

Parochial—and Proud of it!

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“Parochial”—that’s what they used to call my school. And I was embarrassed. Somehow, *parochial* meant something “less than” where my neighbors’ kids went to school—someplace different or churchy. When people asked where I went to school, they always asked twice, saying: “Where?”

I knew my parochial school was right for me—I wanted to be there. But it made me different. Of course, I did take a summer school course at the local high school—and made the top grade—but I assumed that my competition was students who probably flunked out during the regular school year.

And then in college, I took an extra calculus course because the schedule at my parochial college only offered it once a year—and again, I did really well. But I still felt so uncomfortable that I forgot to notice that this was beginning to be a trend.

A few years later, it was time for me to enroll my children in school. By that time, I had taught in both parochial schools and “regular” schools. There was no doubt that I wanted my children in a parochial school! What a switch!

What I had discovered was that *parochial* doesn’t mean “less than” or just “Bible stuff.” It means focused, common goals; parental involvement; a community of learners where every student is known by name; multi-age environments for learning; themes of character and value woven into all subjects; whole-child development; and a community support system. (Looking back at my own experience, I sometimes felt as if the whole church was proud of me!) My “parochial” school was based on and driven by a mission—and all the teachers and parents were aware of that mission. My parents chose that mission and supported and continued it at home. What a blessing! And what a great learning environment!

Do these characteristics sound familiar? If you’ve been involved with schools over the past 15 years or so, they should remind you of the research on effective schools. These are the very kinds of characteristics that significantly affect learning. In the majority of schools, educators have found it very difficult to achieve these goals. But they are built into the definition of a parochial school.

I’m proud of my church’s “parochial” school education! And I don’t want to misrepresent my interest in “regular” schools. I want to see good education in ALL schools and, as dean of the School of Education at Andrews University, I am committed to working toward that goal. Parochial schools are not perfect, and we must work hard to take advantage of our setting.

But here’s where I stand—given the basic descriptors listed here, parochial schools have an enormous potential for excellent education. Let’s build on that potential! Let’s tell our students *why* their parents have enrolled them in a parochial school. And let’s share with parents and constituents the good things that our schools are doing. We need to highlight our educational excellence, while working to improve Adventist education.

The articles in this issue do just that. These examples of excellence are only a sample of the innovative, effective education being delivered daily in our parochial system. We’ve got the potential and the examples. Read with pride and with conviction. Let’s take full advantage of our “parochial” standing!

Dr. Karen Graham is Dean of the School of Education at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan.