

Summary of Research on the Viability of K-12 Schools
in the North American Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church

by

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State of the Elementary and Secondary Schools in NAD

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has the second largest Christian educational system in the world, and in North America it has over a thousand schools with over 65,000 students from the kindergarten grades to post graduate level of studies.

Established upon a conceptual framework of holistic education, at its core Adventist educational philosophy has as its objective the restoration of the image of God in man.

Research, such as CognitiveGenesis demonstrates that students in Adventist schools outperform their peers at public schools. In spite of these laudable feats Adventist schools in NAD from grades K-12 have not been faring well lately as can be deduced from the data below:

- Enrollment in Adventist K-12 schools has been declining for the past 30 years.
- Between 1980 and 2005, K-8 enrollment decreased by 10,594 students, that is by 20 %
- Grades 9-12 enrollment decreased by approximately 5,458 students or 26 %
- Overall K-12 decline for the period was 16,052 students (22 %)
- Enrollment in grades 9-12 had a large decrease from 1980 to 2000 of approximately 4,944 students, or 24 %
- In 1976 K-12 enrollments peaked at 76,342 and by the 2008/9 school year, attendance figures hit a low point of 54,074, a 29% decrease
- In the last ten years, 177 K-12 schools have been closed.
- Leaders of the colleges and universities in NAD had a no confidence vote regarding the sustainability or viability of the NAD K-12 schools, or in their ability to serve as feeder schools to their higher educational institutions.

Current Challenges of NAD K-12 Schools

Although membership in the division has increased in recent years this growth in membership has largely come from low-income immigrant population. Members who could afford to support children in Adventist schools have children who are past that age bracket. Despite the reports of the CognitiveGenesis study, which clearly demonstrates the short and long term impact of Adventist education several members still believe it to be unaffordable to most church families with school age children.

In addition, research indicate that a significant number of Adventist parents perceive Adventist education as not having any distinct advantages over public schools—which have better funding, courses, equipment and extra-curricular programs. As a result Adventist K-12 schools are facing stiff challenges competing against public schools, charter schools, and home schooling which provide education for special students

While it is true that schools located around Adventist centers (such as higher educational, medical, or administrative institutions) are large and thriving, about 60% of Adventist K-12 schools are regarded as very small institutions with between one to three teachers handling classes beyond their areas of specialization. Several boarding schools have enrollments of less than 100 students and are perceived as overpriced by some Adventist parents. A general perception among parents, and some school principals, is that Adventist education is presently over-priced, and is gradually pricing its way out of the market. On the flip side, in the last 50 years although the median income per household has increased, its purchasing power today is a mere fraction of what it used to be during that period.

Another factor that is challenging to the viability of Adventist schools is the distance to the closest available Adventist school; this has been cited as a reason why parents are not sending their children to Adventist schools. What is noteworthy is that although enrollment at Adventist elementary and secondary school levels has declined the reverse is the case with private parochial education in America in the last few years

Factors Affecting Viability

Varied research projects have been conducted on the viability of the K-12 school system in NAD these include dissertations, academic essays, and varied special interest publications. From this body of literature the following can be adduced regarding the viability of Adventist K-12 schools in NAD:

- **Estimation**—Adventist elementary and secondary schools shall not become viable until there is a change in perception among NAD membership regarding the quality and the benefits of Adventist education.
- **Enrollment**—A major index of the viability of the Adventist school system is its enrollment. While skilled budgeting is important for good management of the schools, the only guarantee for the continued existence of NAD schools will come from increased enrolment.
- **Endowment**—The high cost of school maintenance is largely dependent upon tuition in many cases. In order for K-12 schools to survive efforts need to be made towards establishing endowments that could support the subsidies from local churches and conferences to keep the mission of the schools alive.
- **Excellence**—For Adventist schools to survive in the highly competitive educational marketplace of today excellence should be its identifying brand.

The uniqueness of Adventist education needs to be demonstrated not only through a holistic curricular emphasis, but, by a quest to produce the best students through recruiting quality teachers who employ the best practices.

