

Measuring Quality in Adventist Schools

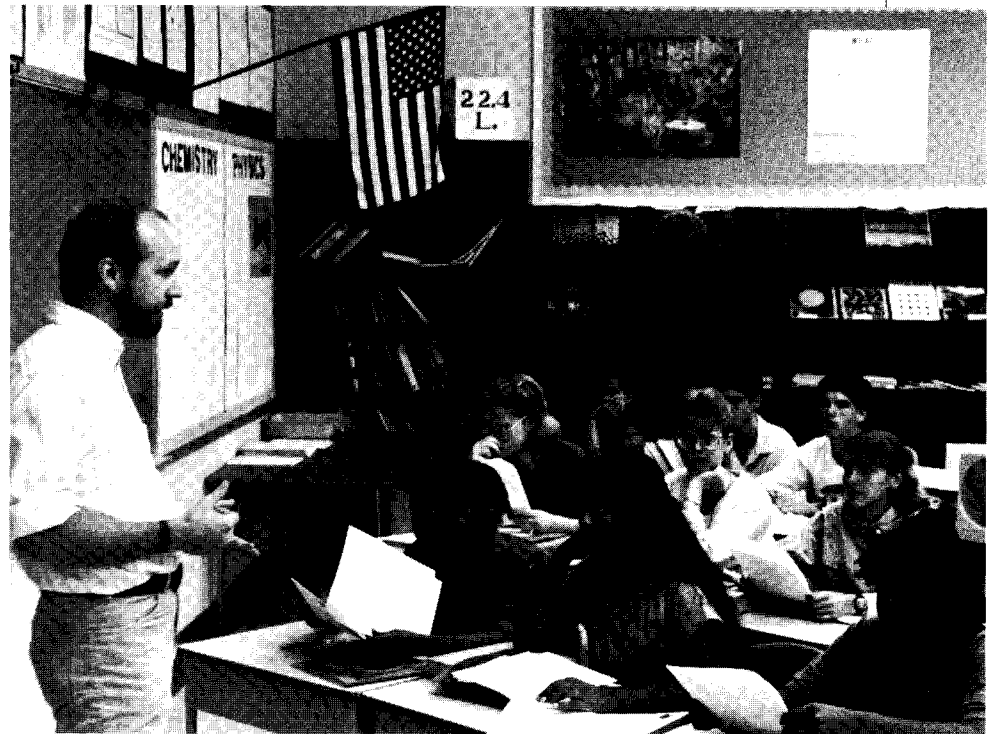
A Review of Valuegenesis III

Introduction

An old joke goes as follows: "I have some good news and some bad news. Which would you like to hear first?" The same question might be asked about the most easily misunderstood and controversial report yet to be released by Project Affirmation entitled, *Valuegenesis: Report III; A Study of School Quality*. The first two Valuegenesis reports had a more general focus on "the influence of family, church, and school on the faith, values, and commitment of Adventist youth." The most recent report released in August 1991 concentrates exclusively on the school.¹ This report contains a new model that Adventist schools can use to study their effectiveness. This could turn out to be its greatest asset.²

The Faith, Values, and Commitment Taskforce of Project Affirmation suggested that the North American Division conduct a survey of church members in North America. As a result, in 1989 the Search Institute prepared a survey form and processed responses from more than 12,000 youth in grades six to 12, as well as some 1,900 parents, and more than 700 pastors, principals, and teachers.³

The third report looks at 10 general categories of effective schools: staff training; commitment to Adventism; religious education program; academic program; caring climate; effective discipline; enthusiasm; resources; mission and governance; and systems of support. These broad categories are broken down into 32 indicators of school quality. (See Figure 1.) In order to assess each of the indicators, the report's authors analyze the vast data base from the Valuegenesis survey to find out how Adventist schools measure up. The report also looks at other school effectiveness



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factors, such as "at-risk" behavior patterns, teacher salaries, and job satisfaction, as well as comparisons with public schools on a number of characteristics.

Interpretation

The reporting mechanism of Valuegenesis III and the groups used to assess the data have led to some misunderstandings. In Figure 1 a school had to achieve a 75 percent positive response to get a point for each indicator. In other areas of the report, the percentages represent the actual responses. One must consult the appendix to find out which group was used to assess each indicator—students, teachers, or principals.

These potential misunderstandings

illustrate the problems in discussing this report without extensive interpretation of the data. However, the report should not be written off, as some educators have done, because of disagreement with the interpretation methods or the results. Instead, educators should take the 32 school indicators, and add a few more of their own to assess the quality of their school programs.

