
EDUCATING INNER-CITY CHILDREN

BY NORMAN K. MILES

A short time ago I sat with a group of pastors, educators, laymen, and administrators who were wrestling with the challenges of operating a day academy in a large city. Everyone present was dedicated to the church's program of Christian education. However, their struggle to deal with the needs of the school and its students clearly indicated that some of the problems faced by this school almost defy solution.

Unfortunately, other urban concerns often receive more attention than education. Street crime, drug abuse, family disintegration, and narcotics trafficking in the inner city grab the headlines in newspapers and network news specials. Urban education is seldom addressed except in the context of schools gone bad because of increased criminal activity, such as drug sales.

Years ago urban schools, public and private, were considered the schools of choice. They fostered innovative programs, produced graduates who attended the colleges of their choice, competed in the marketplace, and enjoyed tremendous academic reputations. Some of these schools educated the first generation of college graduates and professionals in their families. Today many of these once-proud institutions are second-rate at best, and some function as holding institutions that keep young people off the street until they are old enough to drop out of school.

A large segment of the American population has simply written off the inner-city school. Unfortunately, this means that the people who are served by inner-city schools are also written off. These

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persons stand to gain the most from a good education and suffer the worst from its lack.

For Seventh-day Adventist inner-city education, the situation is particularly acute. Adventist urban schools are in a life-and-death struggle. Without special attention, some of these urban schools will close their doors. This will exacerbate an existing problem in urban schools.

At the present time, less than half of the school-age children in urban churches attend church schools. Some do not attend because of finances. Others have transportation problems or live a long distance from the school. Some of the children don't attend church schools because their parents have lost faith in the quality of the school program or don't see enough difference between the church school and public education. By focusing on these three critical areas, I hope to show what can be done to solve the problems of the urban church school.

Financial Concerns

Most urban church schools suffer from a serious money crunch. They are often supported by people at the lower end of the socioeconomic ladder. This is especially true in ethnic communities where working-class people exist from paycheck to paycheck and

have little left from basic living expenses. For many, the cost of Christian education is prohibitive. At a time when middle-class families complain that they are being priced out of the educational market, the prospects for the urban working class are dim indeed. Moreover, many new converts in urban communities are poor. They contribute much to the church in terms of willingness to work, enthusiasm, and positive Christian spirit, but they have no financial resources. Many are single parents with low-paying jobs, people on fixed incomes, or those on public assistance.

To compound the problem, many urban churches are meeting in inadequate or rented facilities. These congregations' top priority is acquiring a suitable place of worship. For a church that owns its own building, simply paying off the mortgage takes all its resources. It cannot support a school, nor can it assist parents who wish to send their children to church school.

In order to foster healthy urban congregations and enable the children of urban parishioners to have the privilege of Christian education, the church must make urban education a priority. Often the amount of money dedicated to education is meager compared to other budget items. In recent years efforts have been made to rearrange the conference financial priorities. Several years ago the General Conference established a K-12 program designed to increase educational spending at the conference level by requiring conferences to allocate a certain percentage of their budgets to education. Noncompliance with this policy would result in conferences' losing certain financial reversions. Unfor-

tunately, some conferences could not afford to spend the specified percentage of the budget on any one department without severely compromising the total program of the conference.

Many urban schools are currently operated by several churches. The cooperation tends to break down when some of the churches are unable to pay their share of the subsidy because of pressing congregational needs. In some cases the other churches in the consolidation are able to compensate for the lost revenue, but in most cases the school simply has to adjust its program to the lower level of support. Perhaps the church needs a coordinated plan for financing the local church school that would distribute the financial responsibility among the various administrative units.

At present most unions and higher bodies support education by making major contributions to the local colleges. Any assistance for K-12 schools normally takes the form of capital improvement allocations or one-time special gifts. Sometimes these appropriations are not made until after the local school makes a sizeable investment. While this may be a necessary safeguard in some cases, in other situations it causes vital projects to be postponed.

A divisionwide offering to upgrade urban schools would demonstrate the commitment of the church to educating inner-city young people. Schools with pressing physical needs could be helped by Maranatha-type programs. Such projects would utilize the skills of students and lay people from many different places in various construction projects. These kinds of projects appeal to many people because they can see the result of their labor quickly. Independent ministries could also help implement a divisionwide urban education project. Until the church views the problems of urban education as a priority, we are destined to have second-rate urban schools, a large number of young people who cannot attend Christian schools, and eventually a weakened urban church.

