

Turning a *SCHOOL* Around

Three years ago South Lancaster Academy was in serious trouble. After a relentless series of operating losses, the Massachusetts day school was \$87,000 in debt. Teachers weren't getting paid on time. Worse, they were fearful for their jobs. The constituency was grumbling. Students and parents were bad-mouthing the program. Morale was, to say the least, on the down side.

Now, three years later, the story is quite different. The \$87,000 debt has long since been retired. More than \$100,000 of equipment purchases and capital improvements have been paid for with ready cash. The school has launched a \$300,000 building program for a new gymnasium, and has a comfortable cash reserve in the bank. Every

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bill is paid on time. The school no longer has to borrow money to cover summer salaries.

Morale among the staff is, by all accounts, "sky high." One teacher says enthusiastically, "The teachers at SLA have fewer worries about money than any teachers I know." And the principal of eight years, Alfred Aastrup, says he is having the best time in nearly 30 years of Adventist educational work. Furthermore, in these remarkable three years, tuition and church subsidy increases have been kept at or below the national inflation rate.

Too Good to Be True?

To some, the change in the school is hard to believe and almost too good to be true. Local church members are euphoric about the new developments, according to David Osborne, pastor of the Atlantic Union College church,

by Ronald Knott

SLA's largest constituent congregation. Osborne jokingly suggests that there must be a catch to all the good news. "I keep wondering when the crash is going to come," he says with a laugh. Most observers maintain it will never come if the school sticks to its present course.

The issues involved in the dramatic turnaround at SLA are common to nearly any branch of Adventist education. School administrators, community leaders, and conference and union educational personnel have learned valuable lessons in several areas, including bill collection, affordable academic programs, and the role of the principal in a K-12 school.

School leaders modestly maintain that what they have learned could benefit other schools. Says Richard Clark, current chairman of the school board, "Many Adventist schools today have the same problems we had three years ago. We believe we have found a way to cure them. We'll give our recipe to anyone who has the guts to implement it."

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Historical Background

South Lancaster Academy is typical of many day schools in large Adventist centers. Operated by five constituent churches with a combined membership of 1800, the K-12 school has approximately 100

students in the academy and 235 in Browning Elementary. Founded in 1882, SLA was the forerunner of Atlantic Union College, with which it was associated until 1965. In that year the Southern New England Conference opened Pioneer Valley Academy (which closed in 1983), and SLA became a day school. The transition was not easy, and during the late 1960's and early 1970's SLA became something of a byword for having had seven principals in seven years.

Alfred Aastrup arrived as principal in 1976 after successful administrations at Spring Valley Academy (Ohio) and Greater Boston Academy. He introduced an innovative, multitrack program offering students a wide range of elective possibilities in meeting diploma requirements.

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While the curriculum was widely applauded, the school had taken a financial nose dive by the fall of 1980. Such nose dives were not new. Twice in the previous six years the constituency had bailed out the school with special appropriations. With crisis looming a third time, the constituency balked. Osborne, who had arrived in town only six months earlier, says: "I soon found out that the pattern in the past was that whenever the school got into financial trouble, the board would just call another constituency meeting and put a bigger burden on the churches. Frankly, I was more than a little upset at that."

So were the constituents. When the predictably urgent constituency meeting was called, they refused to vote larger subsidies. Instead, they asked Paul Kilgore, Atlantic Union Conference director of education, to head a fact-finding committee assigned to make a thorough study of the school's pressing problems. Kilgore was allowed to form his own committee but was charged to report back to the constituency with specific

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recommendations for action.

Kilgore chose five people from the local community to serve on his committee: a lawyer, a college business teacher, two denominational educational supervisors, and a college English teacher. In January, 1981, they began three months of intensive study, delving into everything from collection procedures to teaching loads.

Too Many Electives

A major source of concern was the academy's elaborate elective system. Students were presented with an unusually wide selection of course choices for a school of its size. For example, the bulletin listed eight different courses in industrial arts, five in home economics, and 14 in physical education for juniors and seniors. Of the 53 courses taught that year, 17—almost a third—enrolled ten or fewer students.

Such a program required an exceptionally large staff. The committee was dismayed to learn that

the academy had a pupil-teacher ratio of 11.2 to 1, far below the ratio commonly recommended by task force and evaluation committees. The elementary school was well below union conference rec-

The most significant change in staffing came with a reorganization of the relationship between the academy and the elementary school.

ommendations with a ratio of 18.3 to 1. The committee's report noted with some understatement: "More students could economically be taught by the present staffs of both schools."

Strengthening the Core Curriculum

The fact-finding committee had other worries beyond the great expense of the school's elective program; their formal report also expressed reservations about the educational philosophy behind it. They were especially concerned that the elective program could have unfortunate and far-reaching effects on a student's educational career.

Noting that there was no designated course of study listed in the bulletin for college-bound students, the report stated: "Fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds are confronted with choosing what may well determine their educational future. At that age they may not be fully prepared to make such important decisions. At that point they may fully believe that they do not want to go to college, which is several years away. If they are free

to act on this decision and choose courses on the basis of what seems easy and interesting at the moment, they may find themselves very unprepared for careers that demand more than a high school diploma."

Noting that colleges, despite open-enrollment policies, still require the same basic competence in math, science, and the humanities, the report continued: "It is certainly unfortunate for a student who wants to prepare for a particular career after high school to find that his early casual course selection now forces him to take essentially make-up courses in college and pay a much higher college tuition. It may be that a stronger

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academic core program in high school with possibly fewer elective courses is more desirable. Certainly such a program is not more expensive."

After careful consideration of what the school should and must provide for its constituency, the committee determined that an even stronger academic program and reasonable financial stability could be achieved with nine fewer salaries between the academy and the elementary school. This was a sweeping recommendation, but the facts in the ledger were grim. If the school's program remained unchanged, the academy and elementary school could expect to finish the 1981-1982 school year with

a combined loss of \$140,000. If the program was overhauled and the staffing policy streamlined, according to this plan, the combined operation would just break even.

Deciding How to Begin

Members of the committee stress that their recommendations were not made blindly as cutbacks. Says one: "We did not begin by sharpening a knife. We began by determining what the academy should do to maintain a strong academic program. When the needs and means for doing that were carefully studied, it was obvious that the school was overstaffed.

"At the same time, parents had to be convinced that they were getting full value for their dollars. Merely cutting salaries is not necessarily a solution! Maintaining a strong academic program is a must in order to maintain the confidence of the constituency."

The constituency registered that confidence by supporting the board in accepting the committee's recommendations. Kilgore refuses

The finance committee has determined that if a student will do everything possible to remain at SLA, the academy will always find a way to make up any difference.

any credit for the resulting success, and praises the board. "They took the strongest medicine possible, all in one year," he says. "With a day school, you have a local board.

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They have to face the constituency every day. With a boarding school it's different. The people are 'out there.' The board members are not as immediately accountable."

Restructuring the Principal's Duties

The most significant change in staffing came with a reorganization of the relationship between the academy and the elementary school. For many years the elementary school had been governed by its own principal. Acting on the advice of union and conference educational directors, the board asked Aastrup to assume direct responsibility for the elementary school in addition to running the academy and keeping the whole operation solvent.

The strain was too much, and during that first tense summer he offered his resignation. The board, however, was determined to keep him and persuaded him to stay with an offer that was to significantly change the course of financial management and the role of the principal at the school. By establishing a separate finance committee, they relieved him of all direct responsibility for bill collections and the major financial operation of the school.

Aastrup believes that the new organizational structure should become a pattern for Adventist education. "The concept that the principal is also the business manager is dead," he says flatly. He notes that while there had always been a finance committee

on the board, it operated on the basic assumption that the buck stopped at the principal's desk. Now the buck stops at the committee table instead.

