

BY GUSTAVO GREGORUTTI

# Trends Influencing in Adventist K-12 Schools

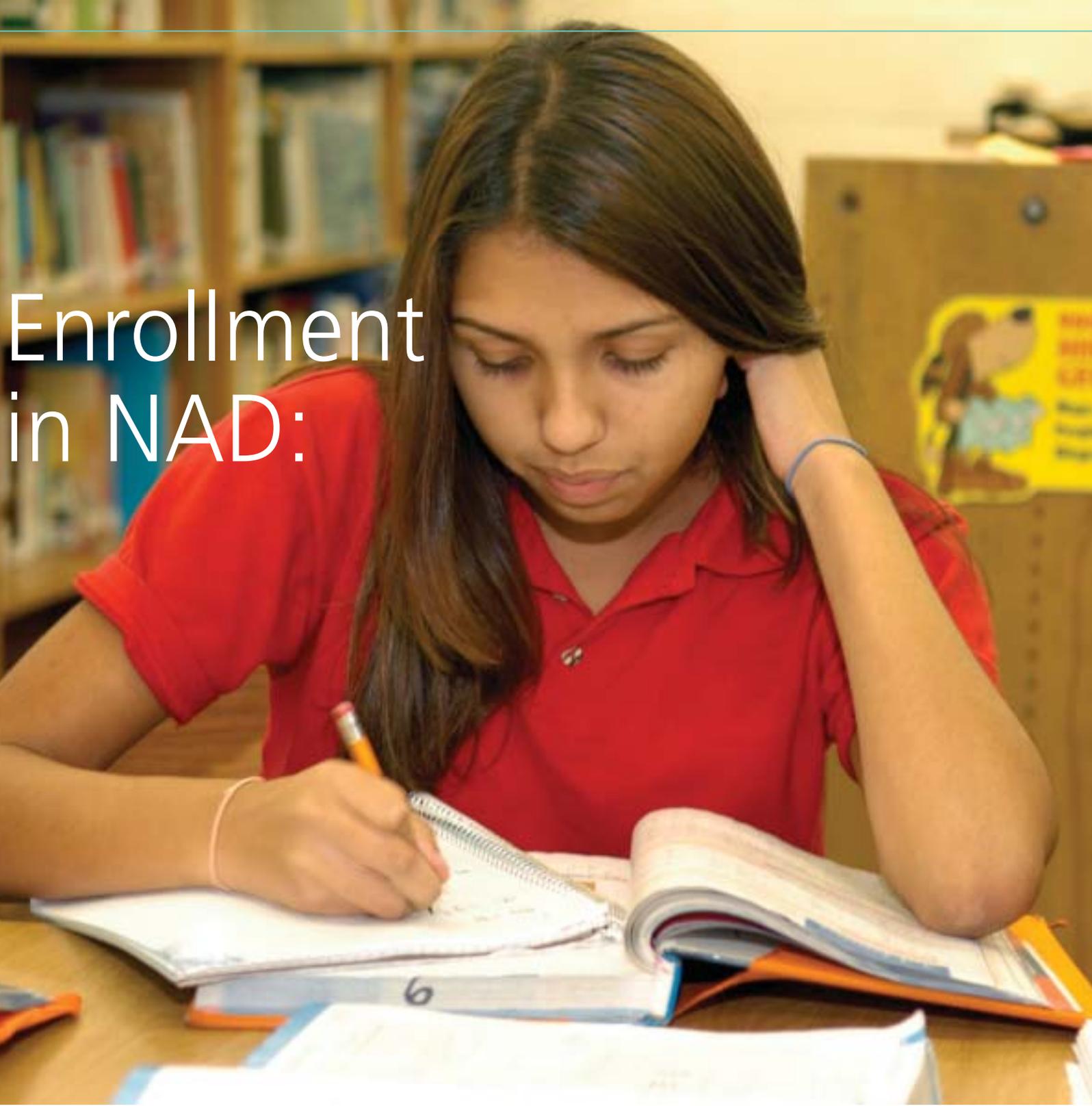
## A Review of the Literature

Since soon after their denomination was organized in 1862, Seventh-day Adventists have promoted parochial education as a means to acquire knowledge within a Christian worldview. Training young people for the mission of sharing the good news of salvation to others was and is a major driving force in the development of a fast-growing international kindergarten through graduate-level system of education.

