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Roots and Wings

BEVERLY J. RUMBLE

Adventist schools pride themselves on educating wholistically. But what does this mean, really? Have you looked at your school's mission statement lately? Even if it mentions religion classes and worship, does it include mostly academic requirements and vague generalizations? Or does it make a specific commitment to students' overall well-being and nurture?

In the wake of heightened concern about public school security and angry, alienated kids, Adventist schools have tended to feel a bit smug that "those things don't happen here." But we dare not become complacent. Adventist students are affected by the culture in which they live. An Adventist college president told me recently that his school had had a suicide attempt and several other crises in students' lives this year, and it's only the middle of the first semester.

Schools need to consider whether some of their problems with retention and finances might not be solved by giving greater attention to students' personal problems. Our most important job may not be teaching facts but keeping students safe, holding their hands, shaping them, showing them right from wrong. Christian education is a lot more than making sure students pass college entrance tests and memorize facts in Bible class. It's not only preparation for careers but also supporting students as they learn how to live—both now and in the hereafter. This requires creating a sense of school community in which each student senses that he or she is a valued member of a group committed to everyone's growth and welfare.

The world is changing so fast, by accident and design, that everything it touches is changing—the economy, family life, interpersonal relationships, values, and expectations. How do we educate for the high-tech world of the 21st century while dealing with the basic needs that human beings have had since Creation? Teachers and administrators have to face the tension between roots and wings: keeping kids safe and grounded while letting them stretch and fly. How do we achieve a balance between the two?

We can start by seeing students as individuals, and treating them that way. Which kids are having problems at home? Which ones chafe at comparisons with their siblings' accomplishments? Which ones' parents are divorcing? Which ones are depressed because of a breakup with a girlfriend or boyfriend? Which ones seem alienated and isolated? Which ones are acting out their frustrations by teasing or bullying other students?

This requires a much broader commitment than simply making rules and penalizing students who break them. It means that teachers, guidance counselors, administrators, work supervisors, and fellow students must be trained to look for subtle signs of problems, such as declining grades, tardinesses and absences, or loss of interest in a favorite activity. It means being there when a student cries out for help—and knowing students well enough to sense when they won't or can't ask. It means having high expectations that inspire students to do their best—and praising them when they do. It means paying attention to the "average" students who don't excel at anything in particular, but don't get into trouble either. It means

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getting assistance for struggling students before they fall too far behind to catch up. But mostly, it means listening to their concerns about friends, college, jobs, family—in fact, anything that is important to them.

Teachers don't have to do all of this themselves. Students can be enlisted to do peer counseling; form student leadership groups; help with conflict mediation; and watch out for classmates who seem withdrawn or potentially violent. Every school employee should be recruited into the cause. Church members and retirees can be enlisted, too. Studies have shown that students who have a trusted adult to confide in and to take an interest in their lives are less likely to get involved with drugs and alcohol, and are more likely to feel positive about spiritual things.

The combination of positive role modeling, inspiring students to achieve, creating a positive school climate, and helping young people develop a personal relationship with Christ will make our schools all that they can be—and might just solve their financial problems as well!—B.J.R.