

INGREDIENTS OF THE MOST SUCCESSFUL SCHOOLS

IN THE NORTH AMERICAN DIVISION

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What ingredients make Seventh-day Adventist schools effective? Do the most successful elementary and secondary schools in the North American Division (NAD) share any elements in common? In the public sector, much attention has focused on what has come to be called “effective schools.” However, beyond anecdotes, we have until recently known little about the unique and shared ingredients of successful Adventist schools.

In the 1960s, some researchers and politicians even questioned whether schools made much of a difference in student success. James Coleman’s famous 1966 study of 4,000 U.S. schools concluded that family background characteristics such as poverty and the parents’ lack of education were far more powerful predictors of student achievement than any school-level factors such as classroom size, teacher preparation and salaries, or number of books in the school library.¹ The conclusion: The school could do little to overcome family deficiencies.

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However, since the 1970s and 1980s, the “effective schools” movement has argued that the way a school is operated can contribute to the success of its students—a premise accepted by the author of this article. The “No Child Left Behind” initiatives of the U.S. Department of Education and passed by Congress similarly assume that schools can make a difference.

A 2002 survey tried to capture a snapshot of what makes an Adventist school successful. The nine NAD union directors of education were asked to nominate the three most successful schools in

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their territory—an elementary school, a day academy, and a boarding academy. Personnel in the NAD Office of Education were asked to nominate three successful schools they had observed throughout the division. (The definition of “success” was determined by each respondent.)

The principal and business manager of each nominated school were asked to respond to several open-ended questions through an e-mail poll conducted by the author, with 35 schools and academies responding. The respondents were not asked to give comprehensive responses but simply to provide quick impressions. While the scientific basis of these results may be questioned, they do provide a basis for comparison with the findings of secular “effective schools” research. Using these findings, Adventist school faculty and boards can then be encouraged to grade themselves on these ingredients. When combined with “best practices” identified in the NAD Office of Education “Journey to Excellence” program, which updates the earlier AE21 report, Adventist schools can become even more successful.²

Here are the results from three crucial questions about what contributes to the success of Adventist education:

1. What five ingredients have most contributed to the success of your school?

Top 13 Ingredients

(in order of priority)³

1. Strong Christ-centered spiritual emphasis with God at the heart of the school
2. Service/caring orientation
3. Stability and reputation of faculty/staff
4. Strong financial planning/management
5. Constituency that values Christian education
6. High scholastic excellence/expectations
7. Stability and strength of administration
8. Shared mission/vision
9. Supportive school board
10. Conference support



11. Cohesive administration and staff
12. Pastors who actively promote Adventist education
13. Strong extracurricular programs in music, art, and sports

The spiritual component of successful Adventist schools is paramount for their success. Having a Christ-centered program focused on service and caring are crucial elements. Strong support from the constituency, pastor, and conference is also a major component. The remaining ingredients are the same as might be expected for any school.

Readers might expect that many of the identified successful schools would be large institutions located in Adventist centers. While that is true of some of them, many smaller schools have operated successful programs for many years, indicating that the ingredients for success can be applied to any school, regardless of size.

One principal created a model of successful schools using “The Five C’s of Academic SuCCCCCess”: Christ-likeness, Collegiality, Camaraderie, Competence, and Communication.⁴

2. What financial characteristics most contribute to your school's success?

Top 13 Characteristics

(in order of priority)⁵

1. Creating and sticking to a balanced budget
2. Consistent collection procedures
3. Strong church subsidies
4. Supportive conference
5. Generous worthy-student fund
6. Profit-making school industries/work program
7. A full-time development director
8. Alumni
9. Hiring dedicated and competent financial personnel
10. Ability to say "no"
11. Union support
12. Strong enrollment
13. Donors

Once again, support from the church, conference, and union are clearly vital, along with characteristics one would expect for any school such as a balanced budget, consistent collection procedures, and competent professionals to oversee the financial program. While this issue was not raised by the survey, the author has concerns about combining the roles of principal and business manager, since few principals have professional financial training. In most cases, the principal will not really be in charge of the school unless the problems relating to holding the dual title can be alleviated through carefully written job descriptions.

Another key premise of the survey was the importance of relationships for successful schools.

3. What relationships make your school successful?

Top 11 Relationships⁶

(in order of priority)

1. School/parents
 2. Faculty/staff with students
 3. Alumni
 4. School relationship with local pastors
 5. Local church/constituency
 6. Adjacent higher education and/or hospital connection
 7. Conference
 8. Happy students as best recruiters for school
 9. A united administration/faculty
 10. Community
 11. Faculty/student/parent
- Besides successful relationships between

students and staff, and between the school and its alumni, which are important for any educational institution, a church-operated school must develop a strong relationship with its sponsoring church and/or conference, and with local pastors. This will require cooperation and effort by both school administrators and pastors.

Picture Removed

Comparisons Between the “Effective Schools” Movement and Survey Results

Despite Coleman’s negative view of schools’ potential impact on students, mentioned earlier, researchers were surprised to discover that some schools did better than others in low-income areas. As a result, educators such as Lawrence W. Lezotte, Wilbur Brookover, and Ronald Edmonds organized what came to be called the Effective Schools Movement, promoting the idea that while family factors are important predictors of student success, certain correlates can help schools become more effective in helping overcome or maximize the environment from which their students come.⁷

While many models could be offered, we will focus here on a model closely associated with the research of Edmonds and Lezotte. According to their research, seven practices are present in effective schools:⁸

1. *A safe and orderly environment*
2. *Climate of high expectations for success*

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3. *Strong instructional leadership and emphasis*
4. *Clear and focused mission*
5. *Opportunity to learn and student time on task*
6. *Frequent monitoring of student progress*
7. *Constructive home and school relations*

Four of the seven correlates highlighted in this research also appear in the surveys of Adventist educational administrators. They include a focus on high expectations, a strong faculty, a clear mission, and good home/school relations (from the relationship survey question).

Missing from the Adventist list is emphasis on a safe and orderly environment. Perhaps this trait is present in most Adventist schools so it is taken for granted. However, more em-

phasis should be placed on two other ingredients in the effective schools list that are missing from the Adventist results. *An instructional focus* needs to receive more attention by administrators, including time on task and frequent monitoring of student progress. Adventist admin-



istrators can get so focused on the “nitty gritty” of running the school and relating to various constituencies that at times the main reason students are in school—to learn—gets taken for granted. However, success in this area is essential in order for parents to have confidence in Adventist education.

Adventist schools are strong in many areas. We can learn from the practices of the most successful schools, public and private, to make further improvements. ✍



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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. James S. Coleman and others, *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1966; James Coleman, *Equality and Achievement in Education (Social Inequality)* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, Reprint ed. 1993).

2. As part of the “Beyond the Bottom Line” seminar organized by Norm Klam held in Loma Linda, California, on March 11-12, 2002, Dick Duerksen and Dick Osborn were asked to present a breakout session on “Successful Schools Can Happen.” This survey was prepared as part of the seminar presentation. Since many business managers responded, the results may be skewed somewhat toward financial considerations.

3. Other ingredients of successful schools mentioned include:

- a. Parents who want to be involved in the school
- b. Viable strategic plan
- c. Steady growing enrollment
- d. Prayer
- e. Strong, profit-producing industry
- f. Good, well-maintained physical facility
- g. Good relationship with local higher educational institution and hospital
- h. Communication
- i. High confidence level of local constituency in the school
- j. Recruitment of non-Adventists
- k. Full-time pastor/chaplain focused on spiritual development
- l. Admissions policy ranking a student’s spiritual growth as important as educational growth with required interviews
- m. School spirit
- n. Financial reserves
- o. Running the best possible program
- p. Hire a staff with strong mission orientation
- q. Large population base upon which to draw
- r. Connection to large international market
- s. Reputation as a school for those intending to go to college
- t. Friendly, open student body
- u. Union support
- v. Excellent board leadership
- w. Teacher belief in school and marketing it to the community
- x. Meeting wide diversity of cultural needs
- y. Community partnerships
- z. Resource help for students with learning differences
- aa. Character-based education
- bb. Selective admissions
- cc. Location

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dd. Music program

ee. Student residence halls

4. “The 5 C’s of Academic SuCCCEss”:

(1) **Christlikeness** - We see Christ as the *raison d’être* of our school.

If He is first and foremost in all we do, He enables us to be successful. Some of the ways we focus on the spiritual component of our school is through regular pastoral involvement in worships, and our school is probably one of the few junior academies that employs a full-time chaplain. This ensures we have a very active student outreach program. We also pray for the individual students in staff worship as their name is chosen on a daily basis. There are many other ways, but the instructions were to keep it short. When the spiritual welfare of the students is put foremost and a relationship with Christ is emphasized, great things can happen.

(2) **Collegiality** - We encourage the staff to see each other in a positive light and to work together for the best interests of the students. By focusing on teamwork we can accomplish much more than working individually. This is one of the better staffs that I have worked with, but we still have to work on this area since each teacher has individual likes and dislikes.

(3) **Camaderie** - Another major focus is to have the students work and play together. A real family culture has been developed over the last several years and so students in each grade from K-10 feel comfortable with each other grade level. In fact, we had a student write a school song for us a couple of years ago, which she called the “_____ School Family.”

(4) **Competence** - We strive to achieve academic excellence in all we do. If students are not doing well in standardized testing, we address the issue and work together as a staff to find new strategies to address the areas of weakness. Each teacher takes the responsibility seriously to develop these skills at their level.

(5) **Communication** - It is vital to have communication between the school administration and the students, staff, and parents. We recognize that information can be easily forgotten, so we try to make each announcement at least 2 - 3 times in different formats.

5. Other financial characteristics included:

- a. Endowment fund
- b. Funding of depreciation
- c. Preschool income
- d. Pong-range planning
- e. Constituent churches that believe in and help finance the school
- f. Government grants
- g. Careful budgeting for capital development
- h. Charging the actual cost of education rather than discounting tuition
- i. No child denied admission solely due to a lack of money
- j. Board policies on delinquent tuition payments and receivables
- k. Student-organized “Fun Run” to raise money for worthy student program
- l. Strangers placed by God in the right place, at the right time, willing to provide financial support for our students
- m. A principal and business manager who are on the same page
- n. Staff accountability for their budgets
- o. Attention to details
- p. Growing support base
- q. Conservative approach toward spending
- r. Auto donations program

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- s. Parents paying on time
- t. Increasing student enrollment
- u. Good student/teacher ratio
- v. On-campus auxiliary services that help provide finances
- w. Quality program that justifies the tuition and fees that parents pay
- x. Strong volunteer program of coaches
- 6. Other relationships included:
 - a. School board's trust in divine leading
 - b. Mentoring program of 11th and 12th graders with elementary students
 - c. Principal is a member of the local ministerial council
 - d. Joint mission trips with nearby Adventist schools

- e. Active Home and School Association
- f. School board
- g. Schools groups performing in local community
- h. Regular meetings between the adjacent junior and senior academy principal
- i. Involvement of boarding academy in providing worships and reading program at our elementary school
- j. Student/principal
- k. Members of international community who recruit from their home countries
- l. Teachers willing to do many extracurricular activities outside class
- m. Active involvement in local Christian school association
- n. Teacher focus on Christ
- o. Staff/administration
- p. Parents/administration
- q. Administration/board
- r. Regular principal conversation about our spiritual corporate portrayal of Christ on campus
- s. Union
- t. Student advisee groups with faculty advisors
- u. Regular communication with constituency



- v. Community work placements

7. Willard Daggett, a frequent speaker at Adventist meetings and the leader of the International Center for Leadership in Education, suggests in "Center Mentor," No. 2 (October 2003) the following characteristics of successful schools based on schools visits, interviews, class observations, personal experiences, research, and literature:

a. There is a strong belief in and commitment to the concept that "all students will achieve"—not can but *will* achieve.

b. Curricula and instruction are standards-based, and the administration and staff hold high expectations for achievement by all students.

c. Data is collected in an organized and purposeful fashion and used to make instructional decisions at the school and individual student level.

d. The teaching staff is competent in subject-matter, knowledge, pedagogy, classroom management skills, and ability to relate positively to students and fellow faculty members.

e. The principal is an active and respected leader who promotes the idea that all students will achieve and sets high expectations for students and school staff.

f. The health and safety of students and school staff are addressed within a caring environment.

g. Parental and community involvement are regarded as vital to the school's effective operation.

8. Lawrence W. Lezotte, "Correlate of Effective Schools: The First and Second Generation," Effective Schools Products, Ltd., Okemos, Mich., 1991.