In the meantime, urban churches can find methods of bridging the gap between the ideal and reality. Urban churches might offer supplemental religion classes for students who attend public school. An



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after-school program could include tutorial groups, religious discussions, and recreational activities. Such a program would help urban youngsters scholastically while teaching them to share their faith. Unfortunately, many of our young people lose their way in public schools because they have never been taught how to stand up for their faith in a firm yet inoffensive way. As a result, they end up going along in order to get along.

A vibrant after-school program would

also help solve the problem of latchkey children, a critical urban issue. Many children have to be alone for three or four hours after school. This is a potentially dangerous situation in terms of physical safety and illegal or unwise activity. The tremendous number of unsupervised children in urban settings helps explain the upswing in sexual experimentation, drug abuse, and antisocial behavior among urban youth. An after-school religious program might help remove some of the opportunity and temptation to misbehave.

Transportation

For many urban students transportation is a serious problem. The public transportation system is dangerous, or in some cities the schools are not centrally located. In

other cases students must ride buses for hours to go to and from school. Parents are often unwilling to put their children through such inconveniences when there is a public school within walking distance.

Operating a bus system can be expensive. However, churches must seek ways to ensure that all of their children can attend the school. When new urban schools are being established, planners must see location as a principal concern. The most well-equipped school is of little use if students cannot reach it within a reasonable time. Some are so committed to the idea that the school ought to be in a rural location that they are unwilling to consider other possibilities. A rural setting may be appropriate for a boarding school, but a day school must be within easy access of its constituents.

Quality of Education

People are no longer willing to assume that a school is automatically better because it is operated by the church. Many church members feel that they can teach religion at home if necessary and are unwilling to pay a high tuition for a second-class education with a Bible class. To win the confidence of our parents, we will have to convince them that their children will gain something in our schools that they cannot obtain anywhere else. This is especially true in urban situations. Urban parents want education to make a demonstrable difference in their child. They want it to make them better behaved, more self-confident, better equipped to cope with an insensitive world, and more spiritually attuned. Parents will do whatever is necessary to see to it that their children have such an education.

At the same time, urban Christian education must be sensitive to the cultural environment. Ethnic children must be helped to move into the mainstream of society without losing touch with their ethnic and cultural roots. Mandatory courses in languages and ethnic history will help train children for the larger society while allowing them to make a major impact within their ethnic communities. This will help address the criticism that Adventists lose their sense of community involvement once they attain a certain educational plateau.

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Big-city school programs need to be much more innovative. Many urban children have learning disabilities that require alternative means of education. Today's urban church school can no longer afford to ignore learning disabilities and the student who needs an alternative approach to teaching. Marva Collins, founder and director of



Chicago's West Side Preparatory School, has demonstrated that alternative methods of education can be tremendously effective for urban children, even when budgets are small and facilities less than ideal.

In a real sense, the problems of Adventist urban education have more to do with our attitudes toward education and the children being taught than with the lack of money or poor facilities. Adventists have been far too willing to accept the traditional methods and goals of education, and too hesitant to ask whether the product meets the needs of the consumers, the children.

From an early age, urban children need to be challenged to think of themselves as citizens of the world. They must be taught that though they live in an inner city, the inner city does not have to live in them. To accomplish this task, teachers need to take a different approach toward education. Education must not be thought of as instilling abstract principles from books, but of teaching students how to live in a complicated world. This new way of thinking about education does not have to cost a lot of money or be unduly complicated. It does require what good teaching has always required—dedicated teachers who see each student as a unique individual with unlimited potential.

Conclusion

Urban education is one of the most significant challenges facing the Adventist Church today. In many ways, the success of our educational system worldwide depends on the ability of the church to effectively deal with the problems relating to urban education in North America. The world is becoming increasingly urbanized, and some of the greatest church growth is taking place in places experiencing the greatest urban growth. Our church must see urban education as important a goal as urban evangelism and devote its resources to assisting these schools. We must find new ways of recruiting young people to serve as urban teachers. But most important, educators must seek to develop new ways to reach urban youth and train them to become all that God wants them to be. ✍

Dr. Norman Miles is Chairman of the Christian Ministry Department of Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan.