

# Fixing the Schools

BY J. WAYNE HANCOCK

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ever before in the history of the Adventist Church has there been more intense interest in Christian education. At the same time, we hear that "Our school system, our whole K-16 system, is in deep trouble."<sup>1</sup> "The word *survival* has never applied to Adventist... education quite as it does now."<sup>2</sup>

This paradox has in part been created by the Seventh-day Adventist school system itself, which since World War II has produced a generation of well-educated consumers of private education. Sure of what they want in education, these graduates actively search for schools that meet their own acquired standards before enrolling their children.

This baby-boom generation was educated in a school system that some church leaders actively promoted as assuring salvation for its pupils. To a great extent the schools that educated the baby-boomers continue to deliver on what the church promised. Many of the children of yesterday's Adventist schools are in the church today, and some of them hold leadership positions. Yet this generation also recognizes the current shortcomings of the system and demands positive change.<sup>3</sup>

Over the years our educational leaders have listened to the chorus of parents who demanded change in the schools. However, few administrators took decisive action, perhaps feeling that, given time, the problems would go away. Principals told concerned parents that they were unqualified to evaluate the school or were too closely associated with a specific problem to take an objective view. Parents who risked discussing the problems and needs of the school sometimes suffered

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character assassination at the hands of the individuals from whom they sought assistance.

Many parents, including significant numbers of pastors, teachers, and other denominational employees, decided they had to pay too high a price for a voice in their children's education. They silently protested by enrolling their children in other private schools that more closely resembled their ideal for education. Although the schools commonly charged

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two or three times the tuition of the Adventist school, parents willingly paid high prices for an education that tapped all the resources of the school, church, and community to meet the needs of their children.

As a result, many church schools lost pupils and some closed their doors. The remaining schools, however, often continued with business as usual, not sensing that they needed to better serve the needs of their consumers in order to survive.

### **What Is a School System to Do?**

Today's business leaders increasingly push their organizations to be "market driven" rather than "sales driven" or "product driven." They are surveying their markets and seeking to find a niche that they can fill. The minivan, computerized banking, and single-serving food packaging are the direct result of businesses listening to customer wants and needs.

Becoming market driven is as important for academies and conferences as for businesses. Quite simply, marketing can provide the means for long-term survival for Adventist schools. Marketing is not just promotion; rather, it entails all aspects of Christian education. Integral segments include curriculum, distributional access, and promotion. All elements must be carefully analyzed to determine which changes will best serve the customer (parents and students) while maintaining the eternal principles of Adventist education.

The market-driven Christian school says, "Let's match our programs to the changing needs of our clientele (school-age children and their parents). Let's be imaginative in anticipating and designing programs for future needs." Thus the school's emphasis shifts from inward to outward focus. Instead of the traditional emphasis on the organization and its needs, schools seek ways to best meet the needs of their customers.

What kinds of programs might we expect to see if schools really responded to their constituencies? Service-related additions might include athletics, industrial arts, music, programs for the gifted and talented, remedial programs, before- and after-school child care, and failure-prevention programs.

Other marketing strategies might include more convenient payment plans or billing cycles, scholarships, and bus-ing.

However, marketing is more than a list of activities or programs. It is a process, a systematic commitment by conferences and churches to match their resources and activities with the needs of their customers. Marketing's system of long-range planning permits the marketplace to dictate the specific missions of a church

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school or conference school system. At the same time marketing provides a common-sense approach to improving education.

Marketing does not throw out the timeless principles or the sacred mission of SDA education. Rather, it uses them as a firm foundation on which to build innovative programs that have the flexibility to meet changing circumstances and needs. Adventist nonprofit institutions—particularly church schools and conferences—have been slow to adopt marketing techniques. Some that have done so unfortunately view marketing as a promotional gimmick rather than a way to enhance the school system.

Conference presidents who view marketing as primarily promotional tend to fear it. They see funds and students flowing to other academies and conferences who spend large sums of money on advertising and promotion. They fear that large-scale promotional warfare will ruin smaller schools that cannot afford such marketing, and will create a competitive stalemate among the larger schools.

However, those conference presidents who truly understand marketing are beginning to realize that it can dramatically improve the quality of education while meeting the unique needs of each student through his or her entire school career. Instead of every academy and elementary school offering the same union conference board-approved generic curriculum, each school would tailor its course offerings and services to its own market demands.

### **Assess Strengths and Weaknesses**

How does a Christian school become market driven? The change does not occur overnight. A commitment from the top is necessary. Perhaps the simplest way is to involve church clerks, Sabbath school division leaders, pastors and their wives, parents, and students themselves in an advisory group that meets quarterly to identify current issues, problems, and needs. This group could also help analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the school and its constituency.

