

# “ONCE UPON A TIME”

## What Valuegenesis<sup>2</sup> Says About the Quality of Adventist Schools

**W**e all remember those wonderful stories that began “Once upon a time. . .” Such captivating language! These words transport us to another world, a world that, though past, still exists. Once upon a time, God created—and redeemed (Genesis 1:1, 2; Matthew 1:18-21). “In God’s creating was redemption, and in God’s redeeming was creation.” God acted on this Earth, and it has never been the same. Christians throughout the centuries have recognized that God’s actions provide the motivation for human devotion and response. God’s creating and redemption is what pulls us toward the kingdom of God.

The basic challenge that grows out of these facts is this: *How does the religious community live in faithfulness to its past and in openness to its present and future?* This question is at the core of our religious-education endeavors—whether in schools, colleges, and universities; or in our homes and churches. Both we and our children live in God’s world, but a world in which the Enemy has made terrible inroads. Adventist educators are forced to face up to this unique paradox: Should our teaching transmit the tradition or seek to enable the creative interpretation and reconstruction of present experience? Do we stress the continuity of the Christian community or try to

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maximize the potential for change? Somewhere in between, we will find the answers.

Adventists want quality schooling. Parents demand it, and accrediting associations expect it. The church wants to fund quality; it is required for good stewardship, and for serving God and humanity. Christian education involves the continual effort to understand the faith both as a historic heritage and as a set of principles that inform contemporary thinking. This requires teachers who can transmit the life and thought of the community of the faithful and acquaint students with the Son of God, who made it all possible. Adventist educators strive for Christian maturity in themselves and in their students. No compromises or excuses can be accepted.

### What Do Our Students Say

#### About Adventist Education?

The students enrolled in Adventist education who responded to our Valuegenesis<sup>2</sup> research survey<sup>2</sup> gave us some interesting insights into the positive attributes of their schools and what needs change in order to make them more relevant to student needs. They provided specific insights into what they perceived as a quality learning experience.

Eight positive school influences are cited in our latest book, *Valuegenesis 10 Years Later: A Study of Two Generations*.<sup>3</sup> They center on the

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themes of *quality teaching*, *Adventist values*, and *school climate influences*. We noticed that schools that stress these areas have a significant influence on a number of important religious qualities we desire in our students' lives. For example, faith maturity, intrinsic faith development, and commitment to the Adventist Church all benefit from focusing on those positive influences. Let me get even more specific.

### Quality Teaching

Three scales provide the information about these influences. Teachers who are seen as competent, caring, and supportive provide the best possible nurture to young people. Adventist schools are particularly blessed with many quality teachers who are certified and well-trained. But do they refrain from "putting down" students and treat them with

respect, one important indicator of a nurturing teacher? Forty-nine percent of the students in our survey had some doubt about this, but in response to another question, a clear 61 percent agreed that teachers respected them.

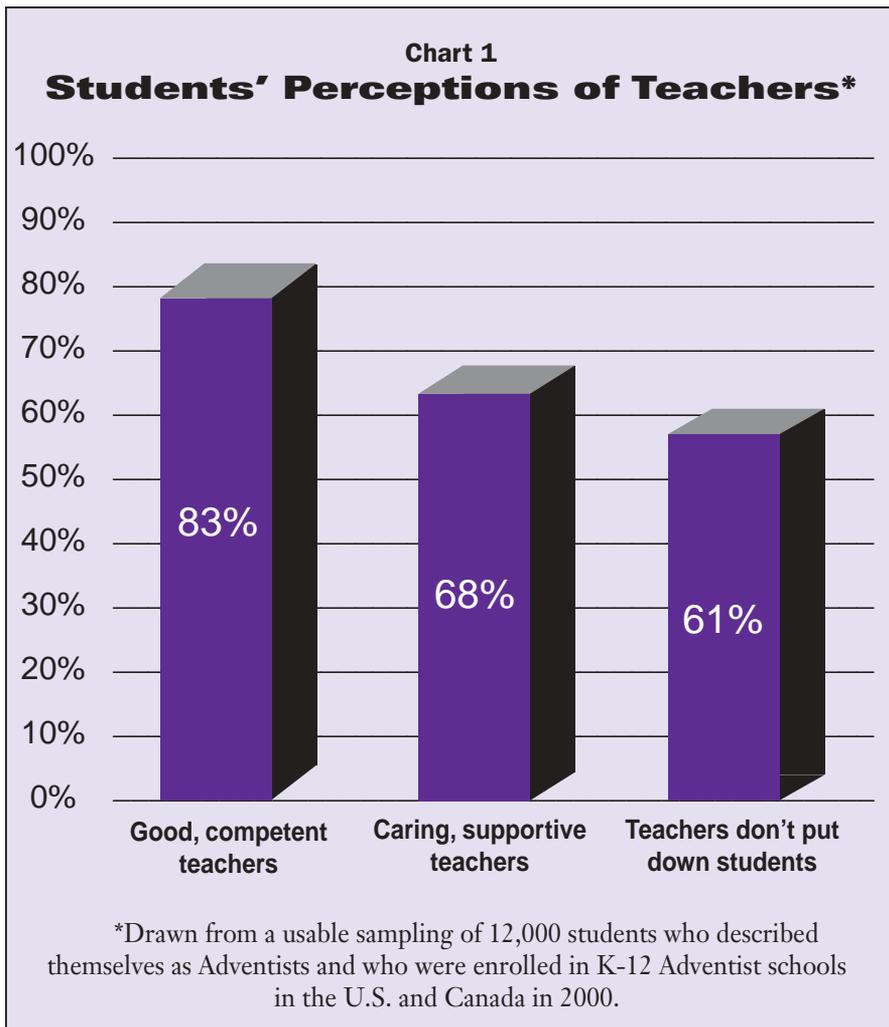
Quality teaching provides the best environment in which to share the grace of God, as it models the kingdom of God and His righteousness. By their attitudes and practices, teachers can communicate God's character and concerns. When faculties take seriously their demeanor and communication with students, they enhance the possibility that their pupils will benefit from the value-added experience of Christian education. In Chart 1, notice the percentages of more than 12,000 Adventist young people who saw their teachers as both competent and caring.

