

CAN EDUCATION BE ADVENTIST AND EXCELLENT, TOO?

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ur nation is at risk! Twelve million copies of a document with this ominous warning grabbed the attention of the American public. That apocalyptic report, released by a presidential commis-

sion in 1983, warned that a rising tide of educational mediocrity threatened the future of the nation. In its wake, the report spurred a frenzy of activity designed to promote world-class schools.

Despite all the discussion of excellence, little attention has been given to Christian education as a driving force for quality schooling. To the contrary, in much of public higher education, a deeply spiritual scholar is looked upon as a object of curiosity.

Few education ideas in the past 50 years are associated with anything religious. Thus, many questions come to mind.

Christian and Excellent, Too?

In Genesis 1, we repeatedly read that

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“God saw that it was good.” Extending the Creation theme, the Psalmist, in considering “thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and stars which thou ordained,” exclaimed, “O Lord our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!” (Psalm 8:1, KJV).

And this excellence has been manifested throughout history in His followers. The precise construction of Solomon’s temple obviated the need of hammer and

nail (1 Kings 6:7). Daniel and his companions followed lifestyles of disciplined excellence: They were found to be 10 times better than all that were in the king’s realm (Daniel 1:19, 20). One can only imagine the quality that went into an item of furniture produced by Jesus in the carpenter shop! From a motley assortment of functional illiterates, Christ forged a team of thought leaders who eventually “turned the world upside down” (Acts 17:6).

The label “Christian” gives no excuse for shoddy work or study. “Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do,” said Solomon, “do it with thy might” (Ecclesiastes 9:10). In the Spring 1995 issue of Andrews University’s *Journal of Research on Christian Education*, we asked former United States Secretary of Education Terrel H. Bell whether he thought education could be Christian and excellent. His response: *Well, we surely can. In fact, I believe that by definition we can be more so. The Christian ideals that most of us subscribe to are ideals that highlight excellence in our lives. . . I think excellence in education is to lead and guide and motivate all students to reach the outer limits of their potential. . . Excellence has to do with being good citizens, persons with a strong moral character, and a personal commitment on their part, from their inner selves, toward excellence in living* (p. 87).

BY PAUL BRANTLEY

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A Historical Overview

From Goodloe Bell's humble Battle Creek school of 1872 has emerged one of the notable and global Protestant school systems of the world.

In the year Bell established his little school, Ellen White received an inspired message about the way such a school should be conducted. Her first testimony on education, entitled "Proper Education," offers an appropriate portrait of excellent schooling today.

Ellen White began with the statement that "it is the nicest work ever assumed by men and woman to deal with youthful

minds." She then proceeded to set forth principles of schooling that are strikingly current in their application. They include (1) varying the manner of instruction (*Testimonies*, vol. 3, p. 131); (2) character education (p. 131); (3) home education (p. 137); (4) critical thinking (p. 132); (5) physical education (p. 137); (6) school-to-work concepts (pp. 147-160); (7) developmentally appropriate early schooling (p. 137); and (8) proficiency in the basic skills (p. 160). Ellen White later amplified this early counsel with recommendations about (9) non-graded instruction, (10) mastery learning, and (11) behavioral objec-

tives. "Higher than the highest human thought can reach," she wrote, "is God's ideal for His children." What a prescription for excellence!

Did the young church take these principles to heart? Not really. Mrs. White was sent to Australia, and the Adventist educational system struggled on for 20 years with only a few day schools worldwide and a fledgling college casting about for an identity.

However, one event would change Adventist education forever. In 1891, a group of Adventist pioneers committed to excellence and reform met at a small con-

ference at Harbor Springs, Michigan, for an extended period of discussion and prayer. Ellen White and W. W. Prescott, an early Adventist educator, were prominently featured in the sessions. Immediately after the meetings, there was an explosion of interest in establishing schools and colleges throughout the world. Within two decades, more than 700 schools and colleges were founded!

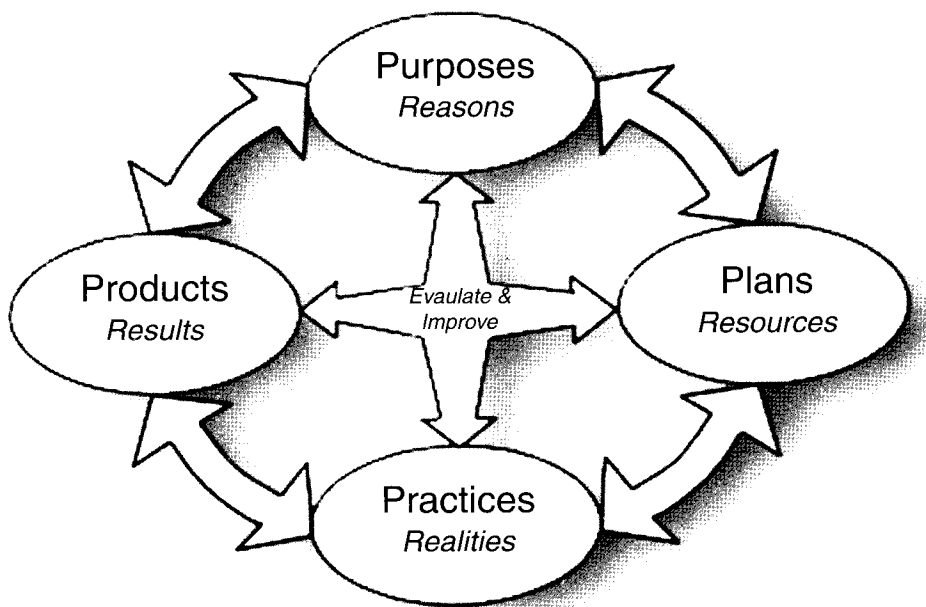
From Harbor Springs to the present day, Adventist education has made impressive strides. In 1998, Adventist schools and colleges enrolled 961,948 students in 5,327 K-12 schools and 89 colleges and universities—a far cry from Bell’s one room in Battle Creek. This issue of the JOURNAL OF ADVENTIST EDUCATION tells the story of a small sample of extraordinary practices taking place in today’s Adventist schools and colleges.