For all teachers, staff members, and administrators, the process asks, "What are we doing and why?" "What do we do well?" "What do we do poorly?" "What are the advantages and disadvantages of our school program?"

Next, examine services from the parent's point of view. Is the school conveniently located? Is public transportation or bus service routing a problem? Can parents get appointments with teachers or school administrators without having to wait for days? How are parents treated by the teachers and staff? Are teachers state and denominationally certified in

their subject areas? What types of students are attracted to the school—the gifted and talented, the exceptional child? What curriculum offerings are growing, which ones are declining? Why?

Finally, analyze services from the student's point of view. Do teachers stimulate curiosity? Is the connection between what is taught and life's experiences obvious? Are credits transferrable to other recognized schools, or will competency examinations be required? Is learning a pleasurable experience?

Schools may at first feel reluctant to undergo this kind of scrutiny, fearing that the changes suggested will be too expensive to implement. However, parents, church leaders, and even students are likely to identify needs that can be filled without adding personnel or incurring major expense.

For example, many parents feel the billing cycle at the beginning of school puts them behind financially before the school year is even underway, causing them to fear that they will not be able to meet their commitments. Perhaps registration and book fees could be paid the second week of May for the next school year, followed by monthly installments through the summer months while the children have summer jobs.

This changed system of billing might better meet the needs of parents and offer the school a more accurate projection of next year's enrollment, while at the same time giving the school added income from the interest earned on tuition payments.

### **Analyze Potential Consumers and Competitors**

The next step is to carefully analyze your market area in terms of potential customers and the competition. As a start, examine the church constituency. Obtain and chart ages, addresses, telephone numbers, grade levels, sex, and socioeconomic demographics. Where are parents enrolling their children? Are they dissatisfied with their present schools? What would make your school a more/less attractive option?

How do you get new students? Are they referred by business professionals, physicians, current patrons, other ministers, social workers, psychologists, private or public schools, Sabbath school division leaders, or church members?

What additional benefits do constituency members need or want? For what programs are they willing to pay extra? What programs would they reject?

The above questions will help you identify specific market segments (homogenous groups who share common characteristics) that your school might serve. You might also consider whether nonmembers are potential markets for

your school system.

When assessing the competition, ask: Are their schools more conveniently located? What kinds of services do they offer? How do these compare with yours? How much do they charge for tuition and fees compared with your charges? How do they attract new students? What are their reputations or community ties? If you perceive your competitors as successful, why are they?

Don't limit the list of competitors to other Adventist or parochial schools. Include public schools, alternative education, and schools outside the immediate geographic area. By assessing the competition, you will find opportunities to enhance your own school development.

Here, the question becomes not, "What do I do?" but rather, "What could I do?" and "For whom could I do it?" The process also asks, "What can I do that differs from or improves on what others are doing?" Identify needs that are not now being met (niche opportunities) by other schools and search for creative ways to meet these needs. For example, if there are no after-school activities for children of working parents, athletic or enrichment activities may be offered for a fee.

### **Selecting Marketing Strategies That Work**

Next, identify and select a marketing strategy. This strategy should be based on objectives that consider identified strengths, weaknesses, competition, and opportunities. Marketing strategies analyze location, curriculum, course offerings, services, and student amenities. They also include the use of marketing tools to communicate information about your services to potential consumers (students and parents or guardians).

Five proven strategies for increasing student enrollment are supplied to fire your imagination. These examples will require good organization and lots of work, but are well worth the effort.

### **Sample Objective A**

*Find all eligible students in the conference and enroll them in the nearest Adventist school.*

Strategy: Establish a network of educational consultants, conference wide, trained in four areas: mental age, self-concept, reading, and math. If parents are considering shifting their child from a public school or deciding for the first time where to enroll their child, an analysis of these areas will help inform their decision making.

Many conscientious Adventist parents struggle with the tension between the state's requirement that all children begin school at age six or before, and the church prophet's advice that encourages

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them to keep their children at home until age eight or ten. Schools can ease this dilemma by helping parents determine whether their children are prepared for academic work.

By using the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, a child's mental age and IQ can be established. Experienced teacher/consultants can then help parents make the correct decision about whether to enroll the child in first grade, keep him home and work on foundation skills, or send him to a structured preschool.

Since self-concept is a better predictor of success or failure than IQ, a good self-concept test would also offer additional information to help the parent make the right decision. In cases where the child is not ready for school, the teacher/consultant can write a prescription listing specific materials and guidelines that will help parents prepare their child for first grade.

Parents today are anxious that their child read and compute at grade level. Many are frustrated by their child's poor achievement but don't know where to turn for help. The conference thus has an excellent opportunity to step in and help parents meet their educational needs in a time of crisis. Knowing that counseling and testing are available makes the parents feel confident about solving their child's problems. They feel reassured to know that the local school has access to a network of specialists, conference wide, who are available to help the entire family with their educational needs.

At large church gatherings like camp meeting and youth functions the conference office of education should set up booths featuring its counseling and testing services. At such locations diagnostic tests such as the Woodcock Reading Inventory and/or Key Math Examination can be administered. Within an hour, results of the diagnostic testing can be reported to parents.

If the child's scores are above grade level, the superintendent or classroom supervisor reassures parents that the school and child appear to be working well together. When children do not score well, review of the examination pinpoints specific areas that need attention. This gives the superintendent an opportunity to suggest some possible alternatives that the child might take to develop the needed skills.

Option 1 involves sending the child to a reading or math camp conducted by the conference for two weeks during the summer. At the camp experienced teachers are teamed with new graduates

to work with homogenous groupings of four students each.

At the end of camp, parents receive reports and copies of examinations showing the child's progress. On an official Seventh-day Adventist school prescription pad, the teacher makes specific suggestions to help the child take the next steps in overcoming his or her difficulties. The prescription might include a reading list of high-interest, low-vocabulary books, Fry's list of sight words, or multiplication tables to be made into flash cards.

Follow-up is essential if these children are to continue developing their reading or math skills and if they are to enroll in the area Adventist school. Therefore, the superintendent should give the parents an attractive brochure describing and advertising the Adventist school closest to their home. The brochure lists course offerings, special programs, and a biographical sketch of each teacher.

Next, the superintendent suggests sending the child's records to the teacher and schedules an appointment for the parents and teacher to review the child's progress and make plans for the upcoming school year. The superintendent then assures the parents that he or she will personally track the child's learning and stay in touch with them so that everyone can work together to assure the child's success. The superintendent also assures parents that the entire conference educational system forms a support team to help them ensure their child's academic growth.

Option 2, which involves prescriptive teaching, is followed when a child cannot attend the camp for exceptional children. This approach is much more demanding of parents and teachers than the other option, but usually ends with similarly positive results.

## Sample Objective B

*Maintain a carefully selected 15 percent non-Adventist enrollment, accepting those students whose parents strongly support the school's religiously oriented program.*

Strategy: Open a preschool and child-care center, emphasizing the development of moral values as well as social and motor skills. The General Conference kindergarten program serves as a good model for older children. Structured developmental programs that involve a balance between outdoor play and learning activities, away from the television, are of prime interest to parents.

As preschool children grow, the school can increasingly involve them in learning activities and recess with first graders. The bonding that occurs between children and teacher creates a positive climate for the teacher to invite parents to enroll their child in the church school.

If the parents fear that the cost will be too great, the teacher can reassure them that private school is less expensive than preschool and child care by about 25 percent. Often, because of the friendships the child has made, he or she will become a lifelong consumer and supporter of Christian education.

## Sample Objective C

*To build school spirit, loyalty, academic excellence, and physical fitness.*

Strategy: Schedule an awards banquet annually when high achievers are awarded for a 10 percent improvement over their own previous year's record in three major categories: academics, the arts, and athletics. Students who are first-time achievers of excellence receive as a gift from the school a letter jacket and a medal symbolic of the area of achievement.

In junior academy, speakers such as public officials, civic and business leaders, or local media notables can be invited to present awards and speak on the importance of being peak performers. Parents, grandparents, the pastor, and other interested individuals should be invited. Often parents are excited enough to invite their friends to see their children receive awards.

Each person attending the banquet is charged a fee of \$20 to \$25 to cover banquet costs, awards, and school letter jackets. Academic awards may be presented for math, science, religion, English, reading, writing, temperance orations, and honor roll. Skills awards can be given for band, choir, photography, art, small engine repair, woodwork, and temperance posters. Other awards given include the President's Physical Fitness Awards and the President's Arts Achievement Awards, athletic awards for track and field, gymnastics, basketball, volleyball, tennis, softball, racquetball, and swimming.

At the beginning of the school year, each child can try out for one award from each of the three major categories. Teachers and parents work together to help the child surpass his or her past record. This fosters school spirit and provides good public relations as students and parents talk with pride about their school to their friends. A school letter jacket earned by a student for serious effort produces one of the most successful forms of advertising for the dollars expended.

## Sample Objective D

*To increase customer awareness of the quality of education in Adventist schools and to encourage parents to take an active part in their child's learning.*

Strategy: Conduct a conference-wide science fair and junior olympics. Early in

the school year teachers meet with parents and children at a home and school meeting featuring the theme of parent involvement in learning. The discussion centers on tips to help parents become resource persons. At the meeting parents learn about the importance of having children do the actual research, construct the model, write the report, and record time contributed to the project by both parent and child.

The last part of the program focuses on the local school's science fair and the conference-wide fair and junior olympics hosted by the science and physical education department of the local Adventist academy. Norms for ribbons or medallions are based on the President's Physical Fitness Award norms for the olympics and on points scored in various categories for the science fair. Requirements for prizes are set so that every child, with some ongoing effort, can win at least a third-place ribbon. First-, second-, and third-place rosette ribbons are awarded for outstanding science projects in vari-

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## *How does a Christian school become market driven?*

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ous categories (mechanical, biological, chemical, and so on).

In each school, teachers distribute project guidelines and sample papers for three levels of science projects (grades 1-6, 7-8, and 9-10). Children are taught to write up a report about their projects using the scientific method. Once a child wins a ribbon or medallion at the local level, he or she has one month to refine the project and enter it in the conference-wide science fair.

When youngsters return from their visit to the academy they will rave about the trip and their plans for next year's olympic tryouts or science fair. They also talk about the great experience they had. Unknowingly, they are becoming committed to attending the academy.

Every Adventist secondary school should capitalize on these kinds of opportunities because when the events are over several hundred children from every corner of the conference will talk for months about the science fair and junior olympics that were held there.

### **Developing a Marketing Plan**

Once objectives have been defined, strengths and weaknesses assessed, competition and opportunities examined, and strategies selected, a marketing plan can combine these elements into a coherent,

attainable plan of action. The plan need not be a formal one, especially for a small school, but it needs to be well thought out and shared with everyone concerned.

The most difficult and controversial step for many schools is promotion, especially if advertising is involved. In some cases, promotion, including advertising, is not only appropriate, but necessary. The most effective advertising gets people talking about their accomplishments and successes, including the name of the institution for which they have high regard. The letter jacket or sweater, the gymnastic uniform, medals, medallions, and ribbons further this aim.

Schools can get free advertising from news stories about community service projects, trips to music festivals, science fairs, and junior olympics. Paid advertising in the form of news articles with action photos will be well read if they appear in a prominent location in the newspaper. These articles should be tightly focused, featuring teachers' positive attributes, curriculum offerings, school mission, and building programs.<sup>4</sup>

After these articles appear in the newspaper they should be photocopied and inserted in the church bulletin to gain further publicity. Keeping everyone informed about the good things going on at your school is sure to produce positive results in terms of teacher morale and enrollment, as well as public and constituent esteem for the educational program of the school.

Advertising is typically only a small part of marketing. Promotion also includes production of school newspapers, brochures telling about the school's services, and new curriculum announcements. Some principals promote their school by writing articles for scholarly or religious journals; others contribute to the popular press or participate in local television or radio talk shows. School personnel can also speak to community groups or perform free diagnostic testing for mental age, reading, or math achievement levels. Advertising also includes telling parents about before- and after-school care programs offered by the school.

Before advertising, however, schools need to define their objectives, assessing strengths and weaknesses, examining competition and opportunities, and selecting strategies. Otherwise, they will not know what to advertise. Furthermore, unless their support is enlisted in the program, staff members may resist the changes that marketing may bring about, thus defeating the whole effort.

Once a marketing plan is chosen, everyone must be committed to its success or it will not work. Support from leadership is particularly vital. Everyone in the church from the pastor and school principal on down must enthusiastically

endorse the plan. This includes teachers, school receptionist, maintenance people, treasurer, indeed everyone who works for the school, church, conference, academy, and college.

### **Reevaluate the Marketing Plan**

The marketing plan needs to be periodically updated to assess its effectiveness. No marketing plan can be expected to work indefinitely. Because conditions change, the plan may need revision or reinforcing to succeed. Or it may need redirection to attract different customers than those originally targeted. What worked with one set of consumers may not work with another.

For small schools, evaluations may be as informal as the marketing plan itself. For conferences, school systems, and large academies, however, formal evaluations will be needed at regular intervals. Such assessments should include a number of people.

### **Final Challenge**

The Adventist schools that survive the coming decade will be those that rid themselves of outmoded ways, eliminate territorial boundaries, reassess their goals, and diversify their services and products to provide the church community with a broader range of course offerings, curriculum, and services. It is time for schools to seize this opportunity, which will not only help them survive, but can provide the means of improving Adventist education for all students. □

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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Myron Widmer, "The State of SDA Colleges in North America," *Adventist Review* (March 9, 1986), p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Loren Dickinson, "Marketing Adventist Higher Education: Some Practical Strategies," *The Journal of Adventist Education*, 48:4 (April-May 1986), p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Marquand, "Parents Want More Say-So in How Schools Operate," *Christian Science Monitor* (August 31, 1987), p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> For suggestions on advertising, see story about the Berkeley Hall School in *The Christian Science Monitor*, May 3, August 9, 16, and 23, 1976.