Overview

Adventist schools achieve 18 out of the 32 indicators, on the average. Those with the highest ratings are small K-9/K-10 schools, with 21.7 indicators. The combined small K-12 school—consisting of an elementary school and senior academy—had the lowest rating, with only 14.1. The difference between boarding and day schools was not statistically significant, with 16.9 indicators for boarding schools, compared to 16.2 for day schools.

Good News

The good news in *Valuegenesis III* should bolster the confidence of parents, students, and educators in our church school system. (See Figure 1.)

- More than 90 percent of Adventist schools have a quality academic program, as perceived by the teachers and principal; teachers feel an obligation to promote faith and are committed to Adventism.
- Also impressive is the high percentage of Adventist academy seniors who go on to a four-year college or university. Our 66 percent rate is more than double the 30 percent from public schools and much higher than the 51 percent from the highly touted Roman Catholic system.
- The percentage of students who do six hours or more of homework per week is higher at every grade level than that of other school systems. This is especially true at the secondary level, where it is more than double that found in public high schools for grades 10-12.
- Contrasted with public schools,

Adventist schools have very few behavior problems. They compare favorably to private schools in this area. For example, only one percent of Adventist teachers report that student drug use is a serious problem in their school, compared to eight percent in public schools and two percent in private schools.

- In other categories, such as verbal abuse of teachers; students cutting class; vandalism, robbery, or theft; and physical conflicts among students, the percentage of Adventist teachers who view these as serious



problems is very low (around one percent).

- Equally impressive are the large number of Adventist teachers who hold a master's degree or higher—51 percent in Adventist schools compared to 47 percent in public schools and only 34 percent in other private schools.
- Adventist schools have a large number of racial-ethnic minorities among their student bodies, teachers, and principals. Thirty-two percent of Adventist students come from minority groups, compared with 22 percent in Roman Catholic schools. (Of course, a large number of the Adventist minority students are in all-black regional conference schools, and many white students attend schools without any minority student population.) Although only 15 percent of

Adventist teachers and 17 percent of principals come from minority groups, this figure is slightly higher than in public schools and double that of other private schools. However, as the church's minority population continues to grow, increasing this percentage must become a priority.

Mixed News

On the surface some indicators seem confusing and may require in-depth interpretation. Ninety-five percent of schools have teachers who feel that most of their colleagues "share my values and beliefs about what the central mission of the school should be." However, only 79 percent of the schools have teachers who agree that the goals and priorities for the school are clear. This may mean that teachers themselves know their goals, but that 21 percent of the schools have not developed a collective sense of mission. Conference offices of education should try to get every school board to actively involve the school staff, parents, and constituency in developing meaningful mission statements—not the kind you prepare as part of the self-study for a school accreditation visit and then forget about until the next visit.

Some of the greatest confusion about *Valuegenesis III* has developed over the issue of religious education. Three of the top six indicators suggest that our religious education program is one of the strongest. Here are the rankings with the actual criteria noted in parentheses at the end of each statement:

- No. 2 Ninety-five percent of the schools have teachers who feel an obligation to promote faith (At least three-quarters of the teachers agree that "I feel an obligation to promote the religious faith of my students").
- No. 5 Eighty-eight percent of the schools have teachers who serve as religious educators (At least three-quarters of the teachers agree that they actively model personal religious faith).

PERCENT OF ADVENTIST SCHOOLS WITH EACH SCHOOL QUALITY INDICATOR, BY AREA OF SCHOOL QUALITY

Area of School Quality	Indicators of School Quality	Percent of All Schools with School Quality Indicator
Staff Training	1. Teachers have BA or higher degree	80%
	2. Teachers certified by Adventist Church	82%
	3. Teachers certified by the state	37%
	4. School head has MA or higher degree	64%
Commitment to Adventism	5. Teachers committed to Adventism	94%
	6. Students committed to Adventism	75%
	7. School staff endorses Adventist standards	68%
Religious Education Program	8. School offers quality religious education	88%
	9. Students benefit from religious education program	15%
	10. Teachers feel obligation to promote faith	95%
	11. Teachers serve as religious educators	88%
Academic Program	12. School has quality academic program	97%
	13. Students are committed to learning	44%
Climate: Caring Community	14. Teachers are caring	25%
	15. Teachers are involved with students	21%
	16. Teachers refrain from "putting down" students	19%
Climate: Effective Discipline	17. School maintains order	46%
	18. Discipline is fair	34%
	19. Students avoid at-risk behavior	19%
Climate: Enthusiasm	20. Teachers experience job satisfaction	66%
	21. School has school spirit	22%
Resources	22. School has financial health	32%
	23. School has good physical facilities	65%
	24. Teachers have good teaching materials and supplies	70%
	25. School has stable or growing enrollment	58%
Mission and Governance	26. School has a clear mission	79%
	27. School's mission is widely shared	95%
	28. Teachers involved in forming educational policy	66%
Systems of Support	29. School has support of pastor(s)	62%
	30. School has support of parents	63%
	31. Teachers communicate with parents	44%
	32. Teachers have support of school administrator	80%

