates have been awarded literally thousands of dollars in college scholarships and grants.

Anecdotal information from students and educators/employers indicates that Grace students are well prepared for college and/or the workforce. Students who have transferred into public high schools have frequently been placed in an advanced track and/or advanced placement classes. It appears, in the context of local schools, that the academic standard at Grace is generally advanced by comparison.

More importantly, the School has increasingly been recognized in the community for inculcating citizenship and character values that make Grace students and graduates sought after employees in summer and full-time jobs.
Extra-Curricular Programs

The School has been successful, despite its small size, in offering numerous extra-curricular and/or enrichment activities over the years for its students, including, at various times, the following:

- Worship Band
- Auto Mechanics
- Fine Arts Camp
- Private Music Lessons
- Virginia Boys and Girls State
- Student Leadership Conferences
- Student Government
- Student-led Chapels
- Job Shadowing
- Mentorship Opportunities
- Yearbook Publications
- Web Design
- Computer Programming
- Student Retreats
- Student “Team” Competitions
- Debate
- Drama
- Mock Trial
- Instrumental Band
- Chorus

In addition, drama and fine arts are emphasized as regular classes, along with periodic performances/exhibits both in the School and larger community. Recent drama productions at the high school have included *The Diary of Anne Frank, Omnipotence and the Wheelbarrow Man, Much Ado About Nothing, Cyrano de Bergerac, Little Women: The Musical, and The Importance of Being Earnest.* Yearly musicals and drama presentations are performed each year at the elementary and middle school. Choral concerts at all grade levels include annual Christmas and spring events, as well as presentations in local churches, nursing homes, and other venues.

A youth sports program is offered at the elementary school for fall soccer and winter basketball. A former collegiate coach serves as the School’s boys’ basketball coach and director of the school’s basketball program, as well as conducting sports camps and special seminars for Grace students, as well as the larger community. Depending on student interest, after-school sports are offered for middle through high school students in volleyball, soccer, football, cross country, basketball, wrestling, baseball, golf, track and tennis. The School’s girls’ varsity volleyball program has the distinction of winning seven consecutive Virginia Independent Schools Athletic Association Division III state championships, a quite unique and prestigious accomplishment not duplicated by any other Virginia independent school. Over twenty Grace athlete/scholars have gone on to participate in inter-collegiate sports, many with scholarship assistance.

Student Profile

Student population is evenly spread over the entire grade spectrum of the School, with an average grade size of approximately 19.6 in pre-kindergarten through grade twelve.

The average class size in the pre-kindergarten through sixth grade is thirteen. Forty-six percent are male, and fifty-four percent are females.
The middle school (grades seven and eight) has forty-six students (fifty-four percent male and forty-six percent female), and the high school (grades nine through twelve) has seventy enrolled (thirty-seven male, and thirty-three female).

Nine percent of the School’s students are from minority groups. This is reflective of the local profile based on the 2006 census, which showed that approximately 93.2% of the population of Augusta County consists of “white persons (not Hispanic).”

The remainder of this section deals specifically with the high school population based on survey, census and anecdotal information.

In this 2013-2014 school year, approximately seventy students are enrolled in the high school (grades nine through twelve). Twenty percent of those enrolled are “lifers” (enrolled at Grace since kindergarten). While entrance into the program of the remaining eighty percent is spread fairly even over the grade spectrum, the largest surge of increase seems to be around the sixth through ninth grade years. Anecdotal information indicates that this is the time when some parents become increasingly concerned about problems associated with public education and seek an alternative for their children. Thus, a significant number of Grace students have attended public school at some point in their student life. We find this somewhat ironic, in that most of the School’s enrollment attrition also takes place during these grades, where a significant portion of those who withdraw have had little or no first-hand experience with public education!

We estimate that approximately thirty-three percent of Grace high school students have been home-schooled at one point or another. This may be a growing trend that we are observing as more and more parents seem to be interested in the home school alternative.

In our 2008 survey, eighty-five percent of the high school students indicated they agreed that the School was doing a good job of fulfilling its essential mission statement. Interestingly, while the large majority of high school students were quite supportive of the School’s effectiveness with its spiritual emphasis, students were less enthusiastic about school rules and challenging academic requirements. Over the past two years, the high school principal seems to have made significant progress in minimizing this concern by high school students. However, per our alumni survey, most graduates with the advantage of their hindsight, communicate that school rules and their enforcement are quite reasonable and healthy.

While there are typical student complaints concerning too much homework or that courses are often too demanding, our alumni survey indicates most of the School’s graduates view the academic standard as healthy and believe it should in no way be lessened.

Approximately eighty percent of the Grace high school students indicated they plan to attend college.

As evidence of changing cultural dynamics, ninety-plus percent of the high school students have access to the Internet, and over eighty percent have their own cell phone. Eighty percent of these same students have a Facebook or similar social networking site. In this context, forty percent of the School’s high school students indicated they spend over one hour per day with electronic media—some as many as two or more hours. This single dynamic of the Internet and other electronic media and their burgeoning applications may represent one of the
greatest challenges facing our parents and the School in terms of safeguarding our youth from increasingly pervasive, pop-culture influences.

While television is also a time and influence factor for most Grace high school students, it seems to pale in its influence compared to other electronic media. However, seventy-plus percent indicated watching two or more hours per week of television, videos or theatre attendance. Coupled with other electronic media, this represents significant time in their “free time” activities. We believe our youth are very much influenced by these media sources, often to the detriment of those values which the School is attempting to inculcate.

Other activities occupy our high school students’ time. Interestingly, twenty-nine percent indicated they spend one to two hours per week in church youth group activities. But thirty-six percent indicated spending three to four hours per week, and thirty percent indicated spending four or more hours per week. While the School would view such involvements as positive, one wonders, along with their time spent with the electronic media as well as those who are involved in other extra-curricular activities such as sports and music, where do our students find time to focus on their studies and academic requirements? Obviously, while one realizes that not all Grace students are involved in all of the above-mentioned activities, one quickly can understand the pressure in our culture that militates against maintaining sound academic standards and related values. Indeed, this information is helpful in identifying the unique challenges being faced in raising up the next generation, including our own student body!

Technology in Education

Providing a sound technological infrastructure for staff, parents and students as a fundamental part of our educational program has long been a high priority for the School’s leadership. This aspect of our program is included in this profile section because we are convinced that it is so important to the overall effectiveness of the school.

Approximately twenty years ago, the School began transitioning from several “stand alone” computer labs used primarily to teach students basic keyboarding and word processing skills to building a fairly sophisticated network for both administrative and educational purposes. Working with Vision Technology Group (VTG), the school eventually constructed a network encompassing two campuses with four servers, over 160 PC’s and 15 printers. The educational program focused not only on developing keyboarding skills, but also on teaching students’ the fundamentals of the various Microsoft Office applications. A standardized curriculum published by Global Academics was utilized for grades one through twelve.

Approximately seven years ago, the School engaged RenWeb, a cloud based service by which student records, report cards, and related school records are maintained. RenWeb also provides a means for parents to view their child’s real-time homework assignments, grades, attendance reports, etc., at any time during the term. This service also allows the School to efficiently distribute announcements to parents via phone, text, and email.

In this current school year, the School conducted a successful campaign entitled “The Media Equipped Classroom” to raise money to purchase digital TV’s and / or smart boards, all connected to the internet, in order to equip each GCS classroom with this important technology. With few exceptions, all classrooms are now thusly equipped.
In an effort to remain current with our sense of technology trends in education, it was decided in this 2013-2014 school year to transition most of the School’s educational applications from the Microsoft environment into the Google Apps for Education “cloud” environment. This transition is largely completed as of this writing. In addition, the School has transitioned into using its own “in-house” technology curriculum.

A technology committee consisting of the president of VTG, the directors of information technology services at a local college and a local public school district, and a private industry IT person are working with the School’s leadership in this current school year to craft a five year plan as a map for further upgrades in order to keep the school current with its educational emphasis on equipping its students with those fundamental technology skills necessary for college and the work place.

**An Ongoing Process of Self-Study and School Improvement**

The School has a long tradition of remaining engaged in an on-going process of self-study/evaluation and implementation of school improvement initiatives. An appendix lists many of these initiatives as undertaken in recent years.
Section III

Responses to SAIS/SACS Standards & Indicators

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SAIS ACCREDITATION 2013

SAIS accreditation remains one of the most sought after accreditation models for high quality independent schools throughout the southeast. The process is based on the three coordinated aspects of adherence to standards, a thorough self-study and planning based on self-study, and a visit from peers.

Think of the process as a three-legged stool: all three legs must be intact for the stool to stand. In the same way, schools must engage in all three phases of the process in order to achieve SAIS accreditation.

THREE LEGS OF ACCREDITATION
Adhere to community and research based standards
Conduct a thorough self-study that leads to institutional Goals for strengthening mission fulfillment
Host an external review from peer educational leaders
STANDARD 1: Mission
The school commits to a mission that leads to continuous improvement for teaching and learning.

An SAIS accredited school’s mission guides decision-making, allocation of resources, and the building of community.

STANDARD 2: Governance and Leadership
The school provides a governance, leadership, and organizational structure that promotes its mission.

In an SAIS accredited school, trustees and administrators clearly understand their roles and are advocates for the school’s mission, vision, and continuous improvement. Leaders encourage collaboration and shared responsibility for school improvement among stakeholders.

STANDARD 3: Teaching and Learning
The school provides a curriculum and instructional methods that facilitate achievement of all students in support of its mission.

An SAIS accredited school provides a curriculum that reflects best practices, strategies, and activities. The curriculum includes clearly defined expectations for student development that are subject to review and revision at regular intervals.

STANDARD 4: Stakeholder Communication and Relationships
The school develops and maintains effective communication and relationships to further its mission.

An SAIS accredited school communicates clearly and accurately with its stakeholders and encourages collaboration to further its mission.

STANDARD 5: Resources and Support Systems
The school has the resources, services, and policies necessary to support its mission.

An SAIS accredited school has sufficient human and material resources, employs a qualified and competent staff, and provides ongoing professional development. The school has well-defined and communicated policies and procedures to promote a safe, healthy, and orderly environment.
The school commits to a mission that leads to continuous improvement for teaching and learning.

An SAIS accredited school’s mission guides decision-making, allocation of resources, and the building of community.

**STANDARD 1 — INDICATORS:**

1.1 The mission of Grace Christian School is “to assist Christian parents by providing a sound academic education in a Christ-centered environment designed to prepare our young people to know God and to live in obedience to his will for their lives.” This has been the essential vision for the School since its founding in 1980. This succinct statement is included in all primary school documents, including the governing board’s by-laws, admissions materials, handbooks, the Parents’ Understanding and Commitment Form, as well as being posted throughout school facilities. In considering initiatives and new policies for the school, the governing board and administrative leadership ask the simple question, “How does this potential initiative or policy help the school fulfill its fundamental mission?”

Furthermore, the governing board and administrative leadership, with stakeholder input, engages in an on-going process of evaluating programs and their effectiveness as well as in designing new initiatives in order to help ensure the School’s success in impacting the students and their families per the School’s fundamental mission statement. Evidence of such alignment between goals and policy are reflected in school handbooks and ancillary documents.

Because of its relevance to this indicator, an excerpt from the school’s *Educational Philosophy* follows:

Grace Christian School operates on the belief that all meaningful learning takes place in the context of God’s existence as the infinite, personal God who has revealed Himself through the person of Jesus Christ. While we emphasize the development of intellectual capacity and academic skills, we believe the higher goal of Christian education is the cultivation of Christ-like character. The development of Christian character is the bedrock that makes the individual who he or she will ultimately become and largely determines the quality of his or her life, both in terms of personal fulfillment as well as serving the will of God and the higher good of society. We believe an education that neglects this priority of Christian character development is fundamentally flawed.

An equally important priority is stated in Proverbs 1:7: “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.” All learning must be integrated from this starting point and is meaningful only in the context of man’s acknowledgement of God’s existence. Learning which takes place outside of this context is what the Apostle Paul calls “empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.” Paul further exhorts believers in Christ “to see to it that no one takes you captive” through such philosophy (Colossians 2:8). Thus, in addition to training our students in Christian character, we believe it is equally important to give them a Christ-centered orientation in all areas of their learning and social experience from the time they enter pre-kindergarten through their graduation as seniors from high school.
While we believe in the notion of absolute truth as it is articulated in the Bible, we also believe the Christian worldview, if properly understood, does not stifle freedom of inquiry or diversity of viewpoints. If the claims of Christianity truly represent what the philosophers call a “unified field of knowledge” in relation to all of reality, then our Christian position should fully embrace an openness and honesty in intellectual inquiry and encourage the same in our students. It is in this context that we believe in the traditional notion of a truly liberal arts education where students are exposed to a diversity of ideas and taught to think for themselves.

1.2 Assures that goals are aligned with and advance the mission of the school.

The goals should be aligned with and reflective of the mission of the school and congruent with academic aspirations that guide SAIS member schools. Examples of such alignment can typically be found in the school’s strategic plan, its self-study, minutes of meetings about school policy and administrative/faculty decisions, etc. Schools should ask themselves, “Will this goal help us carry out and fulfill our mission?”

A multi-layered system of accountability is built into the School’s organizational structure to help assure that goals are aligned with and advance the mission of the School. Through the governing board, high school parent advisory board, administrative leadership team, high school academic council, regularly scheduled staff meetings, a professional development emphasis focusing on accomplishing the School’s fundamental mission, opportunities for annual interviews with grade eight through eleven parents, and similar means of engaging all stake-holders helps assure a continual focus on remaining true to the School’s essential sense of mission. Evidence of such alignment is reflected in minutes of meetings, school handbooks, strategic plans and self studies.

1.3 Ensures the beliefs and mission guide the instruction and curriculum throughout the school and reflect research and best practices concerning teaching and learning.

Regular discussions about educational philosophy, developmental psychology, and organizational design should clearly reference the mission. Debate about new directions or new methods of teaching/learning should evidence consideration of the mission, in some cases, suggesting review of the mission itself. If the mission is sound, it will allow for wide ranging discussion on methods and means of achieving it.

Per our over-arching philosophy as a Christian school, we believe there must be an inherent unity between our fundamental mission and best pedagogical practices and curriculum that are based on credible research and a measurable track record of student achievement. While there are certain tried and true, commonly accepted approaches to curriculum and pedagogy, we believe a healthy educational institution must remain flexible and open to new ideas and techniques. Therefore, we encourage on-going and open dialogue among board members, staff, and stakeholders concerning all aspects of school life, with a desire to enhance a culture of continuous improvement. Significant, potentially new initiatives are generally discussed and debated in depth amongst administration and staff, and where appropriate, parents and students are given opportunity for input in the dialogue.

Discussions concerning pedagogy and curriculum are based, in part, on the following standard questions:
Does the pedagogy and curriculum

- Help fulfill the School’s mission and reinforce fundamental, biblical values in the students?

- Represent a mastery of content typically associated with the subject and developmental level of the students?

- Stimulate intellectual curiosity in fostering a desire for learning and developing critical thinking skills?

- Reflect the content and skills considered essential for student success?

1.4 Regularly reviews its mission and revises when appropriate.

A forceful, vital mission requires that schools and their governing boards review the mission statement periodically. Without regular review and reconsideration, a mission can become nothing more than a historical landmark in the school’s existence. This indicator should not be taken as an expectation that the mission statement will be changed each year; many remain useful for decades. But missions do require maintenance and careful consideration if they are to influence the work of the school. The intervals and timing for such review are up to the school.

As a fundamental part of its strategic function, the board is charged with ensuring that the school maintains its distinct mission emphasis and does so through regular discussions questioning and evaluating the school’s effectiveness therein. The priority of being a distinctly mission driven program is evidenced in the by-laws under which the Board of Trustees operates.

Furthermore, the administrative leadership team is engaged on an on-going basis in evaluating its effectiveness in carrying out the mission as set forth by the board and remains open to discovering new ways to more effectively apply this long-standing vision.

1.5 Provides evidence that no form of bias or prejudice is allowed or practiced within the mission scope of the school in order to promote an equitable, just, and inclusive community that inspires students to respect and value diversity.

Assuming that the mission is lawful and powerful for guiding the development of children, no SAIS member school should fear that its mission is too “out of the mainstream.” One of the grand
foundations of non-public education in this nation, dating back to the Pierce v. Society of Sisters decision at the beginning of the last century, is the assurance that all schools have a right to exist as long as they obey established law and serve the general public interest in improving the citizen life of the nation. Within the meaning of this standard and indicator, SAIS member schools go the extra mile of assuring that, within the meaning of their mission, they allow no discrimination and, in fact, promote diverse communities and interactions with fairness and equity.

The School's formal, non-discriminatory policy states: “Grace Christian School admits students of any race, color, national or ethnic origin to all rights, privileges, programs and activities generally made available to students at the school and does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national or ethnic origin in administering its educational policies, admission policies, and athletic and other school administered programs” (Proverbs 28:21; Galatians 3:28; Romans 15:7).

This statement is more than mere formality, in that it is consistent with and inherent to the School's deeply held conviction that all members of the human race are created in God's image and, therefore, to be treated with respect, dignity and equal opportunity. Any form of discrimination based on race, color, national or ethnic origin is contrary to the fundamentals of the biblical belief and value system which under-girds the School's overall philosophy.
STANDARD 2: GOVERNANCE & LEADERSHIP

The school provides a governance, leadership, and organizational structure that promotes its mission.

In an SAIS accredited school, trustees and administrators clearly understand their roles and are advocates for the school’s mission, vision, and continuous improvement. Leaders encourage collaboration and shared responsibility for school improvement among stakeholders.

STANDARD 2 – INDICATORS:

2.1 Operates within the jurisdiction of a governance structure or civil authority and, when necessary, has a charter, license, or permit to operate within that jurisdiction.

Evidence should point toward the by laws, charter or license that clearly states the authority of a school-based, 501(C)(3) credentialed board that makes decisions, typically related to every aspect of policy governing school life and organization. Schools that function under the authority of another 501(C)(3) authority, such as an ecclesiastical bishop or national organization, or as a proprietary school must show the location of evidence that such authority has been delegated to the school.

The School is a 501 (c) (3) organization as registered with the Internal Revenue Service and operates under the authority of an independent school board that makes all final decisions related the governance of the School. By-laws establish the authority of the school board as an independent governing agency. The School complies with all known federal and state requirements.

2.2 Complies with all applicable statutes and governmental regulations.

While this is a difficult expectation to guarantee, the spirit of this indicator expects the school to assume responsibility for compliance “to the best of the school’s knowledge” and to point the visiting team members toward supporting documentation. It should be remembered that non-compliance with some laws and regulations (i.e., number of days in the school year, fire codes, zoning regulations) could put the school in legal and financial jeopardy.

Schools offering extended day programs and/or serving children younger than (senior) kindergarten shall provide evidence that they know and meet applicable state statutes and requirements related to pre-k programs. Typically, a state agency prescribes regulations for these programs and schools may or may not qualify for exemptions. To be considered for SAIS accreditation, these programs must be part of the overall school program and included in the school’s standards compliance and self study and must be operating in full compliance with the state agency and/or must demonstrate exemption from regulation.

To the best of our knowledge, the School is in compliance with all federal, state, and local statutes and regulations, including Internal Revenue Service reporting, mandatory attendance, fire, safety
and health codes, food establishment inspections, criminal background checks for employees, zoning regulations, Virginia codes for reporting suspected child abuse, federal asbestos management requirements, Virginia Department of Education guidelines for crisis management, hazardous weather and pandemic flu planning, regulations concerning operation of a pre-kindergarten program, an after-school program, and related issues. Documentation of compliance is contained in various files and handbooks in both school offices and readily accessible for inspection.

2.3 Obtains necessary information about the legal requirements and obligations that exist in the state, federal, or other jurisdictions in which it operates.

