

Good Adventist Schools- Making a Difference

The little Adventist church in Summerstown, Idaho,¹ had to make an important decision. Three of the eight families had elementary-age youngsters, and they wanted an Adventist school for their children to attend. One family donated some land, while the others provided the labor and the materials so that a small one-room school could be constructed. It was an expensive proposition to raise money for an Adventist school with only seven children.

The dedicated church members in Summerstown struggled through those first few winters. Parents had to substitute teach when the teacher became ill. Church members donated wood for the stove. Constant repairs were required, as first the plumbing and then the electrical wiring needed replacement. The impoverished membership wondered more than once if all the sacrifice was worth-

while.

Is it really worth what it takes

to provide an Adventist education for our youth? Teachers and administrators in Adventist schools are asked this question frequently. Parents look at their bank accounts, while pastors and church members worry about increasingly tight church budgets as they question the value of an Adventist education.

Educators who see lives shaped by the power of a Christian school environment believe that Adventist schools do make a difference. They know of young adults who attribute their present Christian commitment and love of the church to the fact that they attended Adventist schools. Many teachers and parents believe that the sacrifices made to enable youth to attend are worth whatever it takes. But what does the research show?

The North American Valuegenesis project did not establish beyond a shadow of doubt that Adventist schools were the deciding factor in the future of Ad-

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ventist youth. The study sought to determine whether differences existed between Adventist students in church schools and those in public schools. Data analysis revealed that students in Adventist schools seemed to show some advantages over those attending public schools. They felt more favorable toward Adventist schools, had more close friends who were Adventists, and reported more frequent personal prayer and family worships, for example. There were no significant differences, however, between the two groups in frequency of sharing faith with others, Adventism as a life goal, orthodoxy, frequency of devotional practices, altruism, or faith maturity.²

Questions might rightly be asked about the similarities or differences between the students in Adventist schools and those in non-Adventist schools from the North American Division Valuegenesis study because of the discrepancies in randomization, population selection, and survey administration, as well as the great disparity between the two groups (more than 10,000 youth in Adventist schools and fewer than 500 from non-Adventist schools). Probably we are comparing a fairly accurate representation of the students in Adventist schools with the “cream of the crop” of those not attending our schools.

What about Adventist youth outside North America? Would research on another group of youth, using different sampling techniques, produce different results? The South Pacific Division recently completed its own version of the Valuegenesis research. Their study population was very closely divided between students in state schools (45 percent) and those in Adventist schools (46 percent). Results were quite similar to

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the North American Division study, even with a more representative sample. Some differences emerged, as in the earlier study. Researchers found, for example, that students attending Adventist schools have a significantly more positive attitude toward Adventist standards than those who attend state schools. They also found that attendance at an Adventist school was positively associated with denominational loyalty and Christian commitment.³ However, in both of these major studies, young Adventists were very similar, whatever

school they attended.

What have we learned from the Valuegenesis research? Although our data show only marginal relationships between attendance at Adventist schools and Christian commitment or denominational loyalty, strong relationships do exist between certain school quality and effectiveness factors and youth attitudes. As the Australian report put it, “*What happens within an Adventist school has a far more significant bearing on the development of loyalty and Christian commitment than does mere attendance at the school.*”⁴

It is clear, then, that we cannot rest on the laurels of “being an Adventist school.” The Valuegenesis research indicates that this in itself does not appear to make much of a difference for many students. We must have good Adventist schools if we want to ensure the redemption of the youth. Such schools can make a real difference.

What Makes the Difference?

Continued analysis of the Valuegenesis data has yielded new information about what makes the differences in a good Adventist school. Students with high levels of denomina-

tional loyalty, Christian commitment, and social responsibility say that the following things are true about the Adventist school they attend:

- They feel they are getting a good academic education at their school.
- They see the school environment as warm and accepting.
- They feel accountable for their behavior.
- They view their teachers as Christian role models.
- They benefit from the planned religious curriculum of the school.

Teacher Quality and Academic Expectations*

My teachers do their job very well.
My teachers reward me for work that is well done.
My school expects me to master the basic skills.
My school expects me to do my best work.
My school is a good school.
I am proud of my school.
I would rather go to my school than any other.
What I learn in class will help me in later life.

** All items in this list have shown significant positive associations in at least one of the major administrations of the Valuegenesis survey instrument to denominational loyalty, faith maturity, and/or social responsibility.*

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Students in good Adventist schools say that their teachers are competent, have high expectations of their students, expect them to do their best, and reward them for work well done. These students are proud of their school and would rather attend the Adventist school than any other.

Good Adventist schools do everything they can to encourage excellent academic achievement. Some specific things that contribute to students' perceptions that the school has a good academic environment include the following:

- The school takes an aggressive posture toward faculty growth, providing encouragement for teachers to obtain advanced degrees, credentials, and continuing education.
- The school encourages active involvement of student, faculty, board, and community committees in recognizing and rewarding academic leadership by teachers. Unfortunately, many teachers quit teaching because they have no idea that their hard work really matters. Adventist schools have had the opportunity to reward teachers these past several years with the prestigious Thomas and Violet Zapara Excellence in Teaching Award. Each conference should be inundated with award nominations from its schools. But some conference

Strong relationships exist between certain school quality and effectiveness factors and youth attitudes.

committees find that they have few candidates from whom to select. The constituent community needs to be educated to look for excellence and to seek appropriate ways to communicate their awareness and appreciation.

- The school communicates frequently and regularly with parents and constituents. Newsletters, church bulletin inserts, and other forms of communication will not only inform the school community and increase involvement in activities, but also help to deepen conviction that the school deserves strong support from the constituency. Few Adventist schools utilize the local newspaper to communicate academic achievements of its students and faculty. Most local newspapers have a weekly

column entitled "Young Achievers" or something similar, which prints essentially all news supplied to it from the local schools. This is an easy and low-cost way to increase public awareness of the academic excellence at the local Adventist school.

School Climate: Warmth and Caring

My teachers care about me.
Teachers at my school listen to me.
Teachers try not to embarrass students.
At school I learn how to accept myself.
At school I learn how to care for others.

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Valuegenesis writers have voiced concern about the low warmth ratings young people have given to Adventist schools and churches.⁵ Students at effective Adventist schools say that their teachers care about them, listen to them, and try not to embarrass them. These

students are learning to accept themselves and to care about others.

How can educators and administrators in Adventist schools ensure that their schools are warm? Suggestions might include the following:

- Help students feel listened to. Look for ways that students can express their concerns and get feedback from teachers and administrators. Some schools hold public forums, while others use suggestion boxes. A "Letters to the Principal" section in the school newsletter allows students to communicate their concerns. Be sure that students get a response to their question or concern.

- Don't count only on individual teachers to set the warmth climate. Help it happen by frequently discussing it as a group. Encourage the teachers to devise plans to promote warmth in the school climate. Use ideas gleaned from articles on the subject in recent journals.⁶

- Some schools hold "Quality Circles," when teachers and students share feelings and concerns. Certain academies have "family groups" that meet on a regular basis. These kinds of interactions, which mandate respect for individual ideas and feelings, allow students to develop ties to smaller groups within the school. This helps to develop the feeling that individuals matter at the school. Other people care about them, and they have a responsibility to care about the feelings of other students.

- Let students know that the school values caring attitudes. One school in the Pacific Union has established a wonderful tradition that encourages warmth and caring among students. It is called the Golden Rule Scholarship. A local businessman donated a sizable sum for the scholarships, which are given to students each May. Four students, one from each class, are selected by the students. This school bestows no greater honor on its students than the Golden Rule Scholarship.

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Christian Impact of Teachers*

My teachers show me how to relate to God.
I learn Christian values in my classes.
I am able to talk to my teachers about God.

** Items in this list have shown significant positive associations in at least one of the major administrations of the Valuegenesis survey instrument to denominational loyalty, faith maturity, and/or social responsibility.*

“What happens within an Adventist school has a far more significant bearing on the development of loyalty and Christian commitment than does mere attendance at the school.”

Students whose Adventist school makes a difference in their lives report that their teachers show them how to relate to God. They say that they can talk to their teachers about God and that they learn Christian values in their classes. One of the most important findings of the Valuegenesis study is that youth are heavily influenced by caring adults who give of themselves and share their Christian experience.

Here are some ways that administrators can encourage this kind of Christian impact by their teachers:

- Select teachers with vibrant Christian lives. Sometimes personnel committees focus on academic preparation and experience, but do not ask, "How have you encouraged students to explore their relationships with God through your subject area?" or "How would you

respond to a student who asks about relating more effectively to God?" It is much easier to hire a caring Christian than to create one.

- Encourage your staff to be actively involved in the constituent church programs. Youth are very impressed with faculty who do not feel that their work ends on Friday when the last bell has rung. They like for their teachers to be involved with their Sabbath activities.

- Help teachers relate their subject areas and their teaching to Christianity. Provide workshops for faculty that allow for creative thinking about ways to bring Christ into every classroom.