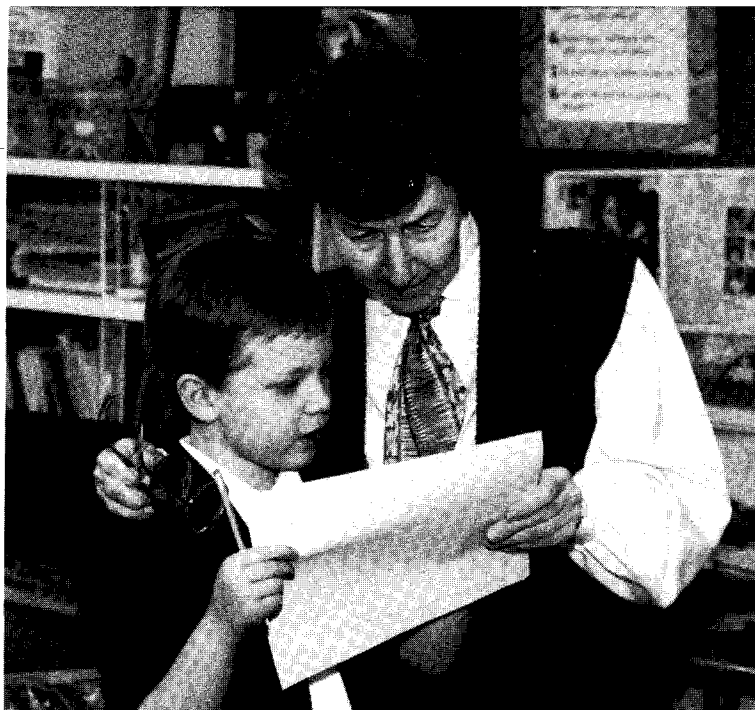
No. 6 Eighty-eight percent of the schools offer quality religious education (At least three-quarters of the teachers plus the principal report that the quality of the religious education is "excellent").

However, when one looks at the very bottom of the list for the worst-rated item, it is startling to discover that only fifteen percent of schools have students who benefit from the religious education program (In these schools at least three-quarters of the students report that four or more of eight religious-education programs such as school worship, chapel, Bible class, week of prayer, student week of prayer, community outreach, and Bible labs influence their faith "somewhat" or "very much.") (No. 32).

A breakdown on specific religious education programs in Adventist schools further illustrates the problem. In the sixth grade, 40 percent of the students reported that their Bible class has "very much helped them" develop their religious faith. However, by grades 9-12 those numbers have dropped to the 20 percent range. The impact of dormitory or classroom morning worships suffers an even worse drop, from 38 percent in the sixth grade to 10 percent by 12th grade.

A statistic from the first Valuegenesis report adds another dimension. Only 17 percent of students in grades six to eight and 12 percent of students in grades nine to 12 report that they talk to their teachers about faith. While teachers may be talking to students about religion, they do not seem to be involving them in a dialogue. Perhaps too often religious education takes the form of preaching and does not touch on issues that are relevant to students' lives. Overall, teachers rate themselves much higher as religious educators than do their students.

Some have written off these findings as developmental issues that result from the normal rebellious attitudes of teenagers toward parents, teachers, and religion.



tion, and school. We cannot expect the school to be the sole provider and enabler of effective religious education in the church. It should become part of a concerted church wide effort at all levels. We must find new ways to provide religious education throughout our church and not just blame the school when young people leave the church.

Bad News

The worst news in the report revolves around

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This may explain some findings, but it cannot be used as an excuse not to make religious education more relevant for students.

Without the data from the first two reports of Valuegenesis, Adventist educators might think they were failing at one of their most important tasks. Undoubtedly, we must improve religious education in the areas of teacher modeling, programming, and content. But we must also see the survey results as part of a bigger problem in the church.