*Leaders in a school should demonstrate that they have access to the information regarding legal requirements necessary to operate a school. The name(s), affiliations, and relationships should be indicated in the school records.*

A primary means for the School to remain current with federal and state regulations is through its professional memberships with the Southern Association of Independent Schools, the Association of Christian Schools International, and the Virginia Council for Private education.

When legal counsel is needed, the School depends primarily upon the services of Mr. Douglas N. Noland, Jr. of the law firm Black, Noland & Read, P.L.C., located in Staunton, Virginia. In addition, the School has occasionally consulted with John Cooley of Wooten Hart, P. L. C., located in Roanoke, Virginia, because of his background in school law. Documentation of the School’s dealings with legal counsel is on file in the business office.

The School utilizes the services of Ritchie, Withers and Masincup, PC, to perform financial audits or reviews and to advise the school of relevant federal and state requirements pertaining to finance issues.

2.4 Establishes by its governing process policies to ensure no conflict of interest between businesses, professional or parental roles and duties to the school.

*No economic or other advantage must come to a board member because of his or her role on the board or affiliation with the school. Board members should not participate in discussions that relate to conflicts of interest involving their businesses, or themselves, or their family relationships. Annual signed consent forms, orientation, and on-going training are typical methods of demonstrating adherence.*

Article II, Section 2.10 of the by-laws provides a definition of potential conflicts of interest for trustees and requires full disclosure to the entire board if any member believes there is a potential conflict. Individual trustees are asked to sign and “Board Members Understanding and Commitment Form” annually affirming their understanding of this and related issues.
2.5 Assures that the governance structure supports and models inclusive decision-making methods.

A governance best practice is for Boards to follow procedures during meetings that allow for open and confidential conversations; and likewise to develop protocols to speak as one voice outside of meetings. Examples from the minutes, board orientation, and ongoing training are excellent indicators.

Inclusive decision-making by board members is required as stated in various sections of the by-laws and per by-law guidelines for conducting meetings. Minutes of board meetings are available as examples of the decision making process.

2.6 Assures that the governance structure establishes comprehensive monitoring of overall school policies.

The governing board establishes regular methods for monitoring policies while balancing the need for the managers of the school to address day-to-day concerns. Board minutes, retreat agendas, schedules of regular reports received, list of “dashboard metrics” the board uses, or other meeting minutes can attest to this.

Included in the by-laws under “Standing Policies: Governance Process, Section 3.14.4,” the head of School is required to “provide the board with regular reports on overall compliance with school policies,” as well as report any noncompliance. Board minutes and agendas are available for documentation.

2.7 The school engages in formal and regular strategic thinking and planning aligned with its vision, mission, and beliefs and provides for the continuity of mission.

Evidence of visioning and planning must be made clear and a current strategic plan must exist and be available for review. A strategic planning process that is mission-driven, comprehensive of all facets of the school, and inclusive of representatives of all stakeholder groups, could serve as the basis for the school’s self-study and school report as a required component for accreditation; if the strategic plan does not meet this “three question test,” then it cannot serve as the basis of self-study for accreditation.

School leadership engages in an on-going process of strategic thinking and planning, striving continually to “sharpen the edge” in terms of the School’s effectiveness in fulfilling its mission. Evidence of such thinking is contained in informal notes, minutes of board and administrative team meetings, and, more formally, in strategic planning documents available for inspection.
Furthermore, The Board is charged in its by-laws with “determin[ing] School policies in accordance with the By-Laws and under the guidance of the mission statement, statement of faith, and unique distinctives of the School” (Article II: Section 2.01.B). These distinctives are stated throughout the by-laws, standing board polices, and appendices, as well as other school documents.

2.8 Assures that the governance structure provides for stability in transitions of leadership.

*Orderly succession planning and practice helps to ensure the continuity of mission. Succession plans should account for board member and board leadership transitions as well as head of school transition. Policy statements, planning documents, by-laws, related minutes or meeting notes can be used to demonstrate attention to this important governance duty.*

The by-laws and standing board policies provide clear guidelines for the selection of new board members, the removal (if necessary) of current board members and/or head of school, as well as protocols for the hiring of a new head of school. While the board is in only its sixth year of existence, election of several new board members and the “retirement” of several former members have been conducted in an orderly manner as documented in board minutes. In addition, there has been one headmaster transition, also conducted in an orderly manner, per guidelines in the by-laws. Currently, the headmaster is mentoring a younger man in hopes of his assuming headmaster responsibilities at some point in the foreseeable future.

2.9 Assures that the governance structure clearly defines roles and responsibilities for board members and the head of school, and provides procedures for: orientation; continuous growth, renewal and training; and evaluation of both the board and the head of school.

*Job descriptions, by-laws, head’s contract, agendas, meeting minutes, orientation and evaluation protocols for head and board are some examples of evidence. A board handbook may serve as a repository for these things.*

A board manual, which clearly articulates trustee roles and responsibilities, is provided to each board member. At each meeting, the board reviews at least one portion of the by-laws and standing board policies to help ensure conformity to its guidelines and directives. The by-laws require the chair to meet individually with any new director to ensure his/her familiarity with the fundamental role of the board and appropriate protocols for individual directors.

General guidelines pertaining to the head of school’s role in administering the School and his/her unique relationship to the board as its sole employee are also clearly articulated in the board manual. A formal evaluation of the headmaster is conducted annually by the governing board.

Effective in the 2012/13 school year, the board implemented an annual self-evaluation format to measure its own sense of growth in effectively providing strategic leadership for the School. The board has also designated at least one annual meeting for the purpose of board training to help ensure renewal and growth toward more effective strategic leadership.
Evidence of the above is contained in various documents, including the School Board Manual, and School Board Minutes.

2.10 **Has an organizational structure that includes separate entities that carry out the distinct functions of governance and day-to-day management.**

*Typical responsibilities of the governing board include: employ, nurture, support, and evaluate the administrative head of the school; manage the investments and commission the audit of the school; assume fiduciary responsibility for the school; set policy for the school. Typical day-to-day responsibilities of the administrative head of the school include: oversight of personnel, curriculum (as well as extra and co-curricular offerings), and student life; administration of the approved budget. Policy manuals, employment documents, by-laws, admissions materials, board handbook statements can be used to demonstrate adherence to this indicator.*

Article IV of the by-laws requires the board to hire an administrative head of school as the board’s sole employee. By-laws clearly articulate the distinction between the board’s strategic governance and the head of school’s administrative responsibilities in carrying out the board’s wishes. Board policy clearly restricts the board and its individual members from interfering in the administrative prerogatives as they are solely reserved for the head of school. Typical responsibilities of the head of school are outlined in the Article IV of the School Board Manual.

The board formally evaluates the headmaster on an annual basis.

Board by-laws establish the role of the board in assuming fiduciary responsibility for the school and holding the head of school accountable for his day-to-day management of the School’s budget. A finance committee appointed by the board generally meets monthly with the head to ensure reasonable financial accountability.

2.11 **Establishes policies and procedures that recognize and preserve the executive, administrative, and leadership prerogatives of the managers of the school and assure that the governance structure does not interfere with the day-to-day operations of the school.**

*Clear statements in the board policy manual, the bylaws, the board minutes, and/or the school handbooks are evidence of the head’s authority.*

Article IV of the by-laws, as well as the board “Standing Policies: Governance Process, Section 3.7 Operational Authority,” clearly articulates the head of school’s executive, administrative, and leadership prerogatives as the chief executive officer. The *Administrative Policies and Procedures Manual* and other school handbooks provide additional evidence of the head of school’s executive role in providing leadership to the School.
2.12 Assures that the administrative head of the school allocates and aligns the human, instructional, financial, and physical resources in support of the vision, mission, and beliefs of the school. The school head shall have responsibility for the expenditure of all funds raised in the name of the school by booster clubs and other related organizations of students, parents, alumni, or supporters.

Clear statements in the board policy manual, the bylaws, the board minutes, and/or the school handbooks are evidence of the head’s authority.

The School’s organizational flow chart (Administrative Policies and Procedures Manual, Appendix, 1E) and finance statements illustrate the allocation of all school personnel and resources to the direct fulfillment of the School's vision, mission, and beliefs. The head of school, as indicated in the by-laws and standing board polices, is charged with the oversight of the entire budget, including all monies obtained through fundraising done in the name of the school by any group of students, parents, alumni, or supporters.

2.13 Assures that the governing body provides adequate risk management policies for the protection of the school and adequate documentation of insurance or equivalent resources to protect its financial stability and administrative operations from protracted proceedings and claims for damage.

Descriptions of risk management practices and policies, copies of insurance policies, agreements with pro bono or retained counsel, description of equivalent resources are possible resources to document adherence.

The School maintains liability insurance via Weaver Insurance Agency covering the School as well as individual policies for each administrator. Copies of these policies are available in the business office.

In addition, the school requires its parents and staff to sign a binding arbitration agreement that all disputes will be resolved by a due process of appeals leading, if necessary, to final resolution through the mediation of an arbitrator (or arbitrators) mutually agreed upon by the School and complainant. See copies of this agreement in the staff contracts found in the appendices of the Human Resource Policies and Procedure Manual, and the Parents’ Understanding and Commitment Form found in the Parent Handbook, page 52.

2.14 Assures that debt service or lines of credit are managed in such ways as to ensure that fiscal responsibility remains under the control of the governing authority.
The location of financial records regarding debt and credit should be made clear to the visiting team.

At present, the school holds no debt or lines of credit.

The by-laws charge the board with full responsibility for the School’s fiscal oversight. All financial records are on file in the School’s business office.

2.15 Assures that the school is not in, nor in prospect of moving into, financial reorganization under the protection of bankruptcy.

Absence of litigation or court proceedings provides clear evidence. Further evidence might include the lack of any board level records of discussion of liquidation or bankruptcy, and the operation of the school without extensive debt and within a balanced budget for more than one year.

The most recent financial audit documenting the School’s financial condition is on file in the business office. The school has operated within a balanced budget throughout its history.

2.16 Budgets sufficient resources to support its educational programs and plans for improvement and maintains a plan to fund a maintenance reserve.

The financial reports of the school must be made available to the team on the campus. The evidence of a reserve fund in place indicates that the school takes this need seriously and although there is not a specific amount to be set aside, fiscally prudent and sound schools provide for future maintenance or programmatic needs based on the school’s financial capacity, its physical plant size and age, and the complexity of its programs.

Financial statements, the annual budget, and related documents are available in the business office and evidence the allocation of funding necessary to carry on the School’s educational program and plans for improvement.

The school seeks to maintain a reserve fund of no less than $150,000.00. It has been the School’s experience that this amount has been adequate.

2.17 Maintains its accounts in accordance with Generally Accepted Accounting Principles (GAAP). Its accounts are reviewed or audited annually by an independent licensed accountant. A full audit is conducted in the year before the visit.
Business manuals, procedure handbooks, a copy of the audit, and business manager knowledge provide evidence of this. Note: To be in compliance, a school must hold a full audit for the year prior to their accreditation visit and minimally reviews in the intervening years. It is a best practice to conduct audits annually.

All accounts are maintained by the School's business manager in accordance with sound accounting principles. School finances are audited once in a five-year cycle corresponding with accreditation, with reviews conducted the other four years, all by Ritchie, Withers & Masincup, a certified public accounting firm located in Staunton, Virginia. Finance procedures and policies, the audit report and reviews, and other specific records and documents are filed in the business office and available for inspection.
STANDARD 3: TEACHING & LEARNING

The school provides a curriculum and instructional methods that facilitate achievement of all students in support of its mission.

An SAIS accredited school provides a curriculum that reflects best practices, strategies, and activities. The curriculum includes clearly defined expectations for student development that are subject to review and revision at regular intervals.

STANDARD 3 — INDICATORS:

3.1 Develops and aligns the curriculum and instructional design with the school’s mission and expectations for student performance.

The visiting team will be looking for evidence in conversations and written statements about the teaching and learning philosophy of the school. Remember that the emphasis here is on broad subject/grade levels, not within individual classes or courses. The mission language should show up often in minutes or official notes of division meetings and in the descriptions of how the school organizes its instructional program to accomplish its objectives.

As one individual has observed, most learning is “caught” rather than taught, meaning that a formal system of education is only as effective as the “flesh and blood” element that administers the educational program. That is, students are perceptive and “catch” most of their lasting educational benefit as a result of the character example and worldview as modeled by those who serve as their teachers. Thus it is that a primary aspect of the School’s successful fulfillment of its mission results from its striving to hire only staff whose lifestyles effectively model the Christian values and worldview consistent with the School’s statement of faith. This “living curriculum” is not so easily defined on paper, but is really at the heart of the School’s fulfillment of its fundamental mission and is one of its highest priorities.

In previous years, staff have been trained through in-service sessions to integrate worldview emphasis in all subject areas using an approach developed by Don Johnson and Christian Overman as articulated in their manual, Making the Connections. In more recent years, there has been a great deal of emphasis on in-service sessions intended to train staff to incorporate the different levels of learning through the application of Bloom’s Taxonomy to lesson planning. Christian worldview classes are taught in grades 4-12 using curricula that is thoughtfully developed and aligned with the School’s mission and student expectations.

The School exercises diligence in selecting those textbooks which staff and administration believe best represent the fundamental mission of the School in both its spiritual and academic emphasis. A Curriculum/Textbook Evaluation Form reflects criteria for selecting texts in accordance with the School’s fundamental mission. (See Administrative Policies and Procedures Manual, Appendix 1J.) Supplemental curriculum is often integrated into various subject areas to support expectations for student learning.
Furthermore, in order to bring an inherent unity among all instructional staff in terms of their formal instruction, curriculum guides for every subject for grades K – 12 document the curriculum and instructional design with the School’s expectations for student performance across subject areas and grade levels clearly articulated in the context of the school’s fundamental mission. Other forms and handbooks reinforce the School’s effort to continually emphasize the foundational goal of tying instruction and curriculum in with the larger Christian worldview. Staff meetings also provide frequent reinforcement of the School’s educational philosophy and general mission emphasis.

Examples of documents and forms verifying compliance with this indicator are located in various manuals, handbooks, minutes, guides, and forms and are available upon request.

3.2 **Designs curriculum to encourage students to reach their potential.**

Encouraging students to reach their potential may suggest vigorous coursework and co-curricular activities, differentiation, AP, Honors, IB programs, dual enrollment, or a myriad of other opportunities and approaches. Independent schools commit to the uniqueness of students and have designed curriculum with individuals in mind.

The School makes every effort through its CARE Program (Center for Academic Resource and Enrichment) at the elementary and middle schools to diagnose and effectively interface with the unique learning requirements of special needs students. Curriculum and materials used in the CARE Program are specifically chosen and designed to support the students in learning to their full potential. This program is outlined in the **CARE Program Manual**. In addition, special needs students are carefully monitored at the high school and their learning requirements accommodated or modified as needed, as well as providing tutoring and other resources in order to help these students achieve success in school.

Student potential is of high consideration when placing middle school students into math classes. A specific process is in place for making these determinations. (See **Administrative Policies and Procedures Manual, Appendix 1L**)

Gifted students at the high school level are able to enroll in honors, dual enrollment and advanced placement courses. In some cases, high school students are able to enroll in on-line classes, distance learning courses through the Virginia State Department of Education (Virtual VA) or matriculate locally at Blue Ridge Community College for dual credits. These opportunities are outlined in the **High School Guidance Manual**.

Classroom teachers take student potential very seriously when developing lesson plans by incorporating a wide range of methods, activities, and supplemental material into the core curriculum to meet individual needs. Furthermore, the School remains open to undertaking
new academic initiatives when significant academic needs become apparent in specific subject areas. (See articles on the School’s reading enrichment initiative in *The Grace Gazette*; November, 2012)

One professional development focus in recent years has been differentiation. Classroom teachers have collaborated in book study groups, workshops, and other meetings to learn how to encourage students to reach their potential and to meet individual needs through specific methods, activities, curriculum, and other integrations.

The school provides numerous opportunities for students to develop their potential in the areas of music, art, and drama both during school hours and in extra curricular activities.

3.3 Provides for articulation and alignment across all subject areas and levels of schools.

*The visiting team will be looking for evidence in conversations and written statements and curriculum guides about the coordination of the teaching and learning philosophy of the school. Cohesive mission language should show up often in minutes or official notes of division meetings and in the descriptions of how the school organizes its instructional program to accomplish its objectives.*

There is significant and on-going communication among the primary leadership staff representing all levels of the program. In addition, department heads at the high school are not only increasingly engaged with overseeing their specific departments, but also in dialogueing with middle school and elementary staff concerning transition and alignment issues from the early grades through high school. Grade level classroom teachers collaborate regularly to plan and ensure that specific subject area objectives are taught. Minutes of departmental and grade level meetings, as well as other collaborative groups, are located in the *Minutes and Agendas Notebook*. Alignment across specific subject areas and grade levels is outlined in the School's *Curriculum Guides*.

In order to maintain alignment with curriculum objectives in the early elementary grades and to ensure that pre-school students are well prepared for kindergarten, the teachers at these levels schedule regular collaboration meetings to ensure that readiness skills and developmental activities are at the core and foundation of the pre-school and kindergarten programs.

Middle/high school administrators meet each spring to share specific student information regarding rising freshmen, including special needs profiles. Periodic meetings are specifically dedicated to evaluating middle school to high school transition, including general orientation meetings for new parents as well as for rising high school students and their parents. Faculty meetings consisting of teachers representing different subject and grade levels further demonstrate the school's attention to alignment between levels. Teachers discuss such issues as integrating subject matter and study skills, coordinating field trips, curriculum changes, and special needs students. *The Academic Council provides further academic continuity throughout all grade levels.* *(see *Administrative Policies and Procedures Manual, Appendix 1F*)
Effective the 2012/13 school year, the school meets at least once annually with each set of eighth through eleventh grade parents to involve them in evaluating and planning their child's educational track and any special vocational/mentorship programs or related community activities that might enhance their child’s overall educational experience. (See Student Path to Career and Calling: An overview to the guidance process at GCS and The College Handbook)

3.4 Implements curriculum based on clearly defined expectations for student learning.

There are numerous right approaches to expectations for student learning. These expectations should be understood by all and should be enumerated, as best as possible in admission materials, handbooks, curriculum guides, etc. and should be the subject of minutes of faculty or department meetings. Note that this curriculum must be implemented.

As noted in 3.1, Curriculum Guides for every subject, grades K – 12, document and clearly define the specific curriculum and instructional design with the school's expectations and objectives for student learning across subject areas. As is the case in any healthy school, the issue of curriculum never remains static; there is an on-going evaluation of existing curricula and consideration of updated and/or new materials through a process of dialogue and evaluation among instructional and administrative staff. In this context, all core curricula is systematically evaluated at least once each five years. The Curriculum/Textbook Evaluation Form also provides related guidelines. (see Administrative Policies and Procedures Manual, Appendix 1J)

The School's Supervisor of Instruction works closely with classroom teachers to ensure that all curricula is implemented and that necessary supplemental and support materials are provided in order for students to meet learning expectations.

The Expectations for Student Learning and Performance are included in the Academic Notebook, and the Staff Handbook, page 1.

3.5 Emphasizes elements of collaboration and collegiality that include honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, responsibility, citizenship, self-discipline, and respect for others.

Evidence of these attributes in the mission, objectives, program, curriculum, and co-curricular activities are useful pieces of evidence. Surveys can provide an important means of assessing the effectiveness of the school’s efforts to emphasize these elements.

A 2013 parent survey indicated that 94.1% of our parents think the School is doing well, very well, or extremely well in “character education.”

These character elements are emphasized at our elementary, middle school, and high school chapels. In addition, the elementary and middle students are involved in a Manners Matters Program and Honors Club where students who model exemplary manners and character qualities are publicly recognized. Each year, one eighth grader receives the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) Good Citizenship Award.
The sixth grade leads a Prayer Group / Outreach Program with grades K-5th. The sixth grade students learn leadership and responsibility while working in teams to teach and model character qualities, Biblical principles, and many other positive attributes to the younger students.

