
Administering a Successful Academy Program

An Interview With Principal Richard T. Orrison

Andrews Academy enjoys the reputation of having high academic standards; a professional, stable faculty; a carefully integrated curricular and co-curricular program; and a well-disciplined student body. In 1985 the United States Department of Education named the academy an exemplary private school.

Part of the success of the school must be credited to its principal of 14 years, Dr. Richard T. Orrison. During his professional career he has been an elementary teacher, a boys' dean, a principal of a junior academy, and for the 11 years just prior to his present position, dean of men on the La Siera campus of Loma Linda University.

Describe Andrews Academy in terms of its physical plant and its student enrollment when you became its principal in 1972.

The school was in very crowded facilities. Its home was Bell Hall in the center of the Andrews University campus. The school's peak enrollment was shortly after that, in 1976, I think. We had about 375-380 students; we currently have 301.

Many facilities were shared with the university. And the school program was based on facility availability rather than on student needs and what proper curriculum planning should have been.

How soon did you begin working on plans for a new building?

In the first year that I was here, a building committee was set up and promotion began among the churches and the conference and so forth. It took a long time for the plans to develop, but the seeds were sown at that time. Dr. Richard Hammill, then president of Andrews University, took a major role in leading out in this. We actually moved into our new building in 1978.

Interview by Jane Thayer, director of public relations at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan.

The entrance to the new building opens up into the Commons—a large carpeted area, containing tables and chairs in one section and just space and a few lounging chairs in another section. Has it lived up to what was expected of it?

Very much so. Our early idea was that it would be the social center of the school, and it has, in fact, turned out to be just that. Daily lunches are served there. When students do not have assigned classes, they are to be located there. The variety of social occasions that take place there is phenomenal. It is such a flexible facility. I can hardly imagine administering a school without that kind of area.

Tell me about the doors in your office. You have one that opens into an outer office, and you have one that opens to the Commons. Was that a deliberate design choice?

Yes. I suppose for a couple of reasons: it has to do with supervision and it has to do with availability. I like to promote the idea among students that I operate my office on an open-door policy. I tell them at the beginning of each school year that if the door to the Commons is open, that's a signal to them that they can come in without any reservation.

One parent told me that the first time he stepped into this academy, he felt a very definite atmosphere in this school, and it was not an atmosphere that said, "We're out to keep you in line." Yet there is a sense of order, respect, and discipline. How do you develop and maintain this atmosphere without the appearance of strict control?

I suppose it has something to do with philosophy. I deeply believe that with young people, the levels of expectation ought to be clearly stated and presented in a positive way, giving, as well as we can, reasons for them. Then we ought to expect them to live up to them. If they don't they have to be prepared to deal with the

consequences. I feel it is very important not to hassle or harangue or plead or beg or say, "I wish you would do this." I believe in stating the guidelines and then expecting people to follow through. And I think that young people, in general, respond to that kind of plan.

I'm told that you are often in the hallways and among the students—a visible presence. What do you hope to accomplish by this?

I'm sure that it may contribute to the organization of the school. I suspect that it contributes to the control that you spoke of earlier.

I was gone for a couple of weeks last fall and when I came back, one of the fellows walked up to me and put his arm around my shoulder and said, "I sure am glad you're back. I feel more secure when you're here." I don't think that he meant that anything was going to happen to him, but that he felt the operation of the school was secure.

Thinking now in terms of the school year, what organizational plans or goals do you have in place before each new school year begins?

I select a specific theme for every school year. That theme is then used to focus programming for the school year.

Dr. Orrison

It's a tremendous help. Every school year we have a banner made that portrays that theme, and it is displayed throughout the school year.

The theme this year is "Andrews Academy—A Step in the Right Direction." It has physical, spiritual, academic, and character implications. And it is amazing to me that once the selection is made, the students have insights into the theme that didn't even dawn on me when it was selected. This kind of planning gives a tremendous focus for the school year so that, in a general way, it influences the school calendar and the school activities.

We also seek to identify a professional goal for the faculty, as well as an experiential goal for the students. For instance, our goal this year is to be especially alert to providing assistance for students who have academic problems.

What do you take into consideration when you select and schedule all the activities in your very full school calendar?

They are all planned with a specific purpose in mind. As a faculty we often remind ourselves that our motto is not "more" but "better." Once a number of years ago I made the statement to the faculty that we want to do things "with style, with class, and with flourish." I didn't really intend for it to be something that would go down in the history of the school, but it has. Both students and faculty will use that statement. Whatever we do, we want to do the best job we possibly can and not just do things for the sake of doing them.

How do you improve each activity as it recurs each year?

Well, we're dedicated to continual evaluation. It was a real reward to me to see this year's student association build evaluation right into a part of their planning.

We have provided evaluation sheets with the forms used by those who are planning activities. After the activity is over, they fill out that sheet and it becomes a part of the records of the school so that the next time that activity is done, whoever is in charge of it can make reference to that form and try to see what was profitable

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States Department of Education, representing William Bennett, Secretary of Education, was also present to congratulate members of the student body and faculty. Bowell spoke highly of the involvement he observed among Andrews Academy parents: "Schools like Andrews Academy point to academic excellence. You deserve a round of applause for a job well done. You have proved that excellent education is worth reaching." Responding for the academy Principal Orrison said, "We shall continue to strive for a program that will be considered excellent in the divine eye. What has been accomplished is a strong statement about Seventh-day Adventist education." □

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and what was unprofitable.

Then, there's a lot that I could say about the personal interview that I conduct each year with each of the faculty. I don't want to overemphasize it, but I feel that it really is a key to the program here. One of the things we talk about is what they think the strengths and weaknesses of Andrews Academy are. Their ideas are worked up into a list that we relate to during our postschool week. Subcommittees of the faculty are set up, and every one of those weaknesses or improvement ideas is considered by the faculty. Through the years we've seen significant forward steps taken through this process.

You expect a lot of your teachers, especially in these days of financial belt-tightening. Yet, teachers tell me that faculty morale is quite good. What do you see as a key factor to keeping or developing a positive faculty morale?

I think trying to maintain an atmosphere of openness and trying to follow a plan of making decisions together. Now, obviously, sometimes when we come to the end of the line, the administrator has to make the decision. If the faculty think their voice has been heard, it helps them to say, "Well, we did the best we could, and I'm willing to do my part to see that it works."

When a teacher is not meeting your expectations, how do you handle the situation?

Through personal interviews.

For your annual interview with each faculty member, you require each to fill out a lengthy evaluation questionnaire. What is accomplished by this process?

Lots of things. I referred to one of them when discussing school evaluation. In addition to that, the interview covers an area where the teacher and I identify personal professional objectives for the next year. Usually, and especially if the teachers' programs are satisfactory, they choose those objectives themselves. But if I see an area I feel they need to improve, then I inject my feeling by saying, "I'd like this to be one of your objectives for next year."

I think one of the greatest values of this plan is that it provides an opportunity for teachers, especially those who may be too busy or too reticent, to come talk with me for a long period of time. They know that for that period of time, they have my undivided attention and any topic that is important to them, as well as those on the outline, can be covered.

Every principal must wrestle with financial concerns. What are you having to cut and what are you doing to maintain a quality academic program?

This is probably the greatest challenge that we are faced with at the present time. I have been so very

pleased with the selective curriculum concept that has been operable here. However, I fear it is in jeopardy.

Will you define that?

Yes. After the freshman year, students may choose the courses they can take within the guidelines of the requirements of graduation. Obviously there has to be a limit on the selection available.

This has had a lot of psychological value because students feel that they are in charge of some aspect of their education.

I think that financial pressures are placing that concept in jeopardy right now. Three years ago when we were really faced with financial constraints, we found it necessary to reduce faculty and increase the instructional load of those who remained. I told the faculty that this plan would operate for three years. If they would give me three years under these circumstances, we would get through it or we would change our plan. Well, we're coming to the end of the three years, and there is really no bright enrollment increase on the horizon. We have maintained our enrollment, with modest increases here and there, but certainly nothing to crow about. The prospects of an enrollment increase in the future are just not there. So, very regretfully, we are just now entering into serious discussions about changing the plan.

How many Seventh-day Adventist academy-aged students in this area are attending public high school and why? What do you think it would take to get them into this school?

That is a tremendously complex situation. I don't know for sure exactly how many Adventists are in public school, but I wouldn't be surprised if there are 50 or so. In order to make it possible for them to be here, there would need to be addi-

tional finances because many of them are there for financial reasons. Now, some are there for other reasons. For some, it's just a matter of choice. Others may not have had success in an Adventist school environment. But the vast majority are there for financial reasons.

What do you see as the role of the school in trying to maintain the beliefs and the standards of the church?

Well, it's a key. It cannot, and should not take the place of the family. It is a primary responsibility, but even more important is leading each individual student to an acceptance of Christ as his or her Saviour. These things are primary in Adventist education.

I'm told that you are a workaholic. Just how time-consuming and thought-consuming is this job of yours?

It really pervades my life. It is always a challenge to keep my professional life and my family life in balance. But my thoughts, even when I am not at school are often with school. But I don't know that I am a workaholic. I understand why peo-

ple would say that because I do invest a lot of time.

I think school people in general have this challenge and I'm not uncomfortable with it. I don't apologize for it. We do have an opportunity to come to the surface during vacations. That isn't characteristic of other professions. I think we ought to take deep gulps of the outside world during those times. Then we can return once again to school and submerge ourselves in it and do everything we possibly can to contribute to the success of the youth we have the opportunity to work with.

Every quarter you teach a class in American government and you supervise the development of a multimedia program that is produced by a class which meets throughout the school year. And every year you conduct an education tour on a four-year cycle, giving students the possibility of visiting four diverse historical sections of North America. You sometimes chaperone various off-campus retreats. You are often at the school in the evenings and on weekends. How do you maintain this kind of involvement year after year?

I think it is *important* to maintain that kind of involvement. I say this hesitantly because I don't want to have an ounce of egotism, but I think it is just an established fact that the most important single element in influencing a school and its program is the principal. And if I am not there, I cannot influence it.

What are the rewards of being an academy principal?

Well, they are just so numerous, it's hard to list them. I get a lot of satisfaction from seeing a program work, from seeing a well-organized system and all the elements fit into place.

There is nothing more rewarding than to see the successes of former students and alumni and to have them express their appreciation.

It's a reward to see faculty enjoy themselves and to have a part in creating an environment where they can teach. Not all schools enjoy that. The last thing some teachers get to do is to teach.

And it goes without saying that our real reward will result from our deep desire to make investments that have eternal returns. We really look forward to that. □