While Adventist Church membership has grown in North America, enrollment in Adventist K-12 schools, particularly by church members' children, has consistently declined since the 1980s. Table 1 on page 13 illustrates that between 1980 and 2005, K-8 enrollment decreased by 10,594 students (20 percent) and 9-12 enrollment decreased by approximately 5,458 students (26 percent), for an overall K-12 decline of 16,052 students (22 percent), according to the 2005 North American Division Annual Reports.<sup>1</sup> These trends were most severe for K-8. Between 1980 and 2000, K-8 enrollment declined by approximately 5,058 students, or about 10 percent. From 2000 to 2005, K-8 enrollment declined by 5,536 students, or

about 11.5 percent in just five years. Enrollment in grades 9-12 had a large decrease from 1980 to 2000 of approximately 4,944 students, or 24 percent. From 2000 to 2005, grades 9-12 enrollment fluctuated, but overall decreased by a few hundred students.

By contrast, enrollment at most U.S. private and church-affiliated schools has increased in the past few years. According to the 2003 *Projections of Education Statistics to 2013* report by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), private elementary and secondary enrollment increased 18 percent between 1988 and 2001 and was projected to increase another 7 percent between 2001 and 2013.<sup>2</sup>



# Enrollment in NAD:

According to the *Private School Universe Survey 1999-2000*, conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau and published by NCES,<sup>3</sup> conservative Christian schools experienced an incredible increase in enrollment during the 1990s. The approximately 245,000 students in

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those schools accounted for more than 75 percent of the total increase in enrollment at private schools during that decade. Enrollment at Episcopalian and nonsectarian schools increased by 37 and 26 percent, respectively. During the same period, churches whose schools had negative enrollment trends included Calvinist, Catholic, Lutheran, and Seventh-day Adventist.

*The Condition of Education 2007*,<sup>4</sup> the latest NCES report on trends in private schools enrollment, shows that by 2003-2004 (the latest figures available), the enrollment in private schools had declined from 5.3 to 5.1 million students. The distribution of students across different types of private schools had shifted, with Catholic schools losing students overall. However, the percentage of children enrolled in conservative Christian schools (Adventists are part of this classification) increased from 11 to 15 percent. Non-

## What factors might have caused these enrollment declines in Adventist schools?

sectarian schools grew from 13 to 18 percent during the same period of time.

A word should be said here regarding demographic changes resulting from the aging baby-boomer population and related household structural trends. According to Fields, the portion of married couples with children declined from 40 percent of all households in 1970 to 23 percent in 2003. These children represented 26 percent of the U.S. population, a proportion that was essentially unchanged from 1990 but down from 36 percent in 1960.<sup>5</sup>

These changes are an important demographic trend that may have affected enrollment in Adventist schools. However, enrollment attrition in the church's NAD K-12 schools has been steeper than the

demographic changes (see Table 1). Furthermore, in recent years, there has been a decrease in the actual number of Adventist children enrolled in K-12 schools in NAD, as well as their percentage of the total school enrollment. The enrollment statistics would look even worse if the number of non-Adventist students had not increased.<sup>6</sup>

What factors might have caused these enrollment declines in Adventist schools? It may be helpful to look at a literature review of studies that examines perceptions and factors affecting enrollment at Adventist K-12 schools in North America.<sup>7</sup>

### A Review of Studies on NAD Adventist Schools

Kromann (1983) explored parental attitudes regarding Adventist



secondary boarding schools in mid-America. He found a significant difference between parents who sent their children to Adventist schools and those who did not in their opinion of the quality of academics, cost of attendance, work program, faculty dedication, witnessing training, and attitudes toward dormitory living. There were also significant contrasts between the two groups' church attendance and length of membership. However, the study found no significant difference between the two groups' socio-economic levels, or their opinions about the teachers' effectiveness or the schools' uniqueness in teaching Christian beliefs and values. The study revealed that boarding school costs and dormitory living were two negative variables that may have contributed to non-attendance.