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### Adventist Values

While the home is the first and foremost place where Adventist values are shared, learned, and applied, we believe that church schools should reinforce students' commitment to Adventism's core beliefs, such as Sabbath keeping, modesty, purity, and healthful living. Schools can be a clear help here if they reinforce these values in a clear, loving, and grace-oriented way. This maxim also applies to the home, where understanding of popular culture issues begins and where primary support is very important.

Another indicator of the quality of schools is whether students are regularly exposed to teachers' faith talk. This produces a strong clarification and reinforcement of our Adventist mission and purpose, something that is missing in public education. Since many of our church's baptisms are directly related to schools, the role of teachers in inspiring commitment to Jesus cannot be overemphasized. Sixty-four percent of the young people in our study saw their schools as encouraging students to make positive choices in the area of the Adventist way of life. And more than half, 59 percent, of those same students said they felt free to talk to their teachers about their faith.



## School Climate Influences

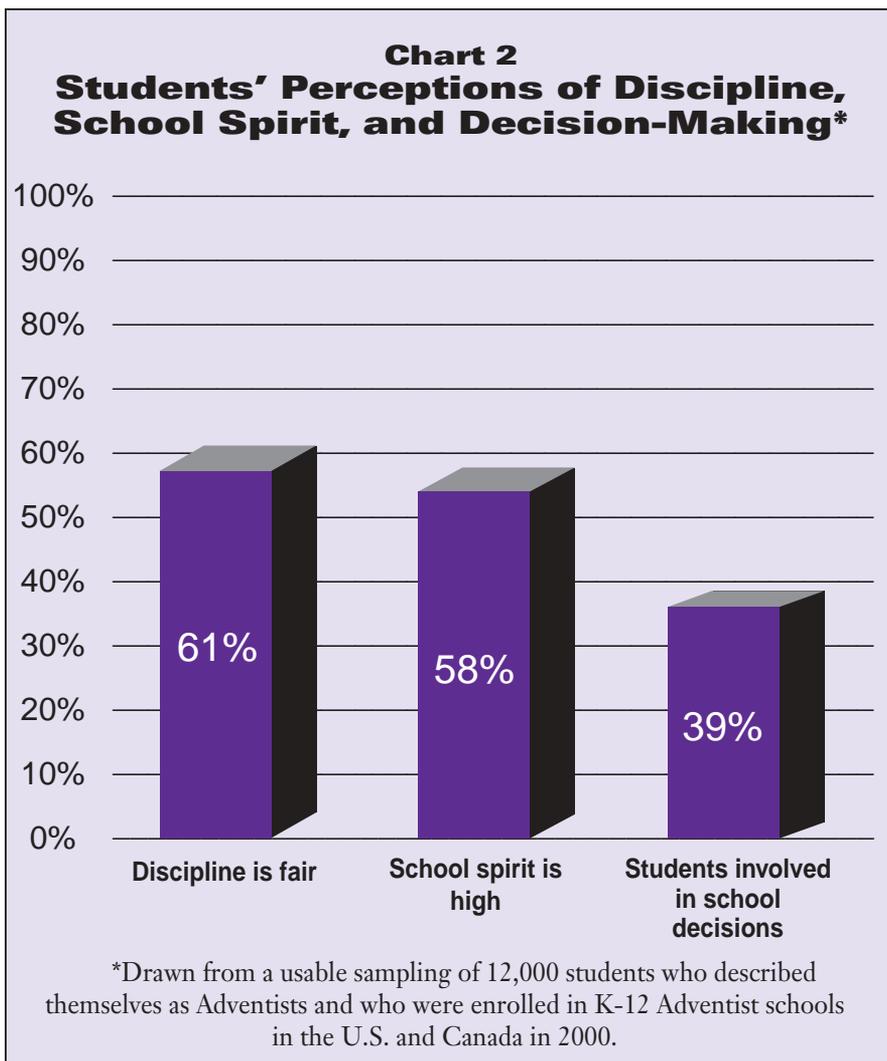
Combine Adventist values with climate influences in institutions that promote school spirit and involvement in educational decisions, and you have a positive Christian influence that only Adventist schools can provide. While standards relating to popular culture (dancing, movies, jewelry, etc.) and substance abuse are not as successfully transmitted in our schools, according to our research, the method of administering discipline is very crucial. This maxim also applies to the home, where understanding of popular culture issues begins.