Possible Options for Consideration

Among the options that have been broached as a way forward from declining enrollment are concepts that have been extracted from recommendations made for the sustainability of Adventist universities in NAD. Some of these options, which are also applicable to K-12, are cited below:

- **Reduction**—Among the options that have been advanced for resolving the multi-faceted challenges confronting Adventist K-12 is the prospect of reducing the number of schools in existence by shutting down those schools that have so far proven unviable.
- **Restructuring**—Another option suggested is the merger of regional schools, that is, for the strong schools in particular regions to take over the weaker ones so that they may survive. Another way such restructuring of the present support systems of schools may occur is the suggestion that reorganization of the schools in local conferences be done in such a way that stronger churches be requested to support weaker schools. Another form of restructuring that has been suggested is for the creation of more day academies, rather than boarding schools—which are becoming less popular among those who can afford to send their children there.
- **Revamping**—Considering that Adventist schools are mission outposts with the goal of preparing prospects for eternity, it has been suggested that all

efforts should be made to ensure their continuous survival. Creative methods should be developed to engage the issues in each context that constitute obstacles for the success of each school that is presently failing, and to secure the continued growth of those that are thriving.

- **Recalibration**—The success of some private and parochial schools in present times is indicative that new approaches may be needed to make Adventist schools viable in this postmodern, globalized, communication age. Marketing and publicity strategies have been suggested, that would help identify and project the value of Adventist education to the communities where the schools exist. The failure of some schools may be reflective of the need in the church for better, contextually developed ministries to the local communities where these schools are located. Such programs would project the church in a positive light to the community and result in increased enrollment from children in the community that are not Adventists.

Issues Affecting Viability/Recommendations

The main factors influencing the viability of the K-12 schools have been summed below, along with the recommended modes for redressing these irksome issues:

- **Poor Funding**—A major setback for parents whose annual income lie largely below \$50,000 is the high cost of Adventist education. Among the suggestions proffered as remedies are: (1) increased support from local churches and conferences to the schools in the form of subsidies; (2) Adopt-a-Child program by older church members whose children are already past school age;

and, (3) increased financial aid to Adventist parents as incentives to bring their children to Adventist schools

- **Publicity**—Creative and aggressive promotional efforts towards school age children of Adventist and community members has been advocated as a means to increase enrollment. Records of Adventist children attending public schools should be obtained from the church for recruiting purposes. Pastors, teachers, and church leaders are all to be involved in advertising the advantages of Adventist education. Printed materials and messages should inform parents about the number of ways in which Adventist education can become affordable to them
- **Politics**—School boards where they are smaller are more efficient. Rather than composed of volunteers without special expertise or skills in running schools they would be more efficient if they were composed of committed volunteers with requisite skills. Smaller, more effective management teams running the schools would help resolve the problem of board dysfunction.
- **Proximity**—Although the distance of Adventist schools from the homes of prospective parents is an issue that is not easily resolveable, the option of distributed education utilizing technology employed in distance educational programs could help mitigate this factor. In some regions this practice is already well known, such as AE 21—Adventist Education for the 21st Century, sponsored by the Florida Conference.
- **Perceptions**—A primary obstacle that needs to be overcome in order to attract Adventist parents to bring their children from public schools to church

schools is the negative perception of the value of Adventist education. Each objection needs to be carefully and clearly addressed for a change in attitude to be achieved.

- **Personnel**—Perhaps the greatest influence upon students in the entire educational enterprise is the teacher. Since the education faculties of the church colleges and universities produce high quality, committed, and motivated teachers each year, effort should be made to recruit teachers whose care and interest in their students shall go beyond just the classroom, school work, and the present. Parental complaints regarding the quality of Adventist education, allegations of nepotism in employment, and apathy in adjudicating on issues regarding staff delinquency will be remedied by recruiting the right personnel.
- **Partnerships**—There is a critical need for collaborative relationships if Adventist schools are to rebound from the present state of affairs. These partnerships need to traverse every aspect of school and administrative life. Each school must see itself as a part of a whole and should be ready to share ideas and resources for growth and progress. It has been suggested that promotional materials printed collaboratively would considerably bring down the cost of high quality productions. Workshops and conferences involving Adventist schools should provide the forum for sharing best-practices, benchmarks, manuals and templates for development.
- Organizations such as Alumni Awards Foundation (AAF) should be empowered to intervene in resuscitating flagging Adventist schools.

Collaboration between pastors, and school administrators is also needed to create the synergy required to revitalize Adventist schools.

Conclusion

Adventist education, like the church itself, is founded upon the bedrock of divine theological, and philosophical foundations that are sound, visionary, timeless, and dependable. Church members and leadership all agree to these premises. Unfortunately, they are plagued by imperfect human failings, and are poignant reminders of the need to adapt our glorious life-saving message to times that have radically changed. As visionary missionary outposts Adventist education is still needed today, however, more desperately required are new approaches for packaging this life-transforming agency.