

# Effective Recruiting for the Long Term

By Robert Stevenson

**W**hile some school principals may feel they have an adequate number of students, most are wondering how to increase enrollment. Most K-10 or K-12 principals wear many hats. However, they usually discover that one expectation was left out of their Master's degree program—that of head recruiter. They learned about curriculum, discipline, learning styles, finance, school law, and the importance of infusing spirituality throughout the program—but when did their training ever mention recruitment?

What do they do? Wait for the board chairman to call and ask how they plan to increase enrollment? Wouldn't it be a good idea to have a recruitment strategy to offer right there on the phone?

With a concerted effort, most schools can increase their enrollment, but it takes organization and a systematic approach. Here are some steps to help you set up a program that will attract more students.

## Develop a Team

Teamwork is central to recruiting. The principal can make a significant impact alone, but when recruiting becomes a commu-

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nity effort, a school can experience significant growth within two years. You may not need to start from scratch—recruiting can become part of the responsibility of each board member. The school board is a natural for this assignment, since each member represents some portion of the school's constituency.

If school board members are not the right choice for recruiters, you will need to assemble a team; recruiting is not a one-person job. To ensure success, the principal and the pastor(s) of the school's constituent churches must be involved. Everyone on the team must play an active role in bringing students into your school.

## Who Should Recruit for Your School?

Although the principal should play an active role in recruiting, he or she should be used sparingly and strategically. If the principal is spending large amounts of time away from the school in order to recruit students, his or her other duties may suffer, detracting from the overall quality of the school program.

The principal's role in recruiting includes organizing quality programs such as open houses and performances, and encouraging students to stay after the programs so the recruiters get them in the door. Principals can also make a positive impact in home visitation once an interest is expressed.

Although it's a tempting to ask the principal to be in charge of the recruiting committee, this is not a good idea. Both recruiting

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**Promote the good things that are happening in your school—good teachers, high test scores, performing groups, intramural sports, etc.—as you seek to recruit new students.**

and school administration will benefit if the recruiting committee chair is someone from the community. By keeping recruiting outside of the ebb and flow of administrative changes, enrollment will be less likely to fluctuate with changes in school leadership.

Teachers make good recruiters, too. During vacations, if given a small stipend and gas money, many of them will probably be willing to visit potential students and their families or make a brief presentation at local churches. Having the constituency get better acquainted with your teachers will serve as good public relations for your school.

Pastors, like principals, are crucial to the recruiting effort and should be used in a thoughtful way. The pastor should be seen as the head recruiter for the local congregation and should help identify possible students from within his or her church. Home visits are most effective when the pastor and principal go together to show their combined concern for the students being recruited.

### **Reassess Your Mission Statement**

Every school should have a mission statement. Make sure yours is current and still serves the school well.

The recruiting committee should analyze the school program and compare it to the mission statement to see if the two are compatible. If the school program is out of sync with the mission statement, recruiters will often find themselves having to defend school activities and programs to the community. Before beginning a recruitment program, the school board and staff, in consultation with

## **Teamwork is central to recruiting.**

parents, students, and constituents, should make any changes necessary to bring the school program in line with the mission statement.

In most cases, a school with a well-stated and well-implemented mission statement does not have to struggle for students. Inconsistency between the mission statement and the actual program or failure to understand the mission of the school can cause the students to either leave or not attend a school at all.

### **Analyze the School Programs**

Ask yourself, What is happening in our school that could be used for recruiting students—i.e., good teachers; high test scores; performing groups like choir, band, and Christian drama; athletic programs; or intramural sports? Analyze whether the programs help or harm the school. Does everything you do align with your mission statement? Be sure everyone involved with the school—teachers, staff, board, local pastors, etc.—understand that they are part of an overall recruiting strategy and know how they fit into that strategy. As you develop ideas for recruiting students, all these people must understand why students should attend your school.

An illustration of the need for consistency between recruiting and a mission statement happened a few years ago when one of our colleges featured a gymnastic program as part of their college-day program. The issue was not the quality of the performance but the fact that the program had an entirely secular focus. The public-relations nightmare that followed far outweighed any positive press coverage the program may have generated. If you claim to offer a

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Schools need to brainstorm in order to find creative methods of recruiting students, such as giving first-month-free tuition vouchers at baby dedications in local churches.

Christ-centered program, your school activities must be Christ-centered.

Do a survey of your parents and constituents to see how the school is perceived. Ask about the quality of the curriculum and instruction, the attitudes of staff and teachers, the registration procedures, facilities, before- and after-school programs, assistance for students with special needs, extracurricular activities, campus regulations, discipline and grievance procedures.

Once you've analyzed and adjusted your school program, it's time for the recruiting team to identify your market and determine how to reach these students. Here are some questions you must ask before you start: Do we want to recruit from outside our religious

constituency? What kind of student do we want to recruit? What grade levels do we need to fill first?