In Adventist schools, discipline must be seen as fair and as a reflection of God's love and grace. This is not a plea for permissiveness; rather, it's a clear call for careful review of the discipline policies in Adventist schools to ensure that they are always

applied in a fair and equal way. Chart 2 shows the percentages for the posi-

tive school influences in the school-climate category.

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## How Much Quality?

No school is perfect, so it is both interesting and helpful to see just how often the students experienced “a lot” of these positive influences. About a fourth of the young people did. But 39 percent said they experienced these influences less than half of the time. So we still have a lot of work to do. And while our schools’ effectiveness in the areas of transmitting Adventist values, school climate, and the quality of teaching (from the students’ point of view) is good, we must never feel smug. This information is presented here so Adventist teachers and administrators can help stimulate change.

What would it be like if we did it right? “Once upon a time, our school. . .”? You finish that sentence. Blending creation with redemption. Growing mature Christians. Representing Christ explicitly. Meeting student needs. Challenging them to make godly choices. The quality of Adventist education is directly related to how well we understand God’s work in our own lives. The research calls for improvement. It calls us to understand more and work harder. It asks us to make “Once upon a time. . .” right now! ✍



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Center for Youth and Family Ministry. He is the chief researcher for the Valuegenesis project, a term coined for the two studies of Adventist youth in grades 6 through 12. The first Valuegenesis study, in 1990, dealt with faith, values, and commitment. In the 2000-2001 school year, a follow-up study was completed. Some 11,000 students, as well as teachers and parents, participated in the first study; more than 16,000 students filled out survey forms in the latest research. These students in Adventist schools answered questionnaires containing more than 500 survey questions about their

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schools, faith maturity, intrinsic and extrinsic religion, their parents, and many other subjects relating to how they live out their faith in their homes, schools, and churches. The findings in this article are drawn from that research.

out the North American Division (U.S. and Canada) in 2000 who described themselves as Seventh-day Adventists. We also surveyed a large number of non-Adventist young people in grades 6-12.

3. Information for this article was in part based on the chapter entitled "The Sum of the Matter: Discovering Positive Influences" in V. Bailey Gillespie, Michael J. Donahue, Ed Boyatt, and Barry Gane, *Valuegenesis 10 Years Later: A Study of Two Generations* (Lincoln, Neb.: AdventSource and Hancock Center Publications, 2004), pp. 317-335. To get your own copy of the new Valuegenesis' book, go to the Hancock Center Website: <http://www.lasierra.edu/centers/hcyfm> or e-mail [hcyfm@lasierra.edu](mailto:hcyfm@lasierra.edu). If you would like our free *Valuegenesis UPDATE E-Letter* every other month, just send us your e-mail address.

### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Mary Elizabeth Moore, *Education for Continuity and Change: A New Model for Christian Religious Education* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1983), p. 13.

2 The Valuegenesis' survey information used in this article includes only usable responses from students enrolled in grades 6-12 through-

### Chart 3 What Students Say About Their Schools\*

("Strongly agree" + "Agree": 3 and 4 on a 4-point scale)	Junior High School†	High School**
Youth ministry programs are meaningful for me at my school.	60%	64%
There is real school spirit.	57%	56%
Discipline is fair.	62%	59%
The teaching is good.	84%	81%
Teachers are interested in students.	80%	81%
When students work hard on schoolwork, teachers praise their efforts.	75%	77%
Teachers listen to what their students say.	77%	73%
I like my school.	70%	75%

### Chart 4 Influences on Students' Faith\*

Question: How much has the following helped you develop your religious faith? ("Very much" or 5 on a 5-point scale)

	Junior High School†	High School**
• Weekly worships at school	17%	9%
• Bible classes at school	23%	20%
• Weeks of Prayer at school	29%	28%
• Student Weeks of Prayer at school	24%	28%
• Bible/Leadership Camps through school	21%	26%
• The Bible teacher	22%	22%
• Teacher's faith	22%	15%
• Attending an Adventist school	38%	33%

† 7th- and 8th-grade students

\*\* 9th- to 12th-grade students