The School's Outreach and Missions Program incorporates activities and projects that emphasize respect and care for others in the local community as well as abroad (see Special Events and Outreach Notebooks).

At the high school, end-of-the-year awards designed to recognize students who model specific character qualities as defined in the High School Student Handbook are presented. In addition, high school students participate in several community awards programs designed to recognize student leadership and citizenship.

The Stewardship Program at both campuses helps students learn how to work together, to be good stewards, to respect property, to be responsible, and to be accountable to one another.

Students at the School, with rare exception, respect each other’s property and there is a feeling of trust. This is evidenced by the fact that there are no locks on student lockers and students feel comfortable leaving their belongings unattended.

To further develop citizenship, character, teamwork, and leadership skills, the high school student body is organized into leadership teams. These teams serve the community, their peers and the elementary and middle school through various projects and activities.

The School’s systematic Bible curriculum places a strong emphasis on character building, integrity, godly living, and respect for others. GCS students participate in Bible classes in grades PreK-11 and the high school seniors are required to take a Worldview and Philosophies class.

The high school ministries class provides regular opportunities for students to engage in service. Examples of outreach include serving with the local Special Olympics program, the VASCI (organization that provides housing for mentally ill individuals), and Project GROWS (a nearby community farm that helps children overcome obesity). Individual students from the class have also been involved in a tutoring program at Valley Mission and a craft Christmas outreach for Love, Inc. Students have also sponsored a donuts and hot chocolate drive to raise money for Heritage House (orphanage) in Cambodia, beans and rice challenge to raise money for Valley Mission, a Philippines’ emergency relief drive, and tutoring children in a local public school as "reading buddies."
Other evidences of the School’s emphasis on personal integrity, character qualities, and citizenship are laced throughout its various handbooks, curriculum guides, and manuals.

3.6 Schedules instructional time to support student learning.

Apart from requirements of state law, such time should be evident in the scheduling documents for the school.

Various school documents, including the master calendar and daily schedules, document the School’s commitment to protecting instructional time designed to accomplish the School’s primary goal of student learning. Interruptions to the normal, daily schedule are generally designed to enhance instruction in the classroom through field trips, special assemblies, etc.

Classroom teachers complete and submit various self evaluation forms each quarter or semester. These forms further document accountability for use of instructional time and other professional responsibilities.

In addition, all elementary teachers must submit a general class schedule to the principal at the beginning of each school year documenting the daily time frames for every subject for a full week (as practiced throughout the year). Middle school and high school class schedules are filed in the school offices. Additionally, teachers at the high school submit weekly lesson plans to the principal each Monday.

Teachers, at all levels, are held accountable by the Supervisor of Instruction and school principals through classroom observations and evaluation meetings. Teachers at the elementary and middle school submit lesson plans periodically and meet with the administration for evaluation and accountability. Lesson plans, class schedules, and observation reports are on file in each principal’s office.

3.7 Plans a mission-appropriate academic calendar with a minimum of 170 days, or more if required by state law, during which students and teachers engage in teaching/learning activities (Note: for half-day kindergarten programs, one-half day is equivalent to one full day in meeting the 170-day standard).

Evidence of compliance with state law is adequate, along with a copy of the school’s calendar. Note that although state law differs, generally the requirement is a minimum of the equivalent of 180 days of instruction at 4-6.5 hours per day (720-1170 total hours).

The school utilizes a school year calendar based on 180 school days / 990 instructional hours. The regulations for the state of Virginia are included in Appendix 2F in our Administrative Policies and Procedures Manual.
The high school day begins at 8:05 AM and ends at 3:20 PM, representing approximately 1,105 instructional hours per year. This exceeds the Commonwealth of Virginia requirement of 990 instructional hours by approximately 115 hours.

The elementary/middle school begins at 8:10 AM and ends at 3:10 PM, representing approximately 1,038 instructional hours per year. This exceeds the Commonwealth of Virginia requirement of 990 instructional hours by approximately 48 hours.

The School’s kindergarten program fully complies with the Commonwealth of Virginia requirement of 180 school days and minimum number of instructional hours, as well as the SAIS/SACS indicator as stated above.

3.8 Assures that the curriculum relies on sound learning principles, based on relevant research and provides a mission appropriate, well-balanced variety of educational experiences for all students.

The heart and soul of a school is teaching and learning and its commitment to engaging the relevant research regarding teaching and learning. In-service programs, professional development, and/or other faculty seminars can assure attention to these principles and experiences.

All curricula (described in the School’s comprehensive curriculum guide) is based on sound learning principles commonly accepted in the larger educational community. The bulk of the School’s curricula and texts are generated by respected educational publishers, placing our curricula in the mainstream of traditional materials and practices.

There is an on-going emphasis in staff meetings on training staff in various research based instructional techniques, including such examples as cooperative learning groups, differentiation, use of graphic organizers, development of study skills, classical integrations (logic, rhetoric, debate, mock trial, literature/history integrations, Excellence in Writing curriculum), use of Bloom’s Taxonomy in developing critical thinking skills, etc. The School uses numerous cutting-edge professional development resources from educational groups such as ASCD (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development), ACSI (Association of Christian Schools International), and SDE (Staff Development Educators). The School also provides opportunities for teachers to gain knowledge of sound learning principles through its professional development plan (see Standard 5.4). These and other training sessions are documented in the Academic Manual, Minutes and Agendas Notebook, and Professional Development Notebooks.
The School's *Course Descriptions* and other documents verify the inclusion of programs in music, art, drama, physical education, field trips, student government, and other student opportunities complimentary to the core academic program.

3.9 **Assures that the curriculum promotes the active involvement of students in the learning process, including opportunities to explore application of higher order thinking skills and to investigate new approaches in applying learning.**

*The school must provide examples (written and/or observable) of such activities.*

The active involvement of students in the learning process is evidenced in various documents and activities, including *Academic Notebooks*, the *Curriculum Guides*, the *High School Student Handbook*, *Special Events and Outreach Notebook*, and teacher observation forms used by supervisors for observations and evaluations of teachers. Other evidence includes student participation in various competitions (i.e. poetry, writing, debates, mock congress, mock trial, etc.), student-led chapels, student government, science labs, community service, job shadowing, and the School’s technology program. Logic classes are taught in grades 8 – 10, and various thinking skills curricula are implemented in grades 1 – 7.

As stated in the School’s *Educational Philosophy*, “We believe that students who are well-versed in content and who are trained in higher order thinking skills essential to investigating ideas, communicating orally and in written form, and engaging in honest inquiry and independent, creative, and critical thinking are best prepared to meet the challenges of college, vocational training, direct entry into the job force, as well as contributing as responsible citizens to the larger society.” Further, “we believe it essential to cultivate in our students the higher order skills of application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.”

All instructional staff are trained through in-service sessions to utilize Bloom’s Taxonomy at developmentally appropriate levels in order to develop higher order thinking skills, based on a program developed by Donald Johnson and Christian Overman outlined in their manual entitled *Making the Connections*. Perhaps the best example of teaching higher order thinking skills is represented by the School’s senior *Bible and Philosophies* class, which utilizes the Socratic method of teaching through questioning by the instructor intended to stimulate dialogue with the students as they learn to critically think in response to the questions.

New approaches to student engagement and applying learning are initiated through various school events and activities such as the high school “Word of the Day,” Pi Day, the elementary school Vocabulary Parade, Read Aloud Day, and the Daily Five Reading Enrichment Program.

All curricula is carefully chosen and adopted to include activities for critical thinking challenges, student engagement and involvement, and projects and investigations that directly apply to the learning process.
3.10 Assures ready access to instructional technology and a comprehensive library/media collection integrated to support learning goals.

While differences and limitations may exist in the volume of technology or resources a school is able to obtain, the salient feature of this indicator is how instructional technology and media/library resources are being used to enhance and support learning goals.

The School seeks to provide information and media services that directly support its educational programs at all levels of the school. Anticipating the increased use of technology as a vital component in providing a quality education, the School implemented a strategic plan devised by a number of local technology professionals, working with school staff, to systematically build an infrastructure for providing such services. Examples of such services include, but are not limited to, the following:

- A computer network encompassing both campuses provides administration and staff with direct email communication with one another, enhancing efficiency in communication. This same network provides staff with direct access to the Internet via a high-speed connection which allows access to the rich resources increasingly available to educators. This technology also allows staff to record all grades and student assignments via a web-based, school records program known as RenWeb, thus minimizing the “busy work” factor for teachers.

- Most classrooms contain at least one computer with direct access to the Internet. In addition, four educational computer labs -- two at the elementary, one each at the middle and high schools -- make possible classes for students in learning basic computer and networking skills, as well as providing students with supervised access to the Internet for research purposes. In addition, the School has developed a comprehensive technology curriculum preparing students to function productively in an increasingly technology-oriented culture.

- Equippping most classrooms with large-screen digital TV’s with direct Internet access, thus allowing instructors access to the rich resources of the Internet as a means to supplement and enhance the primary curricula.

- All computer access to the Internet is filtered by a hardware appliance and software known as Sonic Wall.

- Standard media hardware (overheads, smart boards, televisions and mobile devices, VHS/DVD players, music devices, and access to local broadcast media, etc.) are available to aid in classroom instruction. In addition, the school has installed a number of projectors and computers in classrooms that allow for Power Point presentations, Internet displays, and other instructional applications.
• The School maintains its own website in order to keep parents, students, and the larger community aware of school events and happenings. In addition, the School subscribes to RenWeb, an Internet-based service that allows parents to check on their child’s homework assignments and grades by accessing this information via a security code assigned to each school family.

• The above (and other) technology is supported by a part-time coordinator and a part-time technology support person. The over-all system is additionally supported by VTG Corporation, a local technology service business.

The School is in a transition process of moving its technology infrastructure increasingly “into the cloud.” In the 2013/14 school year, all administrative and staff email are being transitioned from an in-house server to Google’s Apps for Education service.

In addition, the School is transitioning from its previous in-house document servers to the Google Docs service both for staff and students. While there is a comprehensive plan in place for this transition, it is being taken one step at a time with emphasis on ensuring proficiency in and dependability with these new technologies before proceeding to the next step.

The School maintains a central library that services the elementary and middle school campus. The library is staffed by a part-time librarian. The librarian supports teachers in teaching traditional library skills and helping students and teachers to locate relevant resource materials. Because of the proximity of the local public library, emphasis on acquiring Christian-based literature for the School’s library has been made a priority in terms of filling a unique need for the School. In this context, the School is able to take advantage of public resources when there is a need for more extensive library resources.

Because of the increasing dependency in the educational world on technology, the high school program has focused on developing its technology program as a higher priority than developing a traditional high school library. However, a small high school library with fundamental resource materials is maintained on the high school campus. Another reason for not emphasizing the development of an extensive, on-site traditional library is because of the School’s proximity to the Mary Baldwin College Library located one block from the high school. High school students have access to this library on an individual basis, when needed, as well as the local public library, located approximately a ten minute walk from the high school. High school English classes receive fundamental instruction in how to utilize traditional libraries and also have ready access to more extensive materials than are available at the high school.

All volumes in both school libraries are catalogued on special library software based in RenWeb in order to readily access available volumes and resources. The elementary/middle school library has been recently upgraded by adding barcodes to every book and by purchasing a scanner for check-out. Also, approximately 1,000 titles have been recently
added to our elementary/middle school library collection. In addition, the school librarian is developing a special resource library for parents and teachers.

An additional library (Daily Five Reading Café) of leveled reading books and other media was recently established at the elementary school to enhance and support the School’s language arts program.

3.11 Assures that the school has a policy and procedure for responding to challenged materials.

Modern challenged materials may include books, web sites, art, social media, etc. Operational guidelines for addressing a variety of situations in a mission appropriate manner should exist.

The School has a policy and procedure for responding to challenges by parents and others to materials utilized by the School. This policy is outlined in the document entitled Challenged Materials Policy and is noted in the School’s Parent Handbook, page 14.

3.12 Provides a comprehensive system for assessing student progress based on clearly defined student results for learning.

Curriculum guides, benchmarking assessments, policy manuals can provide a framework for assessment in department meetings, division meetings, grade level meetings, or counselor or advisor meetings, etc. Knowing each student individually is a hallmark of independent education.

Expectations for student achievement are outlined in the School’s comprehensive Curriculum Guide. A traditional system for evaluating student progress is utilized for all grade levels in the context of a quarterly and semester grading system for homework assignments, tests and quizzes, daily work, projects, and participation. In addition to receiving quarterly reports, parents are able to access their children’s grades on an on-going basis through an Internet based program known as RenWeb.

Separate reading progress reports for grades 1-2 are sent home quarterly. Reading benchmark testing is conducted regularly in grades K-2 and periodically in grades 3 – 5 in order to monitor and document progress.

Through the School’s professional development program, teachers have been trained to implement various types of assessments for evaluating student progress: preliminary, formative, and summative.
Use of the Stanford Achievement Test and the Otis Lennon School Ability Test administered in grades one through ten provides a further, more broadly based and standardized assessment of student achievement and ability. Classroom teachers are trained to analyze and use achievement test data in order to differentiate for individual student needs.

The School has refined over the years a system for identifying special needs students and devised an individualized program to help meet their unique learning needs (CARE Program – see Parent Handbook, page 9 and the Care Program Manual). In addition, the local public school system upon request, will conduct formal evaluations (educational and psychological) for GCS students who potentially need special education services.

While not directly related to the assessment of student progress as related to the School’s comprehensive curriculum guide, high school students are encouraged to participate in the Preliminary Scholastic Achievement Test program (PSAT’s) as well as the Scholastic Achievement Test (SAT). In addition, all high school students participate in the Kuder Career Search with Person Match, the Kuder Skills Assessment and the Super’s Work Inventory. This career assessment/vocational testing program is used in many high schools and colleges nationally.

3.13 Uses assessment data for making decisions for continuous improvement of teaching and learning processes.

Examples of documented uses of data for student placement, teacher preparation, and curriculum adjustments are sources of evidence. There are many different valid assessments available; the school’s role is to sift through assessment data and other information to glean an accurate picture of the effectiveness of the teaching and learning processes of the school and to make adjustments when necessary.

Applicants for enrollment in the School must first complete an in-house screening assessment to determine readiness for the over-all program as well as grade and/or class placement. Potential kindergarten students undergo a readiness screening using the Developmental Readiness Screening Scale. The information from these screenings as well as student records from previous schools are used in helping to determine placement of new students.

Students wishing to take honors and/or advanced placement classes in the high school must meet clearly defined in-house prerequisites in order to matriculate in these classes (see High School Course Description Guide).

The Stanford Achievement Test is used as a tool to help evaluate the individual strengths and weaknesses of each classroom teacher as well as the effectiveness of the over-all curricula.
The SAT data is also used by classroom teachers to guide instructional planning and decisions regarding individual student needs (differentiation).

After evaluating the last several years of SAT reading scores and quarterly reading grades, a decision was made to initiate a reading enrichment program at the elementary school in the fall of 2012. This program, The Daily Five, is designed to supplement the School’s basal reading curriculum with the goal of strengthening reading fluency, reading comprehension, vocabulary, and writing skills (see elementary school Curriculum Guide and Grace Gazette, November 2012).

A process is in place for determining math placement of middle school students in order to set them on an appropriate math track for the upcoming high school years. Various forms of assessment data are used in this process (see Administrative Policies and Procedures Manual, Appendix 1L).

The curriculum (each core subject) is systematically evaluated and reviewed on a five year schedule. The review cycle and process is located in the Administrative Policies and Procedures Manual, Appendix 1J.

3.14 Conducts a systematic analysis of instructional and organizational effectiveness and uses the results to improve student performance.

"Systematic" may include an analysis of surveys and focus groups, assessment data, benchmarking studies, teaching and learning profiles, etc. Regular reviews (by semester or annually or other) in appropriate groups (division, grade level, or other) and the results of those reviews could provide evidences of compliance.

Teacher meetings are held to review and analyze the effectiveness of the School’s instructional program and curriculum. Departmental meetings are also held periodically to discuss the School's overall program and its structural relevancy. Many positive changes have taken place in various areas of the school as a result of this process, such as updated curriculum guides, notebooks, manuals, and other school documents and policies.

As a result of on-going dialogue, the high school established an additional layer of educational leadership by appointing departmental chairs for each core academic area. The department chairs comprise the GCS Academic Council. In addition to assisting the high school principal in overseeing academic affairs at the high school, the Academic Council is also engaged in evaluating curriculum and assessing instructional practices with the elementary and middle school teaching staff in order to help ensure a continuity of emphasis throughout the entire academic program. (See Minutes and Agendas Notebook for minutes of faculty meetings and Academic Council meetings, as well as the Staff Handbook, Appendix 1F for a more detailed description of the Academic Council.)
After numerous discussions and meetings regarding instructional effectiveness, the School appointed a Supervisor of Instruction to oversee school curriculum decisions and academic concerns. In addition, this supervisor provides support, coaching, and accountability for instructional staff. The Supervisor of Instruction works collaboratively with the other administrators and school councils to facilitate professional development initiatives, oversee teaching staff, and make curriculum decisions.

A primary means of evaluating student performance and instructional effectiveness is through standardized achievement tests, which are reported to the board in the fall of each school year by the head of School. Other reports, as evidenced by school surveys, assist the board in evaluating school effectiveness.
The school develops and maintains effective communication and relationships to further its mission.

An SAIS accredited school communicates clearly and accurately with its stakeholders and encourages collaboration to further its mission.

STANDARD 4 – INDICATORS:

4.1 Fosters collaboration with community stakeholders to support student learning.

Evidence of discussions, presentations, communications, and outreach activities with internal and external stakeholders such as students, parents, faculty, key civic groups and leaders is adequate. An annual head’s address or documented records of meetings with board members add to the evidence.

The School is involved with key civic groups and the larger community through participation in various community programs, including but not limited to the following: Staunton Rotary Club Code of Ethics Program; Veterans of Foreign Wars Voice of Democracy and Patriot’s Pen programs; American Legion Virginia Boys State and Girls State; Academic Achievers Banquet, sponsored by the Augusta County/Staunton Chamber of Commerce; the New Generation Leadership Conference, sponsored by the Tuesday Morning Rotary Club; participation in the Daughters of the American Revolution Citizenship program, the Staunton News Leader Student Athlete/Scholar of the Year Program, etc. When opportunity permits, the head of school and/or other administrators dialogue with civic leaders or participate in presentations representing the School to the larger community.

Guest speakers from the local community are also invited to participate with the School through programs and presentations to assemblies and classes.

The School has maintained a connection with Mary Baldwin College over many years that has fostered positive community relationships and has benefited our students, staff, and parents. The College has donated computers and other equipment that has greatly enhanced our technology program. College professors are periodically invited to speak to our staff, parents, and students on topics, such as college preparation. A Grace Christian School administrator participates in a panel discussion on educational philosophies every year at the College. As referenced in Indicator 3.10, Grace Christian high school students have access to the Mary Baldwin College Library which allows them to conduct research and provides excellent resources for various projects, papers, and coursework.

The Headmaster gives an annual address to the parents concerning the “state of the union” related both to the larger “cause” of Christian education as well as presenting a renewed sense of vision and direction for the School. Audio copies are available in the high school office.
The School has also developed a Business Partners’ Program which encourages local businesses to contribute to the School's financial aid program in assisting families with tuition costs. (See the Development Manual.)

In addition, students at all grade levels participate in community and international service projects each year as listed below. In many cases, school families, school faculty and others in the larger community are involved in these projects, as well. (See Special Events & Outreach Notebooks.) Projects include:

Wenonah Elementary School. Since 2008, the student body has partnered with Wenonah Elementary School, a local public school in a low-income district, providing the students with a yearly Christmas celebration, personalized gift bags for each student, and other collaborative activities to facilitate learning and build relationships between the students of both schools. (See November 5, 2012 and January 14, 2013 issues of the Grace Gazette.)

Shoes for Kenya. Since 2010, the School has served as a shoe distribution center for Well of Hope, which is an international ministry providing gently used shoes to an organization in Kenya that supports Kenyan widows. (See article in the summer 2012 Warrior Bulletin newsletter.)

In addition, students are involved in specific outrreaches and community service projects at age-appropriate levels. Information concerning these events are in the Special Events and Outreach Notebooks.

High school students have various opportunities to serve each year through community service projects. In addition to spending at least one day each school year helping a local youth camp (Youth Development International) prepare for their summer camping season, high school students have additional opportunities to serve the larger community through such classes as the ministry elective, the Leadership and Student Government Association, and the National Honor Society.

Elementary and middle school students are involved in several community projects each year both at home and abroad. Pre-kindergarten through third grade students host an annual day for grandparents involving classroom visits and individual class performances. In addition, elementary and middle school students visit local nursing homes throughout the year.

Another way in which our students are involved in the community includes participation in our annual Job Shadowing Program. Ninth through twelfth graders each select a local businessperson to “shadow” for a day. High school students also have the opportunity to spend a semester in a more in-depth “shadow” with a business or vocation of their choosing through the Mentorship Program. In addition, teachers utilize guest speakers in their classrooms (local elected officials in government class, local bankers and insurance agents in the personal finance class, pastors and youth pastors in chapels, etc.) (See article in the February 14, 2013 issue of the Grace Gazette.) Students in all grades take field trips during the school year to a wide variety of locations in the community, including restaurants, fire departments, local farms, historical sites, etc.
Students, parents and faculty also interact with members of the community at the annual Family Social held each fall.

Businesses in which school parents and/or staff are associated are advertised in a free publication printed each year entitled the GCS Yellow Pages. This is an attempt to foster relationships between our school families and to link each other’s professional gifts and talents with various needs within the larger school community.

While some of the above cannot specifically be categorized as explicit communication with stakeholders for the sake of collaboration, we have found the cultivation of relationships through such activities as described an effective means of enhancing the School’s standing with all stakeholders and, thus, furthering the School’s mission.

**4.2 Assures that communications among and between school staff, stakeholders, and alumni are clear and effective.**

*Examples of related materials, newsletters, letters, e-mails and other communications are good evidence.*

Parents, staff, coaches, and GCS friends receive detailed communication from the School on a weekly basis. Each Thursday, a weekly newsletter, *This Week At A Glance*, is sent out via email. The electronic newsletter includes information about upcoming school events and announcements, athletic events and practices, lunch menus, field trips, chorus and drama rehearsals, etc. (See notebook with copies of all 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 e-newsletters.) In addition, the School’s website is kept current with more in-depth details of school events. Special mass distribution emails are sent out as needed to the School’s parents with special updates and announcements. An automated calling service is utilized to send out telephone reminders to parents of important school meetings and events.

In recent years, the development office has produced two publications, the *Grace Gazette* and the *Warrior Bulletin*. The *Grace Gazette* was published on a monthly basis and emailed to school families, staff members and friends of Grace who have requested this publication. (For the 2013/14 school year, the *Gazette* is being replaced by the development of a school “Facebook” page which will feature frequent postings.) Twice each year, a twelve-page newsletter entitled *The Warrior Bulletin* is published and distributed to over 3,000 people, including school families, alumni, parents of alumni, donors, grandparents, and others. This newsletter includes news of interest from the elementary, middle, and high schools. It also includes features of interest to the entire school community, development news, sports news, and a section devoted to news about the School’s graduates, entitled “Graduates in the News.” (See copies of the 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 *Grace Gazette* and the *Warrior Bulletin*.)

All stakeholders have access to the School’s website at [www.gcswarriors.org](http://www.gcswarriors.org). Each week, the above-mentioned e-newsletter is uploaded to the website and can be accessed at the News and Events tab. Likewise the *Warrior Bulletin* can be accessed and read online.

All elementary teachers send home weekly communication letters to the parents of their students. This letter includes information about homework, upcoming class events, birthdays, etc.
Correspondence envelopes are sent home each Monday at the elementary and middle schools, and as needed at the high school. These envelopes include information about school events, field trip permission forms, etc.

The School provides parents with on-going access to their child’s current grades and homework assignments as well as other pertinent information through an Internet based program known as RenWeb.

4.3 Uses the knowledge and skills of parents to enhance the work of the school.

Periodic parent meetings along with an organized volunteer program would be good indicators of compliance.

Parent volunteers are organized through the Parent Volunteer Organization (PVO) and utilized in various aspects of the School – the classroom, special programs like Grandparent’s Day, and events such as the auction and the family social. In addition, parents volunteer in the athletic program – from manning the concession stand to working as volunteer assistant coaches – and in our fine arts program – helping to coordinate Arts Night and special drama performances. Parents coordinate the Moms in Touch prayer group, the middle school socials, the “meet and greet” welcome tent on the first day of school, and much more. Parents serve as chaperones for field trips and social events. Room Mothers at the elementary school support their classroom teachers in a variety of ways.

Parents also serve from time to time on various committees that impact school policies. A High School Parent Advisory Board assists with parent/staff/student relations, focusing on aspects of the school such as the dress code, fundraising, and other matters they or the administration identify as relevant issues.

Periodic parent meetings are scheduled and address topics relevant in contemporary culture to the challenges of parenting and education. At times, parents have served on panels in facilitating presentations and discussions.

4.4 Assures that there is ongoing evidence of communication with appropriate agencies, such as public health, mental health, physicians, and other professionals.

Examples of a relationship with appropriate agencies and any recent communications provide evidence.

The School completes all necessary regulatory forms and inspections related to local, state, and federal agencies. Communication is also maintained with the local emergency coordinator, Staunton Police, and the health department as preparation for potential emergencies in both the school as well as the larger community. The School retains a list of outside resources to whom it can refer others for assistance or who can advise the School as needed (see Indicator 5.11).
As a part of its Crisis Management Plan, the school's wireless alert system is also connected directly with the local police and emergency dispatch, summoning emergency personnel when activated.

4.5 Assures that the school's advertising and promotional materials reflect accurate information about the school's programs and accomplishments.

Admissions materials, viewbooks, web and other internal and external marketing materials should align with physical and testimonial evidence and should be accurate and true representations of the school.

In 2013, The School published a magazine focused on the priority of Christian education and the ministry of Grace Christian School entitled, “Why Should You Consider Christian Education for Your Child?” This magazine continues to be distributed throughout the community to various churches, businesses, school families, and friends of the School.

The School's Information Packet accurately describes the programs that are offered by Grace Christian School, including a description of curriculum, extra-curricular offerings, the application process, tuition and fees, etc.

The School's open house held each spring is advertised through newspaper and magazine ads, church bulletin inserts, local radio public service announcements, and the School's website.

Information about the school is shared with the community in the local newspaper’s annual News Leader Fact Book. The school is also promoted through its website (www.gcswarriors.org). In addition, the School is linked to the Staunton City website (private education) and Discover Christian School's website, as well as the Southern Association of Independent Schools and Association of Christian School's International websites and school directory lists.

As an added note, the school's non-discriminatory policy is publicized in most of the advertising and promotional materials mentioned above.

The WHO WE ARE page in the Boots and Bandana Benefit Auction catalog provides information about our school, including the School's mission statement. Advertising is placed in each year’s edition of the local phone directory’s yellow pages—the Yellow Book—which is also available on the Internet.
The school has produced a yearbook each year since 1992 representing an overview of student life. The yearbook is produced by the high school publications class and published by Josten’s Publishing Company.

4.6 Gathers information about graduates and other former students, using the resulting data to inform the school.

Retention and attrition studies of students, results of alumni surveys, and written summaries of interviews with parents provide evidence. Surveys of faculty/staff and students can also provide important data to help improve the school.

Because of the School’s small size, it has relied significantly on anecdotal conversations with school parents, students, graduates, staff, and others involved in the school for feedback in order to help improve programs. Occasional surveys have also provided relevant information.

At various times in the School’s history, but especially in 2007/2008 (in conjunction with the School’s first accreditation effort), formal surveys were administered with parents, students, staff, and graduates in order to gain more extensive feedback. Information gained from these surveys has been helpful in identifying areas where the School can potentially be improved. Additional surveys have been conducted since that time. (See Survey Notebook.)

The Warrior Bulletin, which is printed twice each year, serves as a way to share information about the school’s graduates. Each issue offers a section featuring news about various alumni.

As a part of the School’s self-study process, one-on-one interviews were conducted in the spring of 2013 by administrative staff with all grades eight through eleven parents in order to elicit their direct input concerning strengths and weaknesses of the School.

Exit surveys are also usually conducted with families who choose to leave the school in hopes of identifying any trends or common areas of concern.

Because of the smaller size of the high school, staff often enjoy a more personal relationship with the students than might be the case in a larger institution. These relationships frequently enhance students’ willingness to share their perspectives of the School, and such student input has been a valuable factor in the high school’s effort toward continuous improvement.
STANDARD 5: RESOURCES & SUPPORT SYSTEMS

The school has the resources, services, and policies necessary to support its mission.

An SAIS accredited school has sufficient human and material resources, employs a qualified and competent staff, and provides ongoing professional development. The school has well-defined and communicated policies and procedures to promote a safe, healthy, and orderly environment.

STANDARD 5 – INDICATORS:

5.1 Provides written policies covering recruitment, employment, assignment, evaluation, and termination of service to all school personnel.

Employee handbooks and other materials should describe all phases of faculty and staff members’ association with the school and should address questions such as: What are the qualifications required for an educator to teach at the school? How are faculty and staff members found and interviewed? Be able to describe the successful teacher at the school. Be able to describe the unsuccessful teacher at the school. The interviewing and hiring practice should be conducted by faculty and staff members and overseen by the administrative head of the school. Note that the concepts in indicator 5.1 are enumerated in indicators 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, and 5.5.

Policies concerning recruitment, employment, assignment, evaluation, and termination of service are included in the Human Resources Policies and Procedures Manual pages 4-6 Additional policies such as staff evaluation and professional development are included in the Staff Handbook, page 19.

5.2 Assures that administrative, instructional and support staff are qualified and competent to perform the duties assigned to them in the school in order to meet the needs of the total school program and the students enrolled.

The focus here is on three characteristics of excellence at independent schools – qualifications of employees, competence of employees and meeting the needs of students. Clear position descriptions are the best evidence, coupled with specific qualifications of the individual regarding their suitability for the work assigned. Apart from credentialing, certification, or alternative preparation and subject matter accumulation, heads or division leaders must be able to explain reasons for hiring.
The school's staff, administrators, and teachers are competent to perform their duties and able to meet the needs of students as evidenced by the school's thirty-four year history.

See Human Resource Policies and Procedures Manual, page 4, for qualifications and criteria for teaching at the School. Individual staff folders are located in each principal's office. These contain staff evaluations, observations and professional development documentation.

Personnel Profile Folders are maintained in the business office where the following information is generally available: employee applications, resumes, specific qualifications, completed education, written justification for hiring (in certain cases), reference checks, background checks, position descriptions (contained in contract forms), transcripts, continuing education. Some of the above general information can also be found on RenWeb. Samples of these forms are found in the appendices of the Human Resources Policies and Procedures Manual.

5.3 **Assures that there is an effective orientation program for faculty and staff new to the school.**

*Program description with agendas and minutes provide a good explanation. Consider how the school assesses the effectiveness of the orientation program.*

A thorough program is in place for the training, orientation, and welcoming of new staff, which includes academic and policy training meetings, mentors (staff buddies), manuals, handbooks, and notebooks for each staff, technology, AV, office, and business training, in-service seminars, special orientation meetings, and welcome dinners. See new staff orientation agenda in Human Resources Policies and Procedures Manual, page 9. Specific agendas and minutes are located in the Minutes and Agendas Notebook.

5.4 **Assures that all staff members participate in a continuous program of professional development.**

*All staff, including but not limited to faculty, administrators, administrative, and custodial staff are part of this requirement. While the specifics of the program are up to the school and may differ based on the employee’s role at the school, there must be evidence that a formal method is in place which may include: how employees at the school are made aware of this requirement; how fulfillment of this requirement is recorded; descriptions of what professional opportunities are made available and how they are aligned with the strategic vision of the school; how professional development is funded; what happens to an educator who does not engage in professional improvement.*

The School provides a steady diet of professional development opportunities for teachers and administrators which include the following: academic in-service seminars, occasional conferences or one-day workshops, discussions of educational books as part of teachers’ meeting agendas, technology training sessions, writing workshops, guest speakers, and video series on various educational topics. Individual employees are encouraged to personally pursue continuing education opportunities and independent learning. The Director of Maintenance and Operations
periodically attends applicable Virginia state seminars for professional training and safety updates. The custodial staff receives training each year with the Director of Maintenance and Operations and Tuition Work Credit Supervisor. All staff are oriented annually with Bloodborne Pathogens Training and related health/safety issues, and key staff are given training in basic first aid.

Evidence of professional development is found in the Professional Development Notebooks (in-house seminars and workshops), Personnel Profile Folders containing individual employee documentation of continuing education, Minutes and Agendas Notebook; professional/educational publications; and small professional libraries with books and materials located at both campuses.

Professional Development was the focus of our last School Improvement Plan (see assessment of School Improvement Plan).

5.5 **Implements an evaluation system that provides for the professional growth of all personnel.**

*Programs of evaluation of performance can take many forms and should be developed to support the growth and development of employees within the mission context of the school. There is no one correct way to do this. A thorough written description of the evaluation system provides good evidence. Consider how the school assesses the effectiveness of the evaluation program.*

The School’s system for evaluating personnel is located in the Administrative Policies and Procedures Manual, Appendix 1E. The goal of staff evaluations is to encourage and commend areas of strength and to challenge staff toward professional growth in various areas of focus. Both the instructional and non-instructional staff evaluates the administration by answering specific questions on the Staff In-put Form and/or on a special staff survey form at the end of each school year. (Staff surveys can be found in the Survey Notebook.)

All staff evaluations and staff input forms are filed in the individual staff folders located in the principals’ offices. An over-view of the staff evaluation system, evaluation flow chart, evaluation schedule, and teacher observation schedule are in the Administrative Policies and Procedures Manual, Appendix 1 E.

5.6 **Provides well defined and written student policies encompassing recruitment, admissions, administration of financial aid, conduct, discipline, and separation.**

*Student materials should describe all phases of student’s association with the school. Consistency and compliance with state law are necessary. Written policies in student and parent handbooks, admission materials, financial aid packages, etc. are the best evidence. The admissions process should be conducted by faculty and staff members and overseen by the administrative head of the school. Note that the concepts in indicator 5.6 are enumerated in indicators 5.7, 5.8, and 5.9.*
Written policy for conduct, discipline and separation is located in the *Parents Understanding and Commitment Form, pages 50-53 of the Parent Handbook, and the High School Handbook*, The School's means of recruitment and admissions is located in the *Administrative Policies and Procedures Manual, Appendix 3*. The fundamental policy is in compliance with state law.

5.7 **Assures that there are well-defined, published admissions and financial aid/scholarship processes including criteria upon which decisions are made, and that professional ethics are strictly observed in the process.**

*Interviews (by team members) with parents and students should provide clear evidence, along with written assurances of such in materials.*

The admission process, for parents interested in enrolling their children in the School, is defined in the information packet that is either mailed to parents or accessed through the GCS website. This process is further defined in the *GCS Administrative Policies and Procedures Manual, Appendix 3*. A record of the individual steps included in the admissions process is maintained for each interviewing family (per various interview forms, form letters, and checklists). When questions as to the suitability of potential school families are encountered, the admissions decision is referred to the larger administrative staff. In all cases, the criteria for admissions are rooted in (1) the School’s fundamental mission statement and (2) the evaluation and conclusion that the student can succeed and prosper in the School’s unique environment.

Financial aid and assistance is awarded to families who apply via a standard application form that defines fundamental criteria for making such decisions. A financial aid committee considers each application and seeks to administer this assistance program consistently and impartially. To the best of the administration’s knowledge, the financial aid program complies with the fundamental guidelines established by the Internal Revenue Service.

5.8 **Accepts students for whom there is a reasonable expectation of success from the program.**

*Evidence of compliance should demonstrate admissions decisions based on a student’s compatibility with the school’s mission, program, and academic guidelines. Non-academic based decisions should clearly reflect the school’s ability to serve the student.*

As noted in Indicator 5.7, the criteria for admissions are rooted in (1) the School’s fundamental mission statement and (2) the evaluation and conclusion that the student can succeed and prosper in the School’s unique environment. Each applicant is carefully evaluated and screened in terms of academic compatibility with the School, records from previous schools, and general references carefully checked before acceptance into the program is granted. Special emphasis is given to pastoral references verifying the parents’ compatibility with the unique faith values and emphasis inherent in the School’s specific sense of mission.
5.9 Assures that guidelines for student conduct, attendance, and dress, and discipline are written and communicated to all students, parents, and members of staff.

Written notices are key indicators of compliance. As an example: where uniforms are required, the team should easily be able to compare the written dress code with the actual implementation of it by the student body.

Guidelines for student conduct, attendance, and dress are clearly communicated to all students, parents and members of staff through various handbooks and manuals and via student, staff, and parent meetings. Handbooks and manuals include the Parents’ Handbook, the High School Student Handbook, the Staff Policies and Procedures Manual, the Coaches Manual, the Parents’ Understanding and Commitment Form, and a number of other documents available to all stakeholders.

5.10 Provides counseling services that meet the needs of students.

Counseling services may include college counseling, emotional counseling, learning differences, etc. However provided, these must show alignment with mission and needs of students and faculty should be aware of procedures in place and of their role in the process.

The School's counseling services focus on educational guidance counseling (middle and high school level). However, all school administrators and teachers are available to provide spiritual and emotional guidance, which encourages the School’s students to know God and to live in obedience to His will for their lives, per the School’s fundamental mission. As deemed appropriate, students are referred to outside church and community resources for counseling needs that cannot be met by the School (see indicator 5.11 for outside resources). Information about our high school educational guidance program can be found in the High School Guidance Manual located at the high school.

5.11 Assures that students whose needs cannot be met in school are referred to appropriate agencies or resources for assistance.

Having existing relationships with outside agencies and resource providers (see indicator 4.4) allows a school to continue to assist students whose needs the school cannot meet fully. Consider the faculty member’s role in identifying and assisting students. Written procedures and evidence of faculty orientation to the requirements are good examples of compliance.

Students whose basic educational needs cannot be fully met at Grace Christian School are referred to appropriate agencies for assistance. The school has a list of competent agencies and resources that are made available to families who are in need of special services. Teachers and staff are oriented to the referral process during August staff meetings. Evidence of this orientation is located in the Minutes and Agenda Notebook. The referral procedure is located in the School's CARE Program Manual and Administrative Policies and Procedures Manual, Appendix 1A. Evidence of recent actions can be found in referral letters that are filed in individual student cumulative folders (main offices) and in CARE Program profiles (CARE Coordinator's office).
Available referral resources include:

- Staunton City Schools for psychological and educational testing and tutorial services
- Kluge Children’s Hospital in Charlottesville, VA
- James Madison University Child Development Center
- Local pastors, doctors, and licensed counselors
- Valley Vocational Technical Center
- Blue Ridge Community College
- Stuart Hall Preparatory School
- Mary Baldwin College PEG Program for academically gifted
- Ridgeview Christian School (local)
- Blue Ridge Christian School (local)

5.12 The school maintains secure, accurate, and complete records of operations, finances, personnel and students in accordance with state and federal regulations including both paper and electronic records. The school has a plan to ensure appropriate access and maintenance of all relevant records in the event of a school closure.

