

Case Study: Halton Hills Christian School

WayFinder Leverages Strengths

2024

EffectX



Introduction

This case study highlights the value of WayFinder tools and principles even for an organization that is by many measures quite healthy. Although teachers, administrators, and board members reported feeling safe and able to have difficult conversations with colleagues, they knew contentious issues could arise and they wanted to create a shared understanding of conflict's potential to point others to Jesus.

The Challenge

Halton Hills Christian (HHCS) is, in many ways, an ideal school. Located in Georgetown, Ontario, Canada, they provide preschool through Grade 8 education to a growing student body. The school opened in 1965 and enthusiastically welcomed a new principal in 2022.

HHCS had a healthy organizational culture prior to WayFinder training. Compared to other organizations that also received the training, HHCS staff rated their school's approach to conflict 19 points higher than the average rating in a pre-training survey. Staff members were also more likely than average to report that they had a safe culture where people were good at disagreeing.

“We live in a polarized culture that can be challenging to navigate. How do we then, as a Christian community, navigate conflict in a way that shines the light of Jesus?”

-Angie Bonvanie's Letter to Parents

Principal Angie Bonvanie saw this as the perfect time for the school to develop a theology of conflict.

“When you are in the thick of conflict, struggling, and in crisis, that's the worse time to start learning and implementing a different language and mindset. To me, when you are in a healthy place, learn the tools and weave them into your culture so you remain healthy. Then, when something comes up, it's very natural.”

Their board chair, Kimberly Seeley, agreed.

“I believe that this board will have some tough discussions and issues to wrestle with over the next couple of years ... The principles that we have learned can be used to create a culture in our board, school team, and membership that allow us to be able to tackle whatever challenges we may face in the future.”

The Change Process

The process of adopting WayFinder principles into the Halton Hills Christian School culture began in 2022 when two board members, the principal, and the vice principal attended two days of training.

The principal next attended a series of online meetings with fellow educators and Colossian Forum staff members over the following year.

Since that time, all staff members, including office and facilities staff, have been trained by Angie Bonvanie, the principal, and Alaina Vanderleeuw, the school social worker, who attended the two-day training in 2023. WayFinder principles became the focus of each of the school’s three professional development days during the 2023-2024 school year. According to Alaina,

“WayFinder did a wonderful job with the facilitator’s guide. It’s fool proof. You can’t mess this up. We just felt like it wasn’t labor intensive for us. It’s grab and go with videos and interactive learning. Teachers dug deep. God showed up and He did His work. It hasn’t been a burden to implement WayFinder.”

Regular discussions of WayFinder principles among board members and parents has also been crucial to its successful adoption. The principal and board chair together have trained board members, bringing key concepts to the board during each meeting. They emphasize creating a shared language and a shared vision for healthy conflict.

“My heart is that as a Christian community, we would look different than the rest of the world.”

-Alaina Vanderleeuw

During a community night, school leaders presented an overview of WayFinder concepts to parents as well. They then held a “Mining Meeting,” inviting those present to surface any school concerns before the issues became significant sources of conflict. A board member was present at each table to guide the discussions and to hear the concerns firsthand. As Angie Bonvanie described it, “We introduced the WayFinder language to parents so, as we enter critical conversations as a community, they will have practices.”

The Impact

Time spent learning and practicing WayFinder principles has led to positive change for school members. After the training, HHCS participants rated their confidence level in dealing with conflict 12 percentage points higher than before the training. While this level of change is notably smaller than Reach the Forgotten and Fellowship Reformed Church, it reflects their higher initial level of confidence (i.e. their baseline), which is an additional indicator of the existing strength of their organizational culture. Training participants were also more likely to view conflict as an opportunity for spiritual formation after learning WayFinder principles.

12% ↑ **Increased confidence in leading a community toward healthy conflict**

Now, school members are regularly looking to WayFinder practices, such as pausing to pray when the heat of conflict rises. As Angie Bonvanie described, “We are all holding each other accountable to it. We will have leadership meetings and be debating something quite heavily. Someone will say, ‘Hold up. Can we just Go Godward for a minute?’” A commitment to conflict transformation has begun to permeate the school’s culture. Angie observed, “We live in a cancel culture [where people say], ‘We’re going to agree to disagree and part ways.’ No. We’re a community. We are not going to live that way.”

And change isn't just occurring at the organizational level. Alaina Vanderleeuw shared how WayFinder has shaped her personal life. "I lead a women's Bible study weekly. WayFinder naturally flows out there as well as while navigating hard things within the community, and as a parent."

According to members of the school, HHCS was a healthy organization that had created a safe culture for addressing conflict. But they wanted more. They wanted to be prepared when potentially divisive issues arose, and they wanted to better emulate love and grace to a watching community. Using multiple measures, they have achieved these goals and more.

Conclusion

As we noted before sharing these three stories, conflict frequently elicits strong negative feelings such as fear, impatience, and distrust. Conflict also frequently makes us want to run. These feelings are common even for mature believers. But God offers us a better way.

Reach the Forgotten Jail Ministry, Fellowship Reformed Church, and Halton Hills Christian School each accepted the challenge of adopting WayFinder principles in order to build stronger, healthier, and more effective organizations. The early fruit of these decisions is already evident. Members of all three organizations report increased confidence, courage, peace, and hope as they commit to engaging with conflict in a thoughtful, humble, and more biblical way.