Families did not rate well in faith nurture, either. Few held family worship or participated in service activities. Little faith talk took place between parents and children. The local church's religious education programming, as offered through Sabbath school, achieved similarly poor results.

One of the greatest strengths of the Valuegenesis report is our ability to see how young people relate to all three components of our church's life—the family, congrega-

tion, and school, a problem mirrored by Valuegenesis in its analyses of the family and congregation. Of the eight indicators in the report where Adventist schools get poorest marks, six represent climate issues. Here are the rankings, with the criteria listed in parentheses following the statement:

No. 25 Thirty-four percent of schools have fair discipline (In these schools at least three-quarters of the students agree that "discipline is fair").

No. 27 Twenty-five percent of schools have teachers who are caring (In these schools at least three-quarters of students view teachers as caring).

No. 28 Twenty-two percent of schools have high school spirit (At least three-quarters of students agree that in their school "there is real school spirit").

No. 29 Twenty-one percent of schools have teachers who are involved with students (At least three-quarters of the teachers are actively involved in students' lives—including helping students on weekends or evenings, talking privately with students about personal problems, and giving extra help to students having problems).

No. 30 Nineteen percent of schools have teachers who refrain from "putting down" students (At least three-quarters of students at these schools disagree that "students often feel put down by teachers").

No. 31 Nineteen percent of schools have students who avoid at-risk behavior (At least three-quarters of the students report no at-risk behavior in the past 12

months, including alcohol and marijuana use, sexual intercourse, and antisocial behavior).

These results, coupled with the findings about climate issues throughout the three Valuegenesis reports, should make this area a high priority.

What causes these low scores? Is it just a developmental problem? Apparently not. This section of the report compares similar students in other settings. On the issue of students getting along well with

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teachers, the Adventist eighth-grade response of 65 percent compares well with the public schools rating of 66 percent, but was much lower than the 75 percent for Catholic schools and 85 percent for nonsectarian private schools.

Our 44 percent figure for students feeling “put down” by teachers was twice as high as the figure for public and Catholic schools. Our 78 percent agreement that teachers are interested in students was slightly higher than the 74 percent in public schools, but lower than the 83 percent in Catholic schools and 90 percent in nonsectarian private schools.

School spirit is another problem in Adventist schools, with eighth graders giving only a 55 percent favorable rating,

compared to 68 percent for public schools, 71 percent for Catholic schools, and 77 percent for nonsectarian private schools. Climate, then, is obviously more than a developmental issue—unless we would argue that our eighth graders are more developmentally retarded than their counterparts.

Teacher Attitudes

In one of the most startling statistics revealed by the *Valuegenesis III* report, only 24 percent of Adventist teachers are “very satisfied” with their current teaching job, compared to 50 percent of teachers in public schools and 42 percent of teachers in Catholic schools. If teachers are not happy in their work, they will be unlikely to foster a positive religious education program or a dynamic school climate.

The report attempts to discover the reason for these low results. It discounts the salary issue, since Adventist teachers, although lower paid than public school teachers, earn considerably more than their counterparts in other private and parochial schools. However, most Adventist teachers earn barely enough to survive, especially if they only have one income. (Many of our teachers are single or living in a one-income family with young children.)

The results also suggest that teachers should be more actively involved in establishing curriculum and selecting textbooks and other instructional materials, since our participation rates are lower than comparable school systems.

My discussions with teachers on this issue reveal that general climate issues may account for much of this teacher dissatisfaction. The report shows that only 23 percent of Adventist teachers “strongly agree” that they receive a great deal of support from parents, compared to 40 percent in private schools and 16 percent in public schools. Only 62 percent of Adventist schools rated pastoral support for their schools as “good” or “excellent.”

One item not reported may reveal the greatest source of dissatisfaction of teachers. Many Adventist teachers feel very vulnerable, never knowing when a capricious school board, a group of parents, or a pastor will attempt to get rid of them. This kind of job insecurity makes it even more difficult to solve the problems highlighted in the report. When even one teacher experiences such treatment, a chill goes through the teacher corps that makes everyone fear for his or her future.

Another major problem facing both teachers and pastors is the inability to take early retirement when faced with burnout. Many educators remain effective to the time they retire. However, a significant number do not. It is difficult for such individuals to retain their enthusiasm and energy. They are unlikely to create an effective school climate or a dynamic religious education program under such circumstances.

Recommendations for Reform

In talking to teachers I have discovered that most of them have never heard of the *Risk & Promise*⁴ report. As originally conceived,

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