SAIS schools are required to implement and maintain a records retention system that meets applicable governmental requirements for all operating, financial, personnel, and student records. The records retention system applies to paper and electronic records, includes appropriate back-up systems, and details consistent processes for records destruction. In states where no guidance is provided by governmental agencies, SAIS schools should consult with the SAIS office to ensure appropriate access and maintenance of all relevant records in the event of school closure.

All finance accounts are maintained by the School’s business manager in accordance with sound accounting principles. School finances are audited once each five years in coordination with the accreditation cycle and formally reviewed the other four years by Ritchie, Withers & Masincup, a certified public accounting firm. Procedures, audit reports, and specific records and documents are filed in the business office and available for review.

School finance data are “backed up” by the Quick Books website.
Essential student records/data are secured by RenWeb, an on-line student records website. Cumulative and confidential files for each student are located in fire-proof safes in both school offices.

All personnel files are maintained in the business manager’s office.

All essential records noted above would foresee-ably be maintained and accessible in the event of school closure.

5.13 Has a written crisis management plan.

A written plan that is understood and practiced by faculty, staff, and students and that is regularly reviewed and evaluated is the best evidence.

A long-standing and annually revised crisis management plan is in place and can be found in the Administrative Policies and Procedures Manual, Appendix 2C. The plan has been scrutinized by representatives from the Staunton Police Department and commended by them for its thoroughness. Each school employee has a copy of this plan, and it is reviewed with all staff during August orientation and practiced during the school year. Summary “crisis instruction cards” are located in every office and classroom in the school.

In addition, Administrative Policies and Procedures Manual contains the School’s Severe Weather Plan (Appendix 2E) and a Pandemic Flu Plan (Appendix 2D), which are discussed each August with staff.

Required fire drills are conducted on a regular basis, and “fire exit plans” are located in every room and office. A tornado drill is conducted at least annually. Crisis management “code red” drills are conducted periodically. An alarm system for both campuses was installed in the 2012/13 school year to facilitate potential “code red” situations as well as providing instant notification to local emergency dispatch services upon activation.

5.14 Provides documentation of ongoing health and safety inspections and procedures.

This can be satisfied with certificates of inspection from agencies that are charged with inspecting and certifying the campus on safety matters. Examples would be, but are not limited to, health inspections of the cafeteria, inspections of fire extinguishers and sprinkler systems, and elevator inspections.

Schools offering extended day programs and/or serving children younger than (senior) kindergarten shall provide evidence that they know and meet applicable state statutes and requirements related to pre-k programs. Typically, a state agency prescribes regulations for these programs and schools may or may not qualify for exemptions. To be considered for SAIS
accreditation, these programs must be part of the overall school program and included in the school’s standards compliance and self study and must be operating in full compliance with the state agency and/or must demonstrate exemption from regulation.

The Director of Maintenance and Operations over-sees all physical plant inspections. Certificates of inspection and safety documents from various agencies are filed in the director’s office and in the business office.

The following safety inspections are conducted regularly:

- Cafeteria (hot lunch program) by VA Department of Health

- Fire extinguishers, sprinkler systems, fire alarms, general fire department inspections by local fire inspector

- Elevator by certified service company

- Pre-Kindergarten by VA Dept. of Social Services

- Periodic safety inspections by Weaver Insurance, agents of Brother Mutual, the School’s insurer.

- Additional in-house, periodic inspections help ensure the integrity of the grounds and facility in maximizing the health, safety and welfare of students and staff

Both campuses have telephone inter-com systems set up in all offices and classrooms. All campuses have two outside buzzer (visual and auditory) identification systems at the main entrances to help ensure building security. The outside entrances at all campuses are kept locked at all times. In addition, an alarm system has been installed in each classroom and hallways that when activated sets off an alarm notifying all staff to immediately initiate the “code red” status outlined in the Crisis Management Plan, Administrative Policies and Procedures Manual, Appendix 2C and which also sends a message to the local police force summoning their rapid response.
Section IV
School Improvement Plan

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Strategic Initiatives:  
A Plan for School Development

The fundamental goal of our “Plan for School Development” may be precisely stated as follows: Grace Christian School will be recognized as the premier Christian based education program in the Staunton, Waynesboro and Augusta County community, delivering value to parents and students by focusing on spiritual grounding and academic excellence. This objective is synonymous with the School’s formal mission statement, but represents a companion goal to be attained in enabling the School to become more effective in fulfilling its mission.

In progressing toward this goal, the GCS Board of Trustees has identified what it feels to be a particularly strategic pair of priorities encompassing two complimentary categories:

- Enrollment retention and expansion
- Development of a greater sense of community among school parents, students and staff, along with cultivating a greater sense of partnership and engagement with the larger community.

The Trustees believe these categories represent an especially high priority to be addressed by leadership in the on-going development and sustainability of the School in attaining to its above-stated goal as an outstanding educational ministry.

This section will begin with a summary addressing the question “Where are we in terms of the above-stated strategic priorities?” Each strategic issue and set of strategies will then be addressed in a format that answers the questions: “Where do we want to go?” “How will we get there?” “How will we measure our progress?”

Where We Are In Terms of Strategic Priorities

We believe Grace Christian School, as it stays true to its essential sense of calling to provide a distinctly Christian-based education, is one of the most essential Christian ministry priorities within the larger body of Christ – the Church.¹ No aspect of our larger Christian community should have a greater priority than investing in the education and training of our children and youth.²

In the context of our strategic thinking, we believe no challenge is greater than educating and appealing to the larger Christian community concerning this vital issue of training of our children and youth. Sadly, according to various sources, only approximately ten percent of the professing Christian parent community nationwide chooses to either home school their children


² The paper “Raising Up a New Generation from the 4 – 14 Window to Transform the World,” by Luis Bush, is a compelling call to the local church to invest its resources in its children and youth as one of its highest ministry callings. http://www.4to14window.com/category/all_resources/articles/
and/or send them to a distinctly Christian school. The appeal of public education in terms of it being “free” and also offering educational alternatives not always available in a smaller Christian school are reasons given by many parents (and students) for opting out of the Christian school.

Furthermore, the current economic climate in our nation as well as our local community is such that even for many who may prefer Christian education for their children, their level of commitment is such that they may not be willing or perceive they are able to make significant sacrifices in order to keep their children in the Christian school.

As a result, many Christian and private schools around our nation have experienced enrollment attrition over recent years, especially since the national economic downturn experienced in 2008.

Thus, enrollment attrition has proven to be a – perhaps the – major challenge for many independent schools such as Grace Christian. As pointed out by Dr. Stephen Robinson, President of the Southern Association of Independent Schools (SAIS), “Given that independent schools are funded primarily though tuition revenue, financial sustainability is closely linked to enrolling sufficient numbers of ‘mission appropriate’ students.”

Added to the financial strains experienced by a growing number of local families are other dynamics that potentially have a negative impact on the School’s enrollment (shifting parent values and priorities, increased decision making status of middle/high school students in choosing their school, perception of greater educational opportunities in secondary public education, etc.)

Currently, the School has an infrastructure, both physically and in terms of administrative and instructional personnel, that could potentially support 310 to 325 students, pre-k through grade twelve. The present enrollment of approximately 280 students represents a tuition income that is marginal in sustaining the current infrastructure on an extended basis. While the School remains stable in terms of its finances, it must either expand its income through increased enrollment and/or through expansion of non-tuition/fees revenues, or it must make contingent plans to downsize certain aspects of its staffing and/or program to operate within a more comfortable financial margin.

Because of the desirability of maintaining its current infrastructure, the School’s leadership sees the expansion of enrollment (10% growth over a three year period) as the most desirable solution to increase revenues. However, it must also be recognized that the concept of “mission appropriate” families – those families who are on the same page with our fundamental mission – represent a limited pool of potential school families in our community. Because of this limited enrollment pool, it is incumbent upon the School to effectively market itself to these target families while at the time seeking to retain “mission appropriate” families currently enrolled.

The Trustees recognize that marketing is not merely a matter of reaching potentially new school families, but also retaining currently enrolled students. The School’s leadership believes a primary way of minimizing enrollment attrition is accomplished through building a stronger

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3 Dr. Stephen Robinson, “The Value Proposition” (January 19, 2009); http://www.sais.org/displaycommon.cfm?an=1&subarticlenbr=241
sense of community and partnership with and among school families. Developing such relationships will serve not only to directly benefit the students through a more effective home/school partnership, but will also contribute to creating a greater sense of continuity and loyalty among school families that will contribute to enrollment retention as well as motivating satisfied parents to “spread the word” to other mission appropriate families who can benefit from their association with the School.

These complimentary categories – enrollment retention and expansion, and building a stronger sense of school community – are developed in the following section detailing specific goals, strategies, and means of measuring progress. Because they are complimentary in nature, some of the strategies will overlap and/or apply equally to both categories. In such cases, an asterisk will denote the overlapping nature of the strategy.
Category 1: 
Enrollment Retention and Expansion

Goal # 1: Enrollment Retention

Our goal is to annually re-enroll a minimum of 90% of currently enrolled school families.

Strategies*

1. Establish a headmaster’s “blog” to be distributed to school parents and our larger school community on at least a bi-weekly basis. This “blog” will examine critical issues affecting Christian parents, especially as those issues pertain to education, as well as touting student accomplishments, school programs, etc.*

2. Prepare a comprehensive schedule of parent meetings for each school year addressing issues relevant to our school families, especially as related to parenting and education. Ensure quality meetings with presentations by accomplished speakers and/or well-prepared panels, including GCS graduates.*

3. Engage parents of students in grades eight through eleven at least once yearly in “one-on-one” meetings with the guidance and/or administrative staff. Use these meetings as an opportunity not only to involve the parents in their child’s guidance process, but also to reinforce the importance of a Grace Christian high school education. Also, solicit input from parents in these meetings concerning ideas they may have for improving the School as a means of on-going self-study and evaluation of programs. In addition, address in a general meeting with seventh grade parents at the beginning of the second semester an overview of the high school and related guidance program. Allow for a time of questions and dialogue in this meeting.*

4. Establish and cultivate a football program at the middle and high school in keeping with our overall educational mission and as a unique offering by our school as a means to retain and attract Christian families who deem this particular sports experience as a high priority for their sons. In addition to complementing our other sports offerings, a football program provides our students with a unique opportunity not offered by other Christian or private schools in our locality. Also, continually evaluate student interest in other, alternative sports such as cross country, golf, tennis, softball, etc. and provide such options as interest may warrant and resources may allow.

5. Maintain a careful documentation of “exit interviews” with families choosing to leave the School. Use this information to determine any general trends that may need to be addressed by the school leadership.

* Strategies denoted with an asterisk indicate their over-lapping with the second category: “Development of An Effective Community Dynamic Among Parents, Students and Staff.”
6. Continue to examine ways to expand high school academic offerings (i.e. dual enrollment, advanced placement, distance learning, mentorships, etc.) as well as extracurricular opportunities at all grade levels.

7. Continue to explore ways to “flex” the high school schedule in order to create educational opportunities outside of the traditional school structures (i.e. mentorships, job shadowing, concurrent enrollments, etc.) and/or creating more time for students to complete homework during the school day.

8. Complete work on developing an updated technology plan that ensures all students are being instructed in fundamental technology skills as commonly utilized in many primary and secondary educational programs as well as college and the workplace.

9. Ensure, as much as possible in initial parent interviews, screening out those parents who do not fit the profile of “mission appropriate” families or whose children are unlikely to succeed in the School’s educational program. This will hopefully help minimize future enrollment attrition.

10. Continue to develop a high school mentorship program that allows students to pursue “on-the-job” training as well as exposure to various careers of potential interest to the students.

11. Ensure on-going engagement with the Parent Advisory Board to help identify important issues for parents.*

12. Focus on engaging speakers (rely as much upon parents as possible in order to increase their involvement with the School) into assemblies and classrooms to talk about various careers and the relevance of elementary and secondary education in preparing for specific vocational opportunities.*

**Evaluation**

1. Annually assess retention rates to measure against the 90% retention goal.

2. Carefully evaluate exit interviews and input received from parents in individual meetings to identify issues that may need to be addressed in order to strengthen the program.

3. Focus on feedback from new families regarding their overall impression of the School’s strengths and weaknesses.
Goal # 2: Enrollment Expansion

Along with maintaining a 90% enrollment retention rate, our companion goal is to grow the current enrollment of 280 students by ten percent over the next three years, reaching a total enrollment of 310 students during that time. We believe this is a reasonable goal in the context of on-going economic challenges in our community.

Strategies

1. Hire a part-or full-time staff person with some background in marketing and/or development to assist our current development director with a more pro-active set of marketing and development initiatives.

2. Pro-actively pursue opportunities to present the School to local churches, the home school community, pre-schools, community organizations, and other forums that may represent ways to get word out to potentially mission appropriate families.

3. Produce and intentionally distribute a high quality magazine that features the School and its students throughout the School’s potential market area in venues such as churches, professional offices and lobbies, businesses, real estate agencies, hotels, and other public locations. Also periodically ask parents and staff to distribute this magazine to fellow parents whom they perceive as good candidates for the School.

4. Make a renewed, concerted effort to send school news to both the Staunton and Waynesboro daily newspapers with the goal of increasing public awareness of the School and its programs and student accomplishments.

5. Carefully publicize and conduct an annual open house intended to host families interested in the School, allowing them to examine curriculum, meet staff, tour facilities, and have their questions answered concerning the programs of Grace Christian School.

6. Maintain a careful log of new parent inquiries, follow-up interviews, and information pertaining to why families choose to enroll or not enroll after going through the interview process. Determine from this information any trends and/or information that will help maximize the School’s effectiveness in engaging new families.*

7. Maintain a relevant, up-to-date website and Facebook page to publicize the School with inquiring parents.

8. Continue to develop a set of policies concerning part-time students, especially reaching out to those from the home school community. Increasingly, Christian parents have chosen to go the home schooling route; however, many of them may choose to opt for a part-time enrollment in the School by the time their child reaches the middle or high school years. Accommodating such families fits within the mission of the School and may represent an important source of new students and revenues.
9. As a longer-range consideration, study the feasibility of moving the School to a consolidated campus in the Fishersville area of Augusta County (or possibly opening a satellite campus). The board recognizes that most population growth in our market area is not represented in the Staunton area where our current campuses are located, but in the central and eastern portions of our county including the population centers of Fishersville and Waynesboro. While such a potential relocation would involve significant challenges, not the least of which might include incurring debt, it is nevertheless an issue which requires careful board consideration.

10. As a safeguard in maintaining the School’s fundamental mission emphasis, continue to emphasize to potential school families the distinctives of our programs with the intent of ensuring new enrollments fit the profile of what is considered a mission appropriate family.

11. The School will explore ways to increase dialogue with more diverse segments of our local community in order to maximize the possibility of greater participation in the School by these “non-traditional” Christian/private school groups. This includes not only a potentially greater racial diversity, but also potential, mission-appropriate families from “lower” socio-economic groupings.

**Evaluation**

1. Annually assess new family enrollments (along with re-enrollments) against the three-year goal of 10% growth.

2. Determine through interviews with new families the primary reasons for their interest in the School along with any information that may help us improve our engagement with other potentially new families in terms of our marketing and the enrollment and orientation process. In this same vein, host a new parent coffee with the headmaster each fall for new families, utilizing a round table format to gain further feedback concerning ways to better engage potential school families.

3. Carefully chart the hoped-for increase in the number of part-time students who enroll in various aspects of the School’s programs, as well as their retention in the program from year-to-year and possible transition to full-time status.

4. Give careful consideration to the board study concerning the possibility of relocating the School (or opening a satellite school) in the Fishersville/Waynesboro area.
Category 2:  
Development of an Effective Community Dynamic Among Parents, Students and Staff

Goal

The Trustees and Administration will strive to facilitate more of a community dynamic perceived by parents as an invaluable asset in assisting them with the nurturing of their children and larger family. In the context of a culture increasingly hostile to the fundamental values of the School and its families, building an effective community environment where there is strong, mutual support for one another is an essential ingredient in the School’s effort to maximize its effectiveness in fulfilling its fundamental mission. Furthermore, we believe cultivating such community is an effective strategy in complementing the goal of enrollment retention and expansion.

Strategies*

1. Conduct annually approximately four to six parent meetings addressing issues of significant relevance to parents as related to the training and education of their children. These meetings will be carefully planned in advance in order to ensure quality presentations by effective speakers, panelists, etc.*

   a. While approximately two of these meetings will be school-wide, thus bringing together the entire school community, at least some of the meetings will be focused on more specific age-related topics (elementary, middle, and high school).

   b. At least two of these six meetings will be grade level meetings for parents of pre-k through sixth grade students. This will allow teachers and parents to discuss issues that are especially relevant to each of these self-contained classes.

   c. Meetings will begin, whenever possible, by featuring student talent in various formats (music, prose and poetry, art displays, etc.).

   d. When appropriate, parents will be divided toward the end of these meetings into “grades” in order to interact and to pray together with other parents in the same grades on behalf of their children and the School.

2. Conduct a Back-to-School night each year in August to provide students, parents and teachers with an opportunity to become acquainted, familiarized with curricula, classroom policies and procedures, and to have opportunity to pray together.

3. Sponsor an annual Christian worldview seminar featuring an accomplished presenter designed to teach and emphasize to parents and older students the essential role of Christian worldview training in the development of spiritually healthy young people as an

* Strategies denoted with an asterisk indicate their over-lapping with the first category pertaining to enrollment expansion and retention.
essential preparation to stand in culture as effective witnesses for Christ. This seminar will generally be hosted on a Saturday and will count as a school day for those older grades of students who are asked to attend. This event will be hosted in a local venue with a large enough auditorium allowing for the larger community to be invited, thus serving as a further means to engage other potentially mission appropriate families in the larger community.

4. Facilitate and assist new families in their transition into the School community:

   a. Schedule a new parents’ orientation meeting each August to ensure that they are familiarized with important “get acquainted” information pertaining to various school policies and procedures.

   b. Designate a set of “veteran” parents to serve as “buddies” to each new family. These “buddies” will initiate phone contact with the new family before the school year in order to welcome them and also to volunteer to answer any questions that might arise as the school year progresses.

   c. Host new parent coffees with the headmaster early in the second quarter of the school year in order to dialogue with “new” parents about their experience in the School as well as soliciting their feedback on ways to improve the new parent experience.

   d. Request teachers in grades pre-k through grade six to contact any new parents represented in their class inviting them to come to the classroom to become acquainted before the first day of school.

   e. Offer a “welcome tent” the first day of school on the elementary campus to encourage fellowship among families.

5. Conduct at least two fundraisers designed not only to generate non-tuition income, but also to facilitate a greater sense of community in working together toward a common goal that is in the interests of the larger school ministry.

6. Purposefully explore ways to ramp up the role of the Parent Volunteer Organization (PVO) with the goal of increasing the direct engagement of parents in the life of the School.* Examples of specific engagements for parents would include the following:

   a. Assisting the administration in planning and conducting a Family Fall Social, a middle school Firepot Social, a spring Family Entertainment Night, and similar activities designed to facilitate a sense of community.

   b. Serving as room moms/dads for the elementary grades in assisting the teacher with various class activities, including field trips and other special events, decorating bulletin boards, and similar class-related activities.

   c. Serving as class sponsors for middle and high school grades, helping to coordinate occasional class socials and student and/or parent get-togethers outside of the school, helping coordinate a special community service day for these same grades, coordinating class fundraisers to help each grade fund their senior trip, organizing a middle school father/son camping trip and mother/daughter tea, along with similar events.

   d. Engaging parents in various aspects of the School’s program by utilizing their specific skill sets. Opportunities include speaking in chapels, classrooms, providing mentorship and job shadowing opportunities, tutoring, etc.
7. Design school community service projects and work parties that will involve parents as much as reasonably possible in working together with their children and the larger school community in this common cause of serving the school and the larger community.