The men at that committee table are: James Segar, chairman of the business administration department at Atlantic Union College; Ariel Schmidt, owner and manager of Atlantic Graphics Press; Aastrup, the principal; and Clark, who became school-board chairman in the summer of 1981 after the major reorganization was accomplished. Together they collect all accounts, validate semester exam permits, approve all special payment plans and make all major financial recommendations to the board. Day-to-day business matters are handled by an accountant at the school.

The arrangement has worked remarkably well. Pastor Osborne, never one to mince words, says bluntly: "What made this work is that the board actually turned it over to businessmen to operate. Our church is run in many cases by 'bleeding heart ministers,' and I'm as soft as the rest of them. I know nothing about business. Just because someone is a wonderful, godly person doesn't mean the church isn't going to go in the hole."

Getting Tough on Tuition Collection

The committee assumed authority at the beginning of the 1981-1982 school year, and immediately adopted a simple but firm policy expecting prompt payment of school accounts. "The first semester was really tough," says Clark. "People didn't believe we would stick to our guns. We reaffirmed the standard policy that no student could take semester exams while owing a back bill. Nobody believed us." At least, not at first. How-

ever, during a three-day period at the close of the semester the school collected \$106,000.

The money came in, according to board members, because the constituents had confidence that the new, streamlined program was strong and workable. Says one: "Parents believed in the quality of the education their children were receiving. They believed the product was worth paying for."

"As a church we have not educated the people to see that paying tuition is a priority item in their budgets," says Clark. "Our committee has taken the position, with very little flexibility, that any person who can pay *must* pay. The school is not and cannot be the financier. That is not our function, and we do not have that capacity. What we are saying is that if you can afford a new snowmobile you can afford tuition, and tuition comes first."

Osborne sings a similar tune: "People came to the school wringing their hands saying, 'We had to pay the doctor and we have to pay the electric company.' And we said, 'Yes, and you have to pay us too.' It's incredible to me that people think church institutions are somehow different than any other commitment for which they have given their word."

When any student's account gets more than 30 days behind, the family is contacted by letter. If there is no progress, one of the finance committee members visits the family in person. If no satisfactory arrangement is made, the student will be dropped.

Helping Students With Finances

It sounds tough—hard-nosed—and committee members readily acknowledge that it is. However, they also note that in the three years of this strong policy only four students have been dropped

during the term. That's because there are two sides to the work of the finance committee, and the second side is as generous and compassionate as the first is tight-fisted.

"We go to the ultimate lengths that we possibly can, based on who the student is and his real desire to go to school here," says Clark. "The only thing we owe a student is an opportunity."

He cites an example: In the fall of 1982 a student enrolled while owing the school \$1800. The parents could pay nothing on their son's bill. The finance committee placed the student in a job on a nearby farm, explaining that if he regularly turned over 100 percent of his paycheck to the school he would always get his exam permit. His parents were to provide him with spending money.

"We watched him during the

1982-1983 year to see how he would do," says Clark. "He always brought in his check. He never missed work. He worked extra hours whenever he could, and he had a grade-point average above 3.0. In the spring of 1983 we voted to give him, out of the worthy-student fund, the equivalent of 25 percent of whatever he earned during the summer. The formula worked out so that when he began school that fall—for the first time since he was in first grade—he started with a clean financial slate."

The finance committee has determined that if a student will do everything possible to remain at SLA, the academy will always find a way to make up any difference. That difference comes primarily in the form of jobs. Though there are virtually no jobs available at the school (janitorial work is con-

tracted with an outside company), the finance committee assumes responsibility for placing students with local businesses or industries.

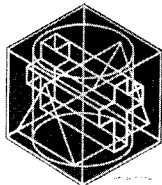
Last year 65 percent of the student body were employed with the help of the committee. The other 35 percent made their own arrangements with employers or chose not to work. Typically, students find jobs at the Atlantic Union College dairy, a broomshop, a cleaning agency, and two nearby Adventist-owned printing companies.

In addition, the academy bought and set up a division of a plastic-ware packaging company. Located in the basement of Clark's law office, the small industry employs up to 32 students on piece-rate work. Working a 12-month cycle, a student can earn 100 percent of his or her tuition, have a two-week vacation, and still make \$1000-\$4000 for personal use.