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School Climate: Justice and Accountability*

I like the way things are done at my school.

The discipline at my school is fair.

Students have a voice in running the school.

At school I feel responsible for my actions.

I have a clear idea of the important goals of the school.

** Items in this list have shown significant positive associations in at least one of the major administrations of the Valuegenesis survey instrument to denominational loyalty, faith maturity, and/or social responsibility.*

In effective schools, students say that they are involved in the school, its goals, and discipline. They say that discipline is fair, and that they like the way things are done. They feel responsible for their actions.

Here are some suggestions to help the school foster ideals of justice and accountability:

- Keep the rules few, simple, and well-chosen. Make sure that they are published and understood by students and parents.⁷

- When disciplining, err toward repentance and mercy, letting natural consequences prevail as much as possible. For example, if a student is caught painting graffiti on a school building, a natural consequence would be for him or her to clean and repaint the wall. This would be a more effective punishment than having the student stay home

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for a week. It would also produce more positive consequences—saving work for the maintenance department, keeping

the student in the learning environment, and teaching that hard work is often necessary to correct careless deeds.

- Help students discover the principles of good leadership and governance through study of godly people and humanitarian leaders throughout history. For example, the wise leadership of Solomon provides timely principles for dealing with difficult situations today. A teacher remarked that a student was recently impressed with an essential truth after studying Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*. The student said that she now understood the danger in applying the letter of the law without looking at the intent.

- Involve students in campus governance, including the board of trustees and disciplinary committees. Even if they are not voting members, their input can be valuable. Every school has mature students who can be a great asset in school planning and administration.

Students agree that the religious pro-

Religious Programming

Percentage of students who agreed that these school activities helped develop their religious faith a fair amount or very much:

- Week of Prayer (63%)
- Bible classes (69%)
- Chapel (52%)
- Morning worship (40%)
- Community outreach (37%)

grams at their schools have a great deal of impact on their religious faith. Weekly or daily chapels or worship periods are often treated very lightly by teachers and administrators, who parcel out responsibility to staff members with little consideration for students' religious concerns and needs. Valuegenesis findings indicate that a great deal of thought should go into the planning of school religious programs. Here are some ways to enhance these programs:

- Establish teams of faculty, students, and community members to develop the overall religious curriculum of the school.
- Establish priorities and find resource people to work with the school to shape the religious life of the youth. Often local pastors are willing and eager to assist, but do not quite know how to do so. Most need to be formally invited to the school campus. Some schools supply office space on campus where local pastors can provide counseling. This increases pastors' willingness to participate in the religious curriculum and to interact with the youth. Schools can also use local conference resources, or contact La Sierra University's John Hancock Center for Youth Ministry, Riverside, CA 92515, U.S.A.
- Increase parental involvement in school religious activities. Ask them to speak for chapel or worships and to sit on planning committees.
- Involve students in religious activities. They gain the most benefit from the religious programs they help to plan and present. Often this is more work for the faculty, but it is well worth it in terms of student outcomes.

If you talk to the Adventist church

Good Adventist schools do everything they can to encourage excellent academic achievement.

members in Summerstown, they would tell you how proud they are of their little school. They would say that it has not been easy to keep everything going smoothly, but it has been worth it. The community effort to provide a good Adventist education has paid off handsomely. The youth who attended the school have distinguished themselves academically and have provided Christian leadership wherever they have gone. Those young people say that attending a good Adventist school really made the difference for them. ☞

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The story told about this school is true. The location has been changed to protect the privacy of the people involved.
2. Roger Dudley, with V. Bailey Gillespie, *Valuegenesis: Faith in the Balance* (Riverside, Calif.: La Sierra University Press, 1992), pp. 244-246.
3. *Valuegenesis: Study 1—Core Report*, South Pacific Division of Seventh-day Adventists, New South Wales, Australia, 1993.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 67. Italics supplied.
5. Gail Taylor Rice, "Have Your Hugged Your Kids Today?" *Spectrum* 22:2 (May 1992), p. 13; _____, "Warmth: The Missing Ingredient in Adventist Schools," *The Journal of Adventist Education* 55:4 (April/May 1993), p. 4; and Roger L. Dudley, with V. Bailey Gillespie, *Valuegenesis: Faith in the Balance*.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Lyell Heiss, "Applying Values," in *Project Affirmation: Perspectives on Values*, V. Bailey Gillespie, ed. (Riverside, Calif.: La Sierra University Press, 1993), p. 225.
8. South Pacific data are quoted from *Valuegenesis: Study 1—Core Report*, p. 86. North American information is from direct data analysis.