The examples cited in this issue are illustrative rather than exhaustive. We could well have featured the Flaiz Memorial Higher Secondary School in India celebrating its Platinum Jubilee, the San Gabriel (California) elementary school’s creative use of computers, the Bermuda Institute’s innovative Bible program, faith-

Battle Creek College about 1876.

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Figure 1
A Continuous Cycle-of-Excellence Model



learning education in Madagascar, or scores of other Adventist educational programs around the globe.

A Cycle of Excellence

Excellent schools, like noble characters, are not produced by accident. Excellence is more an ongoing culture than a singular accomplishment. When the continuous cycle of excellence is in place, quality is assured—whether in classroom, school, college, or conference, or throughout an entire system. The following cybernetic model (and the discussion that follows) are based upon a growing body of research on quality schooling.

A Continuous Cycle-of-Excellence Model

Purposes/reasons. An excellent school or system must clearly define its reasons for existence. When schools create a renewed sense of vision, the parents, students, and educators themselves are energized to accomplish great things. Much of the failure of the excellence movement of

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the past generation can be attributed to an undefined sense of purpose.

To many in the world of education, excellence is best represented by a standardized test or IQ score, or some other ephemeral, fragmentary measure of human performance. But a century ago, Ellen White wrote, “It is the degree of moral power pervading a school that is a test of its prosperity” (*Testimonies*, vol. 6, p. 143). Although counsel from the Spirit of Prophecy repeatedly called for high scholastic standards in Adventist schools and colleges, excellence was always cast in the larger context of redemptive, harmonious education. However, this in no way implies that religion is a substitute for high scholarly attainment.

Our church is at risk, according to the findings of Valuegenesis researchers. Many students (and, sad to say, many of their parents and teachers) fail to see a sufficient difference between Adventist education and other forms of schooling.

Schools of excellence must have high and clear expectations, as did Adventist pioneers at Harbor Springs. Quality Adventist schools must cooperate with homes and churches to help young people harmoniously develop their physical, mental, and spiritual powers and to inspire them to live lives of unselfish service to God and humanity.

The world church has called for each school to give evidence of its total commitment to the Lord’s work. Several divisions have prepared statements identifying the goals and essential core elements of Seventh-day Adventist education. Schools and school systems around the world must examine their reasons for existence and inspire each student and educator to accomplish clearly defined purposes.

Plans/resources. The curriculum defines what students are to learn. The North American Division has created a curriculum plan to accomplish its vision (“Focus on Adventist Curriculum for the

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21st Century,” prepared by the Curriculum Futures Commission). Besides curriculum goals and objectives, the commission identified nine preferred practices: (1) leadership, (2) innovative classroom instruction, (3) diversity and multiculturalism, (4) information technology, (5) integrated curriculum, (6) partnerships, (7) student assessment, (8) student learning styles, and (9) time.

To accomplish these ideals, the commission recommended a process to be used throughout the division, including a plan for change in each school, along with school accreditation, annual curriculum review, certification, incentive grants, and staff development.

Practices/realities. Plans are necessary but insufficient. Unfortunately, the highway to excellence is strewn with casualties—people who were never able to put their bold visions into practice.

A century ago, Ellen White advocated that the ideal school should nurture “thinkers rather than mere reflectors of other men’s thoughts.” However, in too many Adventist schools, lectures and teacher-directed learning are the order of the day. Consequently, Adventist students become incapable of vigorous, independent thought and are conditioned to depend upon the judgment of others.

Ellen White also discouraged rigid

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grade placement, instead recommending cross-groupings where the older children can help the younger, to the benefit of both. Once again, this counsel has been largely disregarded as impractical in today’s world.

One must never underestimate the incredible challenge of reform. The establishment of new patterns of behavior in schools and classrooms is a very time-consuming process. And yet change can be a most rewarding activity, as the Carolina Conference has found in its staff development project described on page 35.

Products/results. Finally, the excellent Adventist school or school system must examine its effect on the heart and mind of each student. This assessment may take the immediate, informal form of a teacher

stopping to talk with a troubled student or pausing to clear up a confusing concept for the class. Adventist education must also plan for extensive assessment of the long-term effects of its schooling at every level. Only then can we determine whether the principles of true education have, in fact, been realized.

An example of the value of assessment comes from the massive 1990 Valuegenesis survey of nearly 12,000 Seventh-day Adventist students and their parents, pastors, and teachers. While the survey uncovered some good news, it also highlighted some problems. Far too many Adventist students failed to develop a vibrant relationship with God. Many engaged in at-risk behaviors, and only a minority saw the religious and Bible teachings of their schools as challenging and valuable. These findings have been mirrored in various assessments taken at the college and university level.

Assessment helps the system determine how it is doing. The excellent school does not hesitate to look into this mirror as it seeks to enhance its performance. Once assessments are made, evaluation looks for discrepancies among the system elements (see Figure 1) and points out changes that will improve the system. Excellence is not a simple attainment; it is a continuous cycle—and a way of thinking that must pervade the school and classroom.

Seventh-day Adventist education finds itself at the brink of one of the most exciting periods in its history. Examples of extraordinary educational practices in this issue only highlight the potential for excellence in every school and college within our ranks. May this issue help initiate the reform of another “Harbor Springs” that will cause each parent, pastor, church administrator, educator, and constituent to cooperate in creating an excellent education that is “higher than the highest human thought can reach.” ✍

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