8. Continue to explore potential activities and projects intended to build a greater sense of camaraderie among the students as well as a sense of school pride and spirit. Examples include community and international service and outreach projects, student socials, engagement of the student senate in working with the school administration concerning student life issues, etc.*

**Evaluation**

Developing an effective community dynamic among parents, students and staff is very much a qualitative rather than a quantitative goal. Therefore, evaluation through empirical measurement is difficult. Rather, evaluation must be based on more anecdotal feedback, as follows:

1. Conduct periodic parent, student and staff surveys in order to determine a general sense of attitudes about the School as a community.

2. Seek one-on-one input from parents in parent/teacher conferences as well as group input from new parent coffees and other parent forums.

3. Conduct on-going dialogue with members of the Parent Advisory Board, the Parent Volunteer Organization, the auction committee, the high school student senate, etc., concerning their perceptions about the School’s progress in building an effective sense of community.

4. Ensure opportunities for staff in general meetings for dialogue and feedback concerning their sense of the community dynamic.
Section V
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# Average 2012-2013 SAT Scores for Local Schools

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### Grace Christian School

*Stanford Achievement Test Results*

National Percentile Scores

2012-2013 School Year

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# Grace Christian School

*Stanford Achievement Test Results*

National Percentile Scores

2011-2012 School Year

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* No class averages due to errors in summary reports
## Grace Christian School

### Stanford Achievement Test Results

National Percentile Scores

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# Grace Christian School

*Stanford Achievement Test Results*

National Percentile Scores

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</table>
GCS Alumni have attended and/or graduated from the following colleges and universities:

(as of Fall 2013)

Asbury University, Kentucky
Azusa Pacific University, California
Belmont University, Tennessee
Bethany Bible College, Canada
Bethany Lutheran College, Minnesota
Blue Ridge Community College, Virginia
Bluefield College, Virginia
Bridgewater College, Virginia
Bryan College, Tennessee
Carson Newman University, Tennessee
Central Virginia Community College, Virginia
Charleston Southern University, South Carolina
Christopher Newport University, Virginia
Coastal Carolina University, South Carolina
College of Charleston, South Carolina
College of William & Mary, Virginia
College of William & Mary School of Law, Virginia
Columbia University, New York
Columbia International University, South Carolina
Covenant College, Georgia
Eastern Mennonite University, Virginia
Eastern University, Pennsylvania
Eastern Virginia Medical School, Virginia
Elon University, North Carolina
Emmanuel College, Georgia
Furman University, South Carolina
Gardner-Webb University, North Carolina
Geneva College, Pennsylvania
George Fox University, Oregon
George Mason Law School, Virginia
George Mason University, Virginia
Gordon College, Massachusetts
Grove City College, Pennsylvania
Hampton-Sydney College, Virginia
Harding Christian University, Arkansas
High Point University, North Carolina
James Madison University, Virginia
Jefferson College of Health Sciences, Virginia
John Tyler Community College, Virginia
Johnson University, Tennessee
Judson University, Illinois
Kenyon College, Ohio
King College, Tennessee
Lee University, Tennessee
LeTourneau University, Texas
Liberty University, Virginia
Mars Hill College, North Carolina
Mary Baldwin College, Virginia
Marymount University, Virginia
Messiah College, Pennsylvania
Milligan College, Tennessee
Montreat College, North Carolina
Moody Bible Institute, Illinois
New River Community College, Virginia
Northern Virginia Community College, Virginia
Nyack College, New York
Old Dominion University, Virginia
Oxford University, England
Piedmont Junior College, North Carolina
Piedmont Community College, Virginia
Pepperdine University, California
Pfeiffer University, North Carolina
Purdue University, Indiana
Radford University, Virginia
Regent University, Virginia
Regency University, Canada
Roanoke College, Virginia
Robert Gordon University, Scotland
Rutgers University, New Jersey
Shenandoah University, Virginia
Shepherd University, West Virginia
Southern Adventist University, Tennessee
Southern Wesleyan University, South Carolina
Taylor University, Indiana
Technical University of Darmstadt, Germany
Temple College, Texas
Trevecca Nazarene University, Tennessee
Tusculum College, Tennessee
University of Aberdeen, British Columbia
University of Barcelona, Spain
University of Indianapolis, Indiana
University of Limerick, Ireland
University of Louisiana at Lafayette, Louisiana
University of Mary Washington, Virginia
University of Mexico, Mexico
University of North Carolina, North Carolina
University of Tennessee, Tennessee
University of Virginia, Virginia
Virginia College of Osteopathic Medicine, Virginia
Virginia Commonwealth University, Virginia
Virginia Intermont College, Virginia
Virginia Military Institute, Virginia
Virginia Technological Institute, Virginia
Virginia Western College, Virginia
Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington, DC
Westmont College, California
Washington & Lee University, Virginia
Grace Christian School Alumni Facts:

- First graduating class in 1992
- 365 alumni
- 86% of GCS graduates in the past 12 years (2002-2013) have enrolled in college in the fall immediately following graduation.

<table>
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<th>Class</th>
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</table>
Purpose: The purpose of the Grace Christian School Parent Volunteer Committee (PVO) is to enrich our elementary, middle and high school students’ education by supporting the teachers, school programs and our school families through volunteer work. The PVO is open to all GCS parents and our slogan is, "The Parent Volunteer Organization... where All Parents are Members!" We also invite grandparents and others who are interested in helping to join us.

History: The Grace Christian School Parent Volunteer Organization was initiated during the 2005-2006 school year. While Grace Christian School (GCS) has always had a strong tradition of volunteerism by the parent population over the past 35 years, the structure and organization of an actual program has not always been in place.

Structure: The PVO falls under the leadership of the Elementary School Receptionist. GCS parents serve as Committee Leaders as well as make up the core of volunteers for each committee. Attached you will find the 2013-14 PVO Committee listing of volunteer leadership positions which gives the “job description” for the committee leaders.

Details: PVO committees include: Room Parent, Grandparent’s Day, Field Day Picnic, Middle School Social Events, Staff Appreciation, as well as an Art’s Committee to help with Music, Art, and Drama.
GCS Volunteer Descriptions for Coordinators and Leaders
2013-2014

Homeroom Coordinator for Pre-K – 6th:
► Assign each class (PK-6) 1 room parent and at least 1 assistant room parent
► Meet at beginning of school year with all room parents to review responsibilities, etc.
► Be the go-to person for the room parents if they need help

Room Parent: Lead Room Parent: will work directly with the teacher with any needs listed below:
  Assistant Room Parent: will help the Lead Room Parent with any needs listed below:
► Involve as many parents as possible to assist with activities and events as needed
► Assist teacher with any classroom needs
► Assist teacher with class auction project
► Plan class parties (with the teacher)

Grandparent’s Day Leader:
► Responsibilities include planning and preparing food for Grandparent’s Day reception
► A list of parent volunteers will be provided
► Work closely with the ES office staff on Grandparent’s Day plans/details
► The ES office staff will mail and receive RSVP’s

Field Day Picnic Leader:
► Responsibilities include planning, purchasing and serving snack, pizza, drinks, and ice cream for the ES/MS Field Day
► Reserve bandstand/park, Dominoes Pizza Truck for the next year’s event
► The ES office staff will send and receive student permission slips, parent volunteer sign-ups, pizza RSVP forms, and collect guest’s pizza money
► The ES office will provide you with a list of parent volunteers to help serve food

MS Social Events Leader:
► Assist with planning of 2 socials per year (with student input and Principal approval)
► Assist with planning 8th grade end-of-the year breakfast with Principal input

Staff Appreciation Leaders:
ES/MS: ► Assist the HS Staff Appreciation Leaders in providing breakfast for staff back to school mtg.
► Provide snacks in ES/MS teacher workrooms occasionally throughout the school year
► Provide a meal for ES/MS teachers during parent-teacher conference meetings twice per year
► A list of parent volunteers will be provided

HS: ► Assist the ES Staff Appreciation Leaders in providing breakfast for staff back to school mtg.
► Provide snacks in HS teacher workroom occasionally throughout the school year
► Provide a meal for HS teachers during parent-teacher conference meetings once per year
► A list of parent volunteers will be provided

Art’s Leader:
► Music, Art & Drama - Assist Elementary Chorus Director and others leading in these areas with various programs as needed throughout the year such as: 4-6th grade Musical, Arts Night, Grandparent’s Day, Arts Night, Summer Art Camp and the Artsonia Program.
► A list of parent volunteers will be provided
2013-2014 Grace Christian School Master Calendar (as of 8/15/13)

August
15  New Parents’ Orientation/Social at High School at 7:00 p.m.
19-21  Workdays for Staff
21  Open House at ES and MS (1-3 p.m.);
   Grade 9-12 New Student Orientation (1-2 p.m.)
21  Seniors depart for Back-to-School Retreat
22-23  High School Back-to-School Retreat
22  First Day of School—Noon Dismissal for ES/MS—No After School Care
23  Noon Dismissal for ES/MS – No After School Care
26  Back to School Night: 6:30 p.m. for grades 3-6 and 9-12
27  Back to School Night: 6:30 p.m. for grades PK-2 and 7-8

September
2  Labor Day – No School
6  GCS Family Social (5:30-7:30 p.m.)
12-13  Middle School Retreat
16  College Seminar for 8th-12th Grade Students and Parents at HS (7:00 p.m.)
17  High School Picture Day
18  Elementary/Middle School Picture Day
25  See You At the Pole/Noon Dismissal for All Grades—
   (PD Meetings --1:00-4:00 p.m.)

October
7-8  SAIS Chair, Cobb Atkinson from Westchester School
14-18  Senior Appreciation Week
16  PSAT’s
24  Last Day of First Quarter, Noon Dismissal, (PD meetings 1:00-4:00 p.m.)
24  4th – 6th Grade Musical –(7:00 p.m)
25  No School (Teacher Workday)
25  Job Shadowing for Grades 9th – 12th
28  Class Meetings PK-6 at ES, General Parent Meeting 7-12 at HS (7:00 p.m.)

November
4  Report Cards Available on RenWeb
7  Noon Dismissal-- Parent/Teacher Conferences (3:00-7:00 p.m.)
27-29  Thanksgiving Break

December
17-19  Exams for Grades 9th –12th
19  ES/MS/HS Choral Concert at 7:00 p.m.
20  12:30 Dismissal for All Grades – Last Day before Christmas Break,
   No After School Care (Wenonah)
21-Jan 5  Christmas Break
January
6 School Resumes
17 Last Day Second Quarter
17 Noon Dismissal (PD Meeting 1:00-3:00 p.m.)
27 Report Cards Available on RenWeb
27 PK-12 Parent Meeting at High School (7:00 p.m.)

February
4 7th grade Parent Guidance Meeting at HS /PK-6th Class meetings at ES (7:00 p.m.)
13 Noon Dismissal-- Parent/Teacher Conferences PK-12 (2:00-6:00 p.m.)
14 No School--Teacher Workday (potential snow make-up day)
18 Open House (6:30 p.m.)

March
3 PK-12 Parent Meeting at High School (7:00 p.m.)
14 Student/Faculty Game Night
19 Last Day of Third Quarter
19 Noon dismissal—(PD Meetings 1:00-4:00 p.m.)
20 No School-- (potential snow make-up day)
21 No School-- (potential snow make-up day)
31 Report Cards Available on RenWeb

April
1-15 Online Auction
6-9 SAIS Accreditation Committee visits
11-12 High School Drama
10, 11, 14-16 SAT (Achievement Tests) - Elementary & Middle School
15-16 SAT (Achievement Tests) – 9th and 10th Graders
17-21 Easter Break-No school

May
2 Grandparents’ Day for Grades PK-3rd
   Early Dismissal for ES/MS only - No After School Care
5 Choral Concert (7:00 p.m.)
15 Arts Night
23-29 Senior Trip (Tentative)
26 Memorial Day-- No School—(potential snow makeup day)
27-30 Exams for Grades 9th-12th
29 Elementary and Middle School Field Day/Picnic (Early Dismissal 1:00 p.m.)
30 Noon Dismissal for All Grades – No After School Care - Teacher Workday
31 Graduation

Potential snow makeup days: February 14, March 20, March 21, April 17, May 26
Grace Christian School
Business Partnership Program

Our Business Partnership Program is comprised of business partners who give financially to support Grace Christian School’s financial aid program on an ongoing basis. Ninety percent of each gift goes directly to meet the current or next year’s financial aid budget, the remaining ten percent is designated to the Grace Christian School Endowment Fund, which will provide for future capital improvement needs and other needs of the School. All donations are tax deductible. Although the following are four suggested levels of giving, we appreciate the fact that each business owner will know the specific contribution amount which is best suited to his/her individual business.

**WARRIOR PARTNER**
A contribution of $6,000 or more per year will support an average of three or more students on financial aid.

**BLUE PARTNER**
A contribution of $4,000 per year will support an average of two students on financial aid.

**ORANGE PARTNER**
A contribution of $2,000 per year will support an average of one student on financial aid.

Participants choosing the Warrior, Blue, and Orange Partner levels will receive the following benefits:
♦ Business name on Partnership signs located at all three campus locations (see reverse side for example)
♦ Business name and logo on our website, www.gcswarriors.org
♦ Business name and logo with advertisement in the GCS Yellow Pages
♦ Business logo in each issue of the Warrior Newsletter (circulation approx. 2,500) with two issues per year

**WHITE PARTNER**
A contribution of $300 or more (when added with other contributions, supports students on financial aid)

Participants choosing the White Partner level will receive the following benefits:
♦ Business name and logo on our website, www.gcswarriors.org (see reverse side for example)
♦ Business name and logo with advertisement in the GCS Yellow Pages

*The Warrior is the GCS mascot.
**Each color represents one of the three GCS colors.

Grace Christian School is indebted for all contributions made to the financial aid fund, as are the families who will receive the benefit of these gifts.

Thank You!

For further information about Grace Christian School, the Development Program, or the Business Partnership Program, please call our Development Office at (540) 886-9109.
Business Partnership Sign

Signs located at both academic campuses and the GCS Activities Center (Gymnasium)
GRACE CHRISTIAN SCHOOL

YES! We want to be a part of the Business Partnership Program and assist the financial aid ministry of Grace Christian School

Business Name__________________________________________________________

Contact Name/Title _________________________________________________________

Mailing Address: Street______________________________________________________

Physical Address if different from above: Street____________________________________

City _________________________ State ________ Zip __________

Phone ______________________ Email ____________________________________________

Website Address __________________________________________________________

Our financial commitment is $_______________

Method of payment: Total payment enclosed $_______________

Quarterly payments of $_______________

Monthly payments of $_______________

Signature __________________________ Date __________________________

Referral Information

Referrals are an important aspect of continuing to grow the Business Partnership Program. We greatly appreciate any referrals that you can provide. We will contact you to discuss your referral information before contacting the business(es) that you have listed below.

Name of Business: ___________________________________________________________

Name of Owner/Manager: _____________________________________________________

Name of Business: ___________________________________________________________

Name of Owner/Manager: _____________________________________________________

Please return this form to Grace Christian School, Development Office
19 S. Market Street, Staunton, Virginia 24401 (540) 886-9109

On behalf of those who are the recipients of your thoughtfulness and generosity, we say Thank You!
Grace Christian School Business Partners in Education

Augusta Seed
Dennis & Angie Rawley, Owners
P.O. Box 899
Verona, VA 24482
540-886-6055

LearningRx—Staunton
Studley Robson, Owner
1600 N. Coaler St., Suite 7
Staunton, VA 24401
540-569-3600

Vision Technology Group, LLC
Hiram Tackett, General Mgr.
125 West Bruce Street
Harrisonburg, VA 22801
540-437-0112

MGW & Lingo Networks
Craig & Sheri Smith, Owners
23 North Central Avenue
Staunton, VA 24401
540-712-0000

F&M Bank
Branches in Page, Shenandoah, and Rockingham counties.
P.O. Box 1111
Timberville, VA 22853
(540) 896-8941

Virginia Frame Builders & Supply, Inc.
Rob Stoneburner, Owner
P.O. Box 60
Fishersville, VA 22939
540-337-4369

KPD, Inc. d.b.a. Roto-Rooter
Doug Campbell, Vice President
66 International Lane, Suite 104
Staunton, VA 24401
540-886-4954

Beverage Tractor
Charlie Beverage, Owner
2085 Stuarts Draft Hwy.
Stuarts Draft, VA 24477
540-337-1090

Blue Ridge Insurance Services, Inc.
Ernie Hess Owner
116 Reservoir Street
Harrisonburg, VA 22801
540-437-9030

Decker Realty
Roger Decker, Owner
12 Sunset Blvd., Suite 2
Staunton, VA 24401
540-886-1521

Blue Ridge Asphalt Maintenance, Inc.
O.D. Royals, Jr., Owner
1080 Hermitage Road
Staunton, VA 24401
540-248-3116

Pro-Build
Zach Straits, General Mgr.
51 Laurel Hill Road
P.O. Box 879
Verona, VA 24482
540-248-0301

Jack Clem, General Contractor
Jack Clem, Owner
37 West Hill Farm Drive
Staunton, VA 24401
540-480-3516

Dent Free, LLC
Keith Hebert, Owner
216 Trinity Point Road
Swoope, VA 24479
540-907-5414

Weaver Insurance & Financial Advisors
Brent Showalter, President
P.O. Box 1588
Waynesboro, VA 22980
540-943-1221

Dent Free, LLC
540-907-5414
Grace Christian School
Local Community Service and International Outreach Projects

Grace Christian School students have been privileged to participate in numerous community service and international outreach projects over the years, including those listed below.

**Local Community Service Projects**
- Valley Mission
- Salvation Army
- Special Olympics
- Youth Development International
- Grace Bible Camp
- Blue Ridge Area Food Bank
- Joy of Life Foster Home
- Greenstone Residence for Handicapped Adults
- Comfort Care Women’s Health
- Many local nursing homes
- Equipping the Saints
- Advancing Native Missions
- Habitat for Humanity
- The Alzheimer’s Association Memory Walk
- March of Dimes Walk
- Wenonah School Project for underprivileged children
- Stuarts Draft Retirement Community
- Dominion Power Energy Share Program
- Love, INC
- Kairos Prison Ministry

**International Outreach**
- Hope Christian School Project in the Philippines
- Kenya Shoe Project
- Little House of Refuge Orphanage--Guatemala
- Zambia – Grassroots Heroes – Grippis Farm
- Advancing Native Missions
- Liberia (packed canisters) – ANM
- Cristo Viene Home in Bolivia
- Voice of the Martyrs Blanket Project in Sudan
RECENT SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVES (ONGOING)

I. High School
   • HS Schedule And Class Revisions
     o Added flexibility during afternoon classes to allow for mentorships, apprenticeships, jobs, concurrent enrollments, on-line learning, etc.
     o Extended time in math classes for providing additional individual student support
     o Writing labs for individual writer’s conferences
     o Home-school partnership (see more below on this initiative)
     o Latin I is offered in 9th grade
     o Additional Dual Enrollment, Advanced Placement classes offered for juniors and seniors

II. Middle School / High School
   • Hybrid Schooling
     o An up-dated program that allows home-school students to take advantage of middle/high school classes and extra-curricular activities on a part time basis. For more details, see pamphlet entitled “Part Time School: Creative Options for the Christian Home School Student.”
   • Expansion of the MS/HS Guidance Program
     o Starting in MS with individual parent conferences, informational group parent meetings, student tours / visits to the HS, individual meetings of 8th grade parents with the HS principal or guidance counselor
     o More personalized guidance counseling for students:
       ▪ Individual student guidance meetings with the HS guidance counselor or principal for 8th-12th graders
     o Expanded mentorship and job shadowing programs
     o Career Week
     o Special career speakers
     o Writing of the Student Path to Career and Calling booklet and updated comprehensive HS Guidance Manual
     o Information is systematically sent home to parents regarding college (pamphlets, newsletters, etc.)
     o 8th-12th grade families receive the GCS College Handbook which provides specific guidance for those who wish to pursue post-grad studies

III. Elementary School (K-6th)
   • Reading Enrichment Initiative
     o Objectives
       ▪ Encourage a love for reading
       ▪ Introduce students to all genres of literature
       ▪ Differentiation – teaching reading (and all related skills) at each student’s instructional level to maximize learning and reading success for all students
- Emphasis on foundational phonics and reading skills K-3rd grades (learning to read)
- Emphasis on comprehension skills and strategies at the upper elementary levels (reading to learn)
- Strengthen reading fluency and comprehension skills through a variety of methods, curriculum and strategies.
- Integration of spelling, writing, vocabulary, reading
- Design and set up a special reading room called the Daily Five Café where students pace through five exciting literacy tasks in a relaxed atmosphere. Hundreds of leveled books, games, and computer activities are available for the students.

  - Methods and Curriculum
    - 90 minute reading / language arts block
    - Guided reading groups using a basal reading series
    - Daily Five Reading Program (widely used) – Students pace through five exciting literacy tasks each day in the Daily Five Café.
    - Individual book baskets which students fill each day with level appropriate, high interest books for reading to self and each other.
    - Differentiated literature circles and book clubs using leveled chapter books in a variety of genres (4th-6th grade)
    - Benchmark evaluations are conducted and reading progress folders for each student are passed from grade to grade.
    - K-2nd grades separate reading progress reports that detail specific skills and reading level are sent home with the quarterly report cards
    - Special literacy days and activities are scheduled throughout the year, such as Read Aloud Day and Vocabulary Parade.
    - Reading at home is highly encouraged at all levels through the Book-it and Honors Reading programs.

IV. School-wide Initiatives (ES/MS/HS)
- Expansion of Language Program
  - Latin I is now offered at the HS (currently in 9th grade for students that test out of grammar)
  - *English from the Roots Up: Word of the Week* curriculum is used to study Greek and Latin roots in 2nd - 8th grades.
  - *Word of the Day* curriculum has been implemented in 9th-12th grades, which incorporates vocabulary and etymology.
  - Spanish at the ES and MS levels is being considered for the future.

- Missions, Outreach, and Student Interaction across Grade Levels
  - Reaching out beyond the School community to touch the lives of others locally and globally
  - These “outreach” initiatives encourage interaction between students of all grade levels, and they encourage leadership as older students interact with younger students
  - Local public school - underprivileged children (Wenonah)
• Kenya shoe project
• Local nursing homes and other care facilities
• Philippine Hope Kinder School (support financially)
• Blue Ridge Area Food Bank Can Drive
• Local Valley Mission
• Kairos Prison Outreach
• Little House of Refuge in Guatemala
• Local community service
• ES “prayer group and outreach” initiative (6th graders lead K-5th graders in small groups)

• Economics and Financial Literacy Integration K – 8th
  Note: Economics and Financial Literacy are integrated at the HS level through history, math, government, and geography. A separate personal finance class is also offered.
  o As a result of a curriculum study several years ago, a weakness in economics surfaced.
  o With support and resources from the James Madison University Center for Economics Education, a basic “literature connection” curriculum plan was developed.
  o Approximately 12 teachers attended various economics workshops sponsored by The JMU Center for Economic Education.
  o A scope and sequence of basic economics terms and concepts are now integrated into our current curriculum through literature, history, math, and Bible.
  o Biblical financial principles are also taught through the curriculum content areas when applicable.
Headmaster Paper:
Strategic Observations and Proposed Strategies for Grace Christian School
February 2012

Part I
Some Strategic Observations

Introduction

I do not believe it is an overstatement or exaggeration to conclude that the worldly, spiritual pressures that militate against Christianity and, more particularly, against Christian parenting, have increased dramatically in recent years. For those of us who have been involved in parenting and Christian education over the last thirty-plus years, we generally agree that we have observed an increasing pervasiveness of worldly influences upon not only our children, but also within our Christian parent community. Compared to previous generations of parents with whom we were associated, we are finding this “new” generation of parents less founded in their convictions concerning Christian education and more perplexed and frustrated than ever with how to raise their children in an increasingly secular and ungodly culture.

As we will consider below, this “lesser” sense of conviction is resulting in what may be an erosion of commitment to Christian schooling that becomes increasingly apparent between grades six and ten. During this stage in their children’s lives, parents are conflicted with the many “values” in terms of how best to educate their children. (By values, I mean everything from the importance of a Christ-centered education, an emphasis on academic quality, the attractiveness of potentially larger and more diverse programs as offered in public education, the less demanding academic rigor of public education, etc.) Parents’ sense of values will determine their educational choices for their children.

We also must recognize that “the times they are a’changing” in the context of technology and its direct influence upon our youth both in exposing them more pervasively to secular culture as well as its secondary impact upon how students use their “out-of-school” time. Technology also equals a greater distractedness among our youth with far less inclination on their part to stay focused and apply themselves to traditional academic disciplines. For example, our own in-school survey by our technology teacher, Jessica Baska, concludes the following (using the ninth grade as the “median” for grades 7 – 12):

- 83% of our ninth graders have their own cell phone.
- 71% of ninth graders have Facebook accounts.
- Ninth graders average 17 hours “screen time (TV, texting, computer, etc.) Monday through Friday (let me emphasize that this does not include weekends)!
Someone suggested that we need to not make too much out of this survey or its reliability; however, when one looks at the survey across grades 7 – 12, it appears that the ninth grade results are certainly “in the ball park.” When one considers that the above “technology time” does not include our students’ other extra-curricular activities, it becomes quite apparent that this “distractedness” from traditional academics is no small factor with which we as a school (and parents) are faced. Indeed, this is a primary factor which must be taken into consideration as we consider the direction of our school.

Also, as stated above, never before has popular culture had such a pervasive access to our youth. There is no question that we are seeing a noticeably greater “worldliness” among our youth than was the case ten or fifteen years ago. When it is observed by one of our middle school teachers that some of the students seem far more conversant about the lyrics of rapper M & M than they do fundamental Christian concepts, we realize that we are faced with a very daunting challenge as parents and a school in how to constructively engage both our youth and many of their parents in the context of “loving not the world” (1 John 2:15-17; James 4:4). This, as well, is no small dynamic affecting our school and may be one of the most significant challenges we are facing.

In this context, we are seeing in GCS and other schools like ours fewer parents willing to stick with the Christian school through the secondary level as evidenced by our attrition between grades six through ten.

If we are to maintain an effective ministry in the days ahead, we must “understand the times,” so to speak, and adapt and respond to these “new” dynamics, yet do so without compromising our Christian convictions and standards as pertains to God’s calling on how we educate our children.  

**Unique Challenges and Dynamics Facing Our School**

I believe the fundamental issue facing us has to do with a sense of values. More specifically, our sense of values priorities as a school and those of a significant number of our parents may not always coincide. We both—school and parents—may need to make some adjustments!

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4 The statement “how we educate our children” itself raises a profound question. Who are we and what is meant by our children? The “we” and “our” implies a community. Just who is this community, and whose unique “responsibility” is it to work and sacrifice to maintain a healthy Christian educational community? That is, the School is not to exist for the sake of existing or to continue merely on momentum from the past; rather, there must be a core body that believes it is “called” by God to sacrifice and work hard to provide this Christian educational opportunity for children. On the surface, this seems an obvious and simple issue. Yet, the educational community cannot be maintained by merely a few dedicated individuals; rather, there must be fundamentally a larger community that shares a basic conviction concerning the importance of Christian education. And the leadership of that community must think clearly about what the community should look like, and the commitments that must be expected of each member who chooses to participate. The leadership of the School must think long and hard about these issues, especially in the context of how to fund such a ministry in the days ahead.
On the one hand, we have pretty much resolved, as a board, who and what God has called the school to be. This sense of calling is defined in our board documents and other school literature. In “Appendix D” (crafted in August, 2011), we clarified our two primary values:

1. We believe our primary calling is to root our entire educational system and philosophy in Biblical Christianity, working to integrate this worldview into every aspect of our educational programs and imparting its values to our students and their families.
2. As a secondary, but closely related value, we believe we are called to found our students in a fundamentally sound academic curriculum which will prepare them to move successfully into post-secondary education or directly into the work force.

If these are our principle, guiding values, then I believe all other values and priorities will follow in their proper order.

Let us consider, however, a second “sense of values” as it apparently relates to many of our parents and the reasons they may be enrolled at GCS.

According to Independent School Management (ISM), there are five fundamental reasons why parents enroll in private education (listed as follows in their order of importance):

1. Safety of my child
2. Faculty care and concern
3. Character education
4. Faculty expertise, and
5. Academic rigor

We likely could translate “character education” and “academic rigor” (numbers 3 and 5) as the equivalents of our particular GCS mission emphasis on “the development of Christian character and worldview” and our “sound academic program.” In other words, to the degree that this ISM survey accurately reflects the motivation of a significant number of our GCS parents, to that same degree parents are enrolling as much or more for “safety of my child” and “faculty care and concern” as they are for the school’s two primary values: Christian and academic distinctiveness.

Here, then, is an interesting observation. It is a true statement that a consistent emphasis in providing a “Christian education” will also result in the values of “safety of the child” and “faculty care and concern.” This is because such values are inherent in the Christian worldview. However, it is not at the same time true that an emphasis on “safety” and “care and concern” will result in a Christian emphasis. That is, other schools may be perceived by parents as representing adequate “safety” and “care and concern by faculty.” This may be especially true by the time students reach the middle

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and high schools. (In this context, a percentage of our parents will, therefore, opt for another school alternative.)

Because this is a strategic observation, let me put it in other words. All responsible parents strongly prefer a safe and loving, constructive environment for their child. These values should be inherent in a Christian school. Therefore, some parents may be attracted to a Christian school primarily for these values rather than primarily for providing a Christ-centered education for their child.

Or we could say it like this: a percentage of the parents (when they first enroll at GCS—usually in the elementary school) have a “mixed bag” of motives in terms of the values they perceive as being most important. The distinctive values that the school has identified as primary, while perhaps important to parents, are not necessarily in the same order of priority for them. Thus, when they come to the middle and/or high school grades, some of them will tend to have a far “softer” conviction about a Christian education for their children.

We do not dismiss the importance of these “other” values. All responsible parents desire for their children all of the values listed in the ISM survey. However, if the priority of the “Christian” and “academic” values are not at the top of the parents’ list, they are far less likely to stick with the school as other, “competing” values are increasingly brought to bear. Other values, as noted previously, would include, but not be limited to the following:

- A perception of a greater diversity of opportunities as represented in the public school, including course offerings, vocational training, technology instruction, Governor’s School, advanced placement and dual enrollment, sports opportunities, etc.
- The promise of a less rigorous academic curriculum and standard, while at the same time a higher grade point average (as the result of “grade inflation” and a lower standard in public education). In other words, public school represents an “easier” path, yet greater short-term “reward.”

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6 Indeed, over the years many Christian parents have taken the position of “giving their children a good foundation” in the elementary grades as a preparation for attending secular schools in the middle and/or high school years. We certainly disagree with this position; however, this is very much a perspective that a certain percentage of our parents will have.

7 It is encouraging that for those GCS parents who responded to the parent survey, the “response average” for the “value” of “Christian education and character development” as parents’ first priority for being at GCS was 1.3. This is evidence that the “Christian distinctive” is most important for these parents (although 1.3 does represent somewhat of a mixed bag). However, it is also important to keep in mind that out of 199 families enrolled at GCS, I would estimate that 25% to 35% did not respond to the survey. One must ask how much their responses would have impacted the survey results.

8 Per our parent survey, twenty-four percent of our middle school respondents felt GCS extra-curricular offerings are insufficient. Nineteen percent of our high school respondents felt this same way.

9 Twelve percent of our middle school respondents indicated the academic program is too challenging, and thirty-four percent believe too much homework is generally given. While only nine percent of the high school parents believe the academic program is too challenging, thirty-eight percent believe too much homework is given.
The cultural pressure of conforming to the public education “standard” and mindset of how best to educate a child in the twenty-first century. This would include the pressure of parents “battling” with their adolescent and teenage children who seem far more vocal in wanting to pursue the “easier” and more permissive road of public education versus remaining in a more rigorous educational environment, etc.

I believe we see this reality of GCS parents opting for these “competing” values as these dynamics become more pressing in the middle and high school years. The elementary school (pre-k through grade six) represents a proportionately higher percentage of our enrollment than grades ten through twelve. That is, in grades one through six, the average grade size is twenty-five, whereas in grades ten through twelve, the average grade size is fifteen. This represents a statistical attrition from elementary to high school of forty percent.

In a more anecdotal context, we could cite middle school grades in recent years of thirty plus students which, by the time they reach tenth grade, have decreased by over fifty percent. I believe this is a clear evidence of parents who are opting for public education because they place what we consider the “lesser” values as more important than the “Christian” and “academic” values.

This is not to say that the “lesser” values are unimportant. Certainly, if a Christian school is not doing a good job academically or is not providing a “safe” environment with loving and qualified instructors, or offering a reasonable number of “diversity” opportunities, many of us would choose to not continue in such a school. However, when these “lesser” values are largely in place as part of the GCS middle and high school programs, yet parents choose to leave the school, it is an indication that they are not primarily concerned about the “Christian” and “academic” values.

Let us also acknowledge that GCS is not for every family. That is, we do not argue the fact that GCS has deficiencies on which we need to continually work for improvement. In some cases, these deficiencies may represent a compelling reason to leave Grace. We would not argue that for some students, other settings may be more to their benefit. However, in the context of a Christian family, we would view this as far more the exception than the rule.

At the high school, twelve percent of our survey respondents indicated their children are not positive about their enrollment at GCS. This figure was sixteen percent for the middle school respondents.

In a small school such as ours, other factors than attrition may explain the variation in class size; however, this statistic illustrates the fact that we do consistently encounter attrition primarily in the late middle to mid high school years.

Of course, it could be argued that the School has significant deficiencies at the middle and high school levels as a primary reason for enrollment attrition. However, the track record of GCS graduates and their attitude toward the school in looking back would indicate a fundamentally strong program both spiritually and academically. Thus, I would suggest that the attrition at the middle and high school levels experienced in recent years is more a function of a “softer” conviction by parents about Christian education as well as values priorities as discussed in the main body of this paper.

As previously cited, thirty-four percent of our middle school respondents believe too much homework is generally given, while thirty-eight percent at the high school believe this to be the case. I find this to be a significant piece of information. While one might debate the reasons for this perception, the simple fact is
It certainly could be inferred that my evaluation of this subject is too “hard nosed” and exclusivist. However, as I have contended for over thirty years, I believe Biblical principles of training and educating our children clearly demand that we place them under the guidance of Christian educators (the Christian school or home school seem the only viable alternatives) in order to sow a Christ-centered mindset and system of Christian values. We do so in complete dependence upon God to honor our obedience to His Word by quickening through the power of the Holy Spirit what we have sowed in faith in a timeliness of His own choosing. While the larger Christian community does not share this same sense of conviction about Christian education, and while we must respect and honor those who differ, we can only choose that course which we believe God is calling us to pursue, regardless of numbers or popularity.

In the above context, I suggest that we should plan for the high school, in particular, to continue as a small learning community rather than it being the same size proportionately as the elementary school. This should not disturb or surprise us in view of the above analysis. Furthermore, we should understand that a smaller learning community has unique advantages that cannot be duplicated in a significantly larger program. Thus, size must not be a discouragement to us in fulfilling our sense of God’s calling in working with our young men and women at the high school level. Indeed, we must have the courage to press on, making the adjustments necessary to maintain a quality program for the benefit of those who share our fundamental convictions about how best to educate our children.

In closing this section, I would observe, somewhat repetitiously, that if Christian education for our children and youth is as vital as we believe it to be, then we must do all possible to maintain it as a viable option for those Christian parents who share our same conviction, regardless of school size. *Furthermore, the school must be quite distinct in its Christian emphasis if it is to be effective. Better a smaller, distinctly Christian school rather than a larger school less focused in its Christian emphasis.*

Indeed, it would represent a serious deficiency in the local Christian community to not have the Christian school—more particularly, the Christian high school—as a means to educate children from Christian families.

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that to the degree that homework becomes an on-going burden for families, whatever the reasons, there are many who would view this factor as a justifiable reason to leave the school because of the stress it creates for the child and for the parent/child relationship. Indeed, when one considers that students are at the school for approximately 7 hours and 15 minutes per day, and then may be faced with significant homework after school, this issue becomes a potentially huge dynamic that I believe may put our families in a “no-win” situation. That is, they want a Christian education for their children, but they also want their children (and family) to have a “life after school.” While we must be careful to say that where there is a problem with homework, it may not be “simply” because the school gives too much homework; that is, other dynamics outside of the school may contribute to the problem. Nevertheless, it behooves the School to carefully evaluate how it can help students and families manage this issue.
In this context, we must work hard to strengthen our most distinctive qualities while at the same time working to correct our perceived deficiencies to ensure the very best, well-rounded program possible for our youth.

Part II focuses on some further, more specific observations along with recommended strategies for strengthening our program and making it more effective in accomplishing our stated mission.

**Part II**

**Some Conclusions and Possible Strategies**

1. Without any question, we must do all possible to ensure that the greatest distinctive of Grace Christian School is its emphasis upon sowing into the lives of our students the content of our faith in terms of Biblical and doctrinal truth claims. Furthermore, a primary distinctive of our middle and high school program must be upon developing our students’ understanding of our faith at the level of higher order, critical thinking skills. That is, students must understand the reasonable basis and defensibility of our faith rather than merely having its content pumped into their brains. The following quotation from Francis Schaeffer, while somewhat lengthy, provides what I consider one of the more compelling arguments for Christian education. Every parent, board trustee, and Christian educator needs to be soaked in these words:

   It is unreasonable to expect people of the next generation in any age to continue in the historic Christian position, unless they are helped to see where arguments and connotations brought against Christianity and against them by their generation are fallacious. … I find that everywhere I go—both in the United States and in other countries—children of Christians are being lost to historic Christianity. This is happening not only in small groups in small geographical areas but everywhere. They are being lost because their parents are unable to understand their children and therefore they cannot really help them in their time of need. … We have left the next generation naked in the face of the twentieth-century thought by which they are surrounded. … We cannot assume that, because we are Christian … and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, automatically we shall be free from the influence of what surrounds us. *The Holy Spirit can do what He will, but the Bible does not separate His work from knowledge; nor does the work of the Holy Spirit remove our responsibility as parents, pastors, evangelists, missionaries or teachers.*

   **Strategy:** While we already have a strong system of Biblical instruction in place for all grades, we must focus on evaluating and increasing emphasis in the following two areas:

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• Expanding our “world view” emphasis in both our middle and high school programs. In both programs, this may be done primarily by “beefing up” the world view emphasis in our chapel programs as well as possibly employing a “floating” teacher who can bring special “world view” emphasis to the various classes on a weekly basis. This is in addition to a world view emphasis in our regular Bible classes.

• Focusing in our professional development in training our teachers how to effectively teach our Christian worldview across the curriculum. There can never be enough emphasis in this area in view of it being our primary “value” as a school.

• We cannot over-emphasize teaching our students critical thinking skills in both their core academic courses as well as their Bible classes. Critical thinking, in whatever academic setting, is an essential part of our providing our students with a Christian education. Christians must be trained in how to be discriminating thinkers, in that Christianity, among other things, is the “mother” of reason and sound thinking.

• The issue of serving others, while usually not considered as part of the academic program, is nevertheless at the heart of Christian faith. While the school’s focus on a major service opportunity such as the Winona Christmas project is vital for students’ in adding practical application to the “theory” aspect of their faith, and while the service projects at the elementary and middle school may provide adequate emphasis at those levels of the school, we need to evaluate ways to increase service opportunities at the high school level, perhaps through our teams program.

• Because of Biblical teaching, we must provide a more regular emphasis on and opportunity for staff and parent prayer intercession. For staff (especially at the high school), we may need to schedule a quarterly meeting specifically for prayer and/or we must work to set aside more time in staff meetings for prayer. We must also consider ways to bring the parents together more frequently for the purpose of prayer. Indeed, it is true that apart from Christ, we can do nothing of lasting value as educators and parents. We desperately need God’s intervention in the lives of our children, and we must give corporate prayer a higher priority both as staff and parents.

2. A strength of Grace Christian School (and Christian schools like ours) has been in providing our students with a strong academic foundation. We must recognize that, by far, the best preparation for post-secondary education as well as the work force is not an emphasis on diversity of course work, but a concentration on building strong fundamentals in language arts (reading, writing and related language mechanics, and analysis skills), mathematics, social studies, science, and foreign language. We believe Psalm 11:3 implies a profound point when it asks, “If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?” (See important note below.)

16 In recent calls to the admissions departments of James Madison University, Bridgewater College, and Eastern Mennonite University, representatives from all three schools have emphasized to us that they are not looking for students who have had great diversity in their high school course work. Rather, they simply are looking for students well founded in language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. Indeed,
public education has made a fatal error in its increasingly rapid departure from traditional academic standards and pedagogy as is evidenced through standardized achievement tests and the “dumbing down” of curricula. This is plainly evident for the objective student of the history of public education in America. While such a strong statement may be offensive to many, I make no apologies for publically stating what I believe is a fact: American public education (certainly with exceptions), has largely failed in its task of preparing our young people for the realities of the adult world and responsible citizenship. (This is not even taking into account its fundamentally anti-Christian bias in terms of its hard-core, secular, orientation.)

Furthermore, it has increasingly covered its tracks, so to speak, by adding “advanced” and “honors” and “enrichment” courses to give the illusion of a fundamentally sound and advanced program of education when, in essence, it is like “the emperor who was without clothes.” So much of public education, when it comes to a fundamentally sound program of academics, is more of a “paper tiger” than it is reality. This is a “bold” claim, but I believe it is eminently defensible.

We are told repeatedly by post-secondary educators that they want high schools to send them students who are fundamentally sound in their basic academic skills. This means, as C. S. Lewis stated, that “All schools … ought to teach far fewer courses and teach them far better.” This does not mean that a reasonable diversity of course offerings is not to be pursued by GC (see number 5). However, the best preparation for post-secondary education and entering the work force is a strong foundation of academic skills, and GCS must work hard at maintaining this priority, along with its Christian distinctiveness. If GCS drifts away from these priorities, we will have lost our fundamental reason for existing as a school.

there is much “hype” in public education about diversity and special programs. Yet, sadly, fundamental academic skills have greatly deteriorated, in spite of all the special programs. Thus, our GCS emphasis on fundamentals all the way through high school is an important and primary strategy that we must not allow ourselves to be moved away from. While our standard generally is far more rigorous than that of public school, and while we lose some students who opt for the easier path, we must stay true to those families who understand the need for a strong program in academic fundamentals!

17 The Virginia Community Colleges website (http://rethink.vccs.edu/case-for-change/) makes the following observations: “Too many students arrive at our colleges not ready for college-level courses, hindering associate degree completion. Of recent high school graduates who enrolled in the VCCS in the fall of 2008, just under half (45%) enrolled in at least one developmental education course, reflecting a lack of readiness for college-level coursework. This percentage has remained constant over the last 5 years. … Another barrier to student success is moving students from initial enrollment in a developmental course through to completion of needed developmental courses. More than half of the program-placed students in the fall 2004 first-time-in-college cohort required developmental education (56%). Only one-half of students who enrolled in a developmental course completed it on the first attempt. Of those beginning in developmental mathematics, only 22% completed a gatekeeper mathematics course. Non-developmental students are almost twice as successful in completing an award as those requiring developmental education.”

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Strategy:

• As stated in an ACT publication, “the level of academic achievement that students attain by eighth grade has a larger impact on their college and career readiness by the time they graduate from high school than anything that happens academically in high school.” Therefore, GCS must continually evaluate the elementary and middle school program to ensure that the highest academic priority is given to mastery and proficiency of fundamental language arts skills (reading and comprehension, grammar and writing, vocabulary, etc.) and arithmetic/pre-algebra skills. While science and social studies are a close “second” in priority, students must be strongly established in language arts and mathematics. The administration, along with the teachers, must continually evaluate academic priorities and pedagogy in ensuring that these skills are in place by the time students complete grade eight.

• This emphasis on academic fundamentals must continue through the high school, with special emphasis on core courses in grades nine and ten. This emphasis would include language arts, mathematics, science, social studies and Bible. Students may elect to enroll in a Spanish I class in tenth grade (with Spanish II and III to follow the junior and senior years).

• The schedule for juniors and seniors would be structured to allow for greater opportunity to enroll in academic electives at GCS, but also in dual enrollment, Advanced Placement, on-line courses, and actual attendance at Blue Ridge Community College and/or other local colleges. In addition, juniors and seniors would have the opportunity to participate in mentorships with local organizations and businesses, apprenticeships with tradesmen, community classes (Fine arts, computer specialty courses, etc.) or other opportunities they and their parents deem valuable. GCS would consider offering credits for certain “out of school” engagements. A meeting will be scheduled every spring with all rising junior and senior parents as part of the registration process to ensure that parents are fully engaged with their junior and senior children in the registration process.

• The school has made substantial progress this year in bringing greater accountability to the classroom through systematic, formal, and informal teacher observations and follow-up conferences. In fact, we are told by some of our staff who have taught in other schools that observations are more frequent and constructive than in the other schools in which they have taught. This important aspect of educational leadership and accountability must be continued in order to ensure our over-all strategic plan and academic quality.

3. We cannot over-emphasize the strategic importance of engaging our students with age-appropriate, critical thinking skills at all levels of our school, and incorporating a Christian worldview emphasis into our critical thinking emphasis. While critical thinking is not the same as a Christian education, a Christian education without emphasis on critical thinking is sadly deficient.

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18 ACT, Inc. (American College Testing) publishes a well-known standardized test for high school achievement and college admissions in the United States.
Critical thinking may be defined in many different ways, including the ability to make inferences and deductions, making logical connections among related premises, recognizing fallacious questions and arguments, being able to defend or rebut various positions, etc. The simple fact is that a traditional, liberal arts Christian education must emphasize equipping students to think in a critical manner.

In this context, our students must, in the previously quoted words of Francis Schaeffer, be taught to understand and defend their faith “in the face of the [twenty-first] century thought by which they are surrounded.”

If we do not accomplish this task, we have fallen far short of our calling as Christian educators.

**Strategy:**

- We must consider ways to expand our worldview and critical thinking skills emphasis through possibly engaging “floating, specialist” teachers (i.e. Cindy Mims and Jason Bailey) who can engage students at all levels in a supplementary manner to the regular classrooms.
- We must consider refocusing our middle and high school chapels to incorporate far more of a world view emphasis rather than the standard “speaker/lecture/testimony” emphasis common in our present program. We do not eliminate the traditional chapel emphasis; however, we bring more diversity with much greater worldview emphasis.
- Perhaps most importantly, we must focus our professional development on training and equipping our classroom teachers in how to more effectively incorporate critical thinking pedagogy into the regular classroom. This emphasis may be one of the most strategic steps that we can employ in helping us to be far more effective in our mission emphasis.

4. We must carefully re-evaluate our approach to daily homework, especially at the middle and high school levels, because of its potentially burdensome dynamic upon many of our students and its often negative impact on family life. This statement may seem quite contradictory to what has been stated above concerning our academic emphasis and our tradition over the years as a “homework” school. Therefore, let me bring some qualification to what I mean.

Homework—what we would define as assignments that reinforce the material covered in the classroom—is an essential part of any credible academic program. Students must have this practice and reinforcement in order to consolidate and expand upon the teaching and learning that takes place in the actual classroom.

It also must be emphasized that *we are not here advocating “less” homework.* Rather, we must think in terms of how and when the priority of homework fits in to our larger academic program.

Furthermore, we often emphasize that our homework regimen is an important element in preparing our students for college or other post-secondary education. There is no doubt that
our graduates indicate to us that they feel well prepared for college relative to their public school counterparts. More specifically, they know how to perform the independent learning skills and time management necessary for college because of the requirements they have experienced at Grace. This has been the basis for one of our fundamental arguments for our approach to homework.

However, for the sake of perspective, let us consider a hypothetical college student taking five three semester hour courses. This student will spend approximately fifteen hours (maybe nineteen hours if taking a laboratory course) in class weekly. In comparison, a GCS high school student will spend approximately 36.65 hours weekly in a structured school setting. If that same student has an average of two hours of homework on a daily basis, this represents 46.65 weekly hours occupied by school (see below note).19

If this same student is engaged in sports (including travel to away games) and/or other extra-curricular activities (whether school or community related), church youth group, and/or some level of family life, this student, to say the least, is quite engaged, and probably overly so.

One must ask the question, therefore, as to whether or not GCS students, especially at the middle and high school levels, have a reasonable “life after school?” And, of course, when it is concluded that there is too much homework, this may also be a function of the student being overly engaged in other activities or with the distractions of technology. Thus, we must be careful to not over-simplify this issue.

Again, for the sake of emphasis, I am not suggesting a lessening of homework. However, I believe that the typical GCS family lifestyle has changed from my children’s generation to where we are today to the degree that we must also consider restructuring our approach to “life after school.” That is, while we have many conscientious families who work with their children after school hours, we must wonder if the tension and stress created by homework is counterproductive to family life? We are certain that this is the dilemma faced by at least some of our families.

One must at least ask the following questions as a part of evaluating this issue:

- Why is it not possible for our students to walk away from a seven hour twenty minute school day having accomplished most of their daily work (including what we call their daily homework assignments) in their regular classes (excepting AP, honors and dual enrollment classes)?
- If a typical college week equals approximately 15 to 18 hours in class, why are we potentially requiring a higher standard at the middle and high school levels when it comes to time on task? For example, if a typical college class requires two hours of

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19 It is significant, also, to point out that in the context of the Virginia Department of Education’s definition of the minimum length school day, GCS has a longer day than many public schools, allowing us to accrue approximately 15 to 20 days of what the DOE terms “banked time.” This is time that can be credited toward make-up in the event of days missed because of inclement weather rather than actually making up literal days. The point to be made is that our GCS students are in school approximately 15 to 20 more days (in the context of total hours) than most of their public school counterparts.
homework for each session (and that is being quite generous), that equals 45 hours per week. As noted above, this is approximately the weekly “school” time presently being required of GCS high school students.

- Are we too focused on coverage versus depth? That is, a typical middle and high school course is structured more in the context of volume of information covered rather than going into greater depth. In terms of the long-term benefit and preparation of our students, are we not better served, in most classes, to emphasize depth and critical thinking skills far more than breadth of coverage (note again the emphasis of #3 above).
- In the context of the above, could teachers be more discriminating in homework assignments to focus on qualitative work rather than volume? That is, if we ask, as we do, that answers to questions be written in complete sentences, would our students be better served to focus on key questions with greater accountability from teachers for “quality” answers rather than on volume?

These are but some of the questions that touch upon this “greased pig” we call homework. The fundamental question is this: “Can we potentially reduce the amount of “after school” work without in any significant manner compromising the quality of our program?” I personally believe this may be one of the more crucial issues facing our school.

Let me put the issue of homework into the following context. While teaching content at the level of lower order thinking skills is essential, in the long term, our teaching students to think critically is far more important, generally speaking, than coverage. That is, I would rather teach sixteen chapters of a subject with emphasis on critical and higher order thinking skills than I would teach twenty chapters with primary emphasis on coverage. I think this is a pivotal thought that we have to constantly keep in mind as we ponder this issue of homework.

**Strategies:**

- Involve the staff in brainstorming on how best to resolve this “problem” of homework.
- Ensure that professional development and other staff meetings train and equip teachers to better plan their classes in order to potentially reduce “homework time” without compromising quality.
- Hold teachers accountable to planning classes and homework per the above-stated principles. Lesson plans should include an “estimate” by the teacher of the time length of out of class work being assigned. Educational supervisors must carefully monitor this issue.
- Consider ways, especially at the middle and high school, to increase time in math classes for students to work on homework, thus decreasing take-home work.
- Consider ways to incorporate learning labs (study halls with teachers on hand for the purpose of tutoring individual students) at the middle and high schools.

5. Number two above addresses the issue of maintaining a fundamentally sound academic program. This does not mean, at the same time, that a diversity of course offerings, especially at the high school level, is unimportant. In this respect, Mrs. Harper has made significant strides in recent years in bringing into the high school program a greater diversity
in academic offerings through advanced placement classes, distance learning and, more recently, dual enrollment with Blue Ridge Community College.

Furthermore, while we must continue to emphasize academic fundamentals with grades nine through ten, we believe it is important to look for ways to allow more flexibility in the schedules of juniors and seniors to allow them to pursue “out-of-school” educational opportunities, such as enrollment in courses at BRCC or other local colleges, mentorships and apprenticeships in the local community, and other community-oriented educational opportunities that may be to their benefit.

Strategies

- “Tweak” the daily schedule to allow an earlier completion of junior/senior core academic courses, thus allowing these students to pursue a greater diversity of opportunities both at Grace and in the larger community.
- As part of this effort, consider ways potentially to assign credits to juniors and seniors for certain of these options. In some cases, consider allowing alternative credits earned outside the school in place of those currently required for graduation from GCS.
- Pursue avenues to offer our students more vocational/mentorship opportunities in the afternoons via local businesses and organizations.
- Seek to expand in-school elective offerings (more computer classes, fine arts, etc.) for all high school grades.

Indeed, we will need to brainstorm as staff and parents on an on-going basis to identify ways to provide our students, especially at the high school level, with a reasonable diversity of opportunities and flexibility in our schedule to accommodate our students.

6. It has been the philosophy of the school since its inception over thirty years ago that our approach to educating our youth is that it is a partnership between the parents and school. Furthermore, we have emphasized that the primary responsibility lies with the parents, and the school is a secondary partner in this process. If the parents are not proactive in their primary responsibility, then the school will be far less effective in its impact upon the students.

That is, it has been our consistent experience that the school has its greatest impact in the lives of those students whose parents are primarily proactive in their engagement with their children. We believe this is in accordance with the Biblical model and principles of child-rearing.

However, we are seeing in current generations of parents a tendency toward less involvement with their children along with an increasing perplexity on their part in how to parent in the context of contemporary society. Indeed, as stated in Part I of this paper, “never before has popular culture had such a pervasive access to our youth. There is no question that we are seeing a noticeably greater ‘worldliness’ among our youth than was the case ten or fifteen years ago.”
Indeed, for those of us who are career Christian educators, we see our young people today under far greater pressures from society than we experienced with our own children. We attribute much of this to the pervasiveness of media and technology.

This topic is, in itself, a major issue for the church, for parents, and for para-church ministries geared toward our youth, and we can only scratch the surface in terms of dealing with this issue in this paper.

However, we offer the following thoughts about strengthening the parent/school partnership as a starting point for our discussion.

(Rather than following the “Strategies” format as is the case with numbers one through six above, I am copying the outline prepared by Joanne Kinder in its original format.)

**The Grace Community**

Grace Christian School is a community where students, staff, and parents relate together, bringing a diversity of gifts to benefit the whole. Relationship is at the heart of community. As members of the community share a common mission, experience joys and challenges, support one another, and work and learn together, a richness of relationship grows. Our larger community is made up of several smaller communities. Individual classrooms are Classroom Learning Communities (CLC’s) where our students learn and grow together in an honoring, supportive, secure environment. The GCS staff comprises the Professional Learning Community (PLC), a group of educators committed to teaching and learning, collegiality, and godly leadership. Parents and staff relate together as a Parent/Staff Community (PSLC) through a shared mission, common purpose, and Biblical values, with the ultimate goal of student learning and growth in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

**Promoting Community through Parent Meetings**

PSLC—Parent/Staff Learning Community= Families and school staff working together to uphold standards, to promote learning, and to build and strengthen the school-home partnership.

**Purpose:**
- To foster the concept of community.
- To provide an avenue for communication of information from the school ie auction, annual giving, technology, etc.
- To provide a format for parents to communicate and fellowship with other parents.
- To provide an avenue for biblical parent support and training.
- To market or promote the value of our school.
- To showcase students’ talents and giftings.
What parents want:

- Meeting with teachers for practical class information
- Question and answer time
- Dialogue with other parents in grade levels on relevant topics (small group discussions)
- Prayer
- Practical helps
- Showcasing GCS students
  - Chorus/Music/PAC/Band
  - Poetry
  - Computer projects
  - Slide shows/videos

Types of Meetings:

- Open House—beginning of the year (August)
- Classroom Learning Communities (Grade level meetings)—2x a year (October and February)
- Special meetings—September and January
- General Parent meeting—March

Open House—for all parents—in August

- PK-6 parents spend 1 hour with the teacher—introduction, plan for the year, procedures and policies of the classroom
- 7-12 parents will meet as a whole first—for general information—and then be sent to each of their child’s classes (on an abbreviated schedule)

Grade level meetings—2x per year—October and February

- PK-6—parents go to child’s class for 1 ½ hours. First 30 minutes is a video from NCBP followed by discussion. The teacher follows up by sharing information about the classroom and the last 15 minutes will be for prayer.
- 7-12—parents meet for a specific topic (Clay—dating or other topics for this age group) this would be followed by parents going to the individual class meetings to discuss and then pray. Teachers would be facilitators and can add information about their classroom/subject.

Special meetings: 2x per year—September and January

- Possibly September with Jan Ingram as a speaker to “jump start” parents about basic principles of biblical parenting (PK-6) Topic for 7-12 (see below).
- Possibly January with practical helps and study skills for parents in math, reading, spelling, etc.(PK-6) Topic for 7-12 (see below).
Possible topics for the 7-12
- Dating
- Entertainment
- Career guidance (identifying gifts in their child)
- How much rope to give your teenager
- Paul Tripp videos
- Music, Media and Movies

*General Parent meeting: In March*
- Discuss auction and registration
- Showcasing students and programs at GCS

**Issues to discuss:**
- How many meetings--enough but not too many.
- How to handle meetings for parents with more than one child.
- How to spread the meetings over the course of the year.
- No meetings in Nov., Dec., April, May (too busy)
- Accountability--Should we hold parents accountable by mandating that parent meetings are required? How? Should we reduce tuition for each parent meeting attended? Other incentives?

7. Last, but not least, we need continually to evaluate how best to finance the school. We will not develop this topic to any great extent in this paper, in that it is an on-going matter of conversation for the board. However, I would like to make the following observations.

- Tuition must remain the primary means of financing the school. Parents must bear the primary burden of cost for their children’s education.
- I believe we must do all reasonably possible to continue to build a strong financial aid program for those families who are unable to afford full tuition. Frankly, it is an on-going disappointment to me that local churches do not have the vision to support this school on a wide-spread and significant basis. With the exception of one primary church in addition to the school’s founding church, there is simply, at best, minimal support from the local church.

However, this is typical for most Christian schools in other communities. Whether independent or church-sponsored, it is unusual for such schools to enjoy significant support from the local Church. While we need to continue to hopefully cultivate our relationship with local churches, I believe our funding must come primarily from tuition and other individuals from within the community who share our vision.

- Thus, we must continue to explore ways through our development program to identify potential donors to partner with the school, as well as “creative” ways to raise money.
At the end of the day, so to speak, we must continue primarily to trust God to supply our need. Indeed, He has done so faithfully for over thirty years, and we trust, as we continue to work hard to maintain an attitude of seeking first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, that He will continue to do so. May we be of such faith!