#### **Create an Action Plan**

The recruiting committee must develop innovative ways to attract students. Listed below are a few ideas that have worked in the past. Be sure to use a multi-level approach and continually analyze what works and what doesn't.

1. Have the school board members from the various constituent churches identify and collect names, telephone numbers, and addresses of members' children not attending your school and then contact them individually. Often, people are just waiting to be invited to place their children in your school.

## **Recruiting is not a one-person job.**

Enter these families' names into a data base, and make sure they are contacted at least three times a year until they enroll their students in your school.

2. Ask each constituent church to schedule an annual Christian education weekend when school groups can perform and students can give testimonials about what Christian education has done for them.

3. Plan and advertise at least one school open house every year when potential students and their parents can visit and take part in your program.

4. Hand out *invitation vouchers* for new pupils to visit the school when you are visiting the homes of potential students.

5. Hand out *first-month-free tuition vouch-*

ers to the parents of children dedicated at your constituent churches.

6. Make sure that when a group from your school performs at a local church, students have the opportunity to share positive school experiences and testimonies with the audience.

7. Have a group call households with potential students to administer a simple questionnaire that helps identify why their children are not attending. Use this information to develop a data base that can be used in recruiting these students.

8. Have the local pastor(s) and the principal do in-home visits, encouraging parents to send their children to the school.

9. Share information about your school's program and activities with the local churches.

10. Prepare regular reports of what is happening at your school for the mission segment of local churches' Sabbath school

programs. Make sure your school is featured in every edition of local churches' newsletters, and in the local media and union paper. As often as possible, identify and praise people who have helped recruit students for your school.

*Know your market:* To expand your recruitment, serve your constituency well. Know what your constituents want from the school, and see that their expectations are met. Any school administrator who tries to implement a vision too far out of line with the expectations of his or her constituency places the school in dangerous territory, in terms of recruiting.

*Follow through:* Once your committee has outlined a recruitment plan, see that each part is delegated to a specific person and entered on a calendar. The committee chairperson must call regular meetings to evaluate the program's success and to keep all members of the committee motivated

and on task. For the plan to succeed, each member of the team must be strongly committed to ensuring that the school is presented in a positive light. Marketing efforts are only as good as the weakest link in the recruiting team. Although every member of the team is important, its success depends on the support of the pastor(s), the principal, and faculty.

*Train the team:* Once you have a strategy and mission statement, you must train your team. A poorly orchestrated plan can cause more problems than no plan at all. Pastor(s), students, teachers, and the principal should be represented on the team.

Members of the board and community will also play a key part in this program. When the team makes telephone calls or personal contacts to recruit students, they should know what to say and how to act. Review with team members every aspect of the process, from the content of the educa-

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Having the local pastors and the principal do in-home visits with families of potential students can be an effective method of increasing the school's enrollment.

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tion sermons preached in church to the script used by the people running the telethon. Through collaborative effort, develop a plan that presents the school in a professional and positive light. As the plan is implemented, schedule regular round-table evaluations to see what is working and what is not.

*Make it institutional:* It is part of our denominational reality that school principals and pastors are a transient part of the local community. For a recruiting program to be successful, long term, it must become a fixture in the school/community culture. Lay members should be invited to become part of the recruitment team and school board. It takes a lot of work to get a systematic recruiting program running, but once it is in operation, it will develop a life of its own if recruiting guidelines become part of both the school board and school constitution bylaws.

Student recruitment and retention are ultimately the responsibility of the school board and constituent church(es). They can collaborate with and support the school's efforts by making it their mission to see that every possible student is enrolled in the church school.

When the school raises money through fairs and other fund-raising programs, the recruiting organization should be represented. It can help raise money to supplement the school's recruiting budget.

## In Closing

Do not expect an immediate and dramatic increase in enrollment the first year of your recruiting program. Give the program

time to develop. The largest increase will occur within two years and then continue incrementally until you reach your community's enrollment potential. Recruiting students must remain an ongoing and systematic part of your school program, even when enrollment peaks. Consistent recruiting efforts will help keep enrollment up. If you neglect this important area, constituents will become less convinced of the importance of Christian education, and enrollment will drop.

**T**he preceding ideas do not represent an exhaustive list of recruiting strategies. They are only meant to get you started designing an ongoing and continual process for marketing your school. Remember that in order for any program to succeed, everyone involved must be willing and capable of fulfilling his or her responsibilities. As your team reviews the needs and culture of your community, you will be able

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to develop a custom-tailored plan. While being systematic in your approach, you should not be dogmatic in your methodology. Review the plan regularly, and make adjustments as needed.

As with every good plan at a Christian school, keep in mind that you are enrolling students so they will find Christ. As your team shares the belief that Adventist education can be a catalyst for Christian growth, your school will grow. ☞

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