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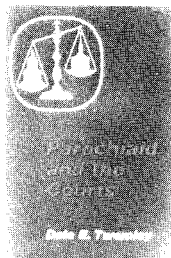
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Defying Myths About Collections

The school's firm yet generous financial policy defies an idea common to Adventist education, according to Clark. He says: "One of the greatest fears we've had in our educational institutions is that if we enforce the obligation to pay tuition we will lose students. I believe the opposite. If we enforce the obligation to pay we will have more students. In the long run our tuition will be lower and the respect of the people for the way we run our institutions will be greater."

Those results—more students, lower tuition, and greater respect—seem apparent at SLA. To help ensure them, the school for two years now has made an unusual promise. If enrollment averages 105 students over the course of the year (up ten from 1982-1983) each student will receive a \$100 tuition rebate, an amount equivalent to the tuition increase levied in September in keeping with the national inflation rate. (Clark stresses that in terms of spendable dollars there has been no tuition increase, so the rebate is equivalent to a \$100 cut in tuition.)

This past year enrollment topped out at 102 and the school didn't have to pay up. However, Aastrup insists the promise is still valid for 1984-1985. Not only is the public relations value of this incentive enormous, but the idea is also a shrewd business deal. Ten more students over a two-year period would bring in an extra \$25,000. One hundred five students getting \$100 back this year gives back \$10,500. Net gain: \$14,500—all while cutting tuition, increasing enrollment, and improving morale.

Boosting School Spirit

The new spirit at South Lancaster Academy is changing the school

in a number of ways. The alumni association has been rejuvenated and recently mounted the original academy bell in a \$3000 tower in front of the school. Last May, construction began on a new gymnasium. Twice before in the past eight years building proposals had been rejected by a demoralized board and constituency. When the issue came up a third time, the vote was favorable and the new building should be completed by the fall of 1984.

This past July, Clark reported that the school had \$130,000 of the necessary \$300,000 in hand, raised specifically for that purpose from alumni and the local business community. Students have helped in a substantial way as well, bringing in \$15,000 through a variety of fund-raising activities. According to Clark, payments on a \$125,000 loan for the gym will be spread over eight years and come from special revenues outside the normal operation of the school.

In another project, Atlantic Union College has invested \$50,000 in the elementary school to establish two model multigrade classrooms as laboratories for college education majors. Aastrup says the classrooms, when fully equipped and operating, will be unique in the Adventist system and of interest to church educators across the United States.

At least one of the changes at South Lancaster Academy has not received unqualified endorsement by the staff. Elementary teachers no longer have their own full-time principal. The school is now organized on a model K-12 program where one principal oversees the entire academic program.

"Whenever you have one principal over 300 students, there is a question of accessibility, and it can easily become a problem," Aastrup says. Some elementary

teachers believe it already has. While stressing that the elementary school is not being neglected, one teacher says: "Wherever there is consolidation there has to be some loss of involvement and attention." Anticipating that concern during the reorganization, the board appointed team leaders for K-6, 7-8, and 9-12 who report directly to Aastrup as resource people, confidants, and trouble shooters.

Facing the Future

Now that the school seems to be on firm financial ground, will it return to the broader program it once had? Says Clark: "Very, very slowly. We do not want to get caught in what I call 'creep'—moving back to the situation where we were before. We don't have the need to build. We are offering everything that we need to offer."

Apparently they are also doing it well. When the Iowa Test of Basic Skills was administered, South Lancaster Academy had the highest aggregate score of any school in Worcester County using the test. There are also incentives for strong teaching. Elementary teachers each have a modest annual stipend of \$800 to spend in their area, and academy teachers have \$500.

Whether the changes that have occurred at South Lancaster Academy can—or should—occur at other Adventist schools has yet to be determined. However, church members, parents, and students in the community think they have something to be proud of. Says David Osborne, "When church institutions have a definite plan, put out a good budget and stick to it no matter what, the church is going to feel better about itself. The people are going to feel better. And the church will be stronger for it."

That, of course, is the bottom line. □