Roesel (1983) examined Adventist K-10 schools in Pennsylvania, with the exception of regional (black) schools. He surveyed parents, teachers, pastors, head elders, and school board chairpersons about their perceptions regarding enrollment in local Adventist schools. He concluded that (1) pastors were seen as unsupportive of Christian education at the local congregation level, which was perceived to have a negative impact on enrollment; (2) charging tuition had a positive effect on enrollment compared to having free tuition; (3) teachers' dedication and involvement were perceived as positively influencing enrollment; (4) distance and transportation to schools had little impact on enrollment; and (5) recruitment activities were perceived as lacking and, when they did occur, as not necessarily having a positive effect on enrollment.

Rhoads (1986) studied student and parent perceptions of the educational philosophy, ac-

ademic program; social, spiritual, and spiritual climate; and staff adequacy, among other factors, that contributed to enrollment and attrition at selected Adventist secondary day schools in Northern and Central California. He concluded that (1) respondents placed a low value on Adventist education, (2) decisions to transfer from Adventist schools were unrelated to religious or philosophical issues; (3) parents wanted more staff assistance with academic, social, and spiritual concerns; (4) parents desired greater participation in

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school procedures; (5) Christian behavior and social morality were perceived as lacking in the schools; (6) parents and students desired improved disciplinary practices and an expanded curriculum; and (7) administrator and teacher performance was perceived as inadequate in many areas.

Fink (1989) surveyed pastors' perceptions regarding Adventist K-12 schools in eight Southern states.

The main findings were as follows: (1) the pastors felt positively about the creation and maintenance of the schools; (2) they perceived the schools as essential for the inculcation of Adventist doctrine; (3) they assumed the responsibility of promoting Adventist education at the church and conference levels; (4) they believed that all Adventist members should be expected to support Christian education whether or not they had school-aged children; (5) they were reluctant to close schools or to allow them to be

funded by public monies; (6) they showed disagreement regarding the present support given to Adventist education, compared with the past; and (7) they believed that the main reasons for low enrollment levels related to lack of commitment, tuition costs, and distance to schools.

Araya (1991) surveyed pastoral attitudes about the Adventist system of education in five Southeastern states. He concluded that (1) pastors opposed enrolling more non-Adventist students to balance budgets; (2) they did not consider Christian education as primarily an evangelistic medium, although they saw themselves as having strong participation in it; (3) they didn't see preaching more often on topics related to Christian education as necessary; (4) pastors of Caucasian groups tended to express a

**Table 1. NAD Enrollment K-12 1980-2005**

Year	K-8	9-12	Totals
<b>1980</b>	<b>53,304</b>	<b>20,557</b>	<b>73,861</b>
1985	51,864	19,573	71,437
<b>1990</b>	<b>50,207</b>	<b>14,882</b>	<b>65,089</b>
1995	50,669	15,766	66,435
<b>2000</b>	<b>48,246</b>	<b>15,613</b>	<b>63,859</b>
2001	48,289	15,582	63,871
2002	46,383	14,102	60,485
2003	44,229	15,782	60,011
2004	42,922	14,662	57,584
<b>2005</b>	<b>42,710</b>	<b>15,099</b>	<b>57,809</b>

higher level of positive conviction about the value of Adventist education; (5) pastors who had served longer were significantly more convicted than younger ministers about the value of church-sponsored education; (6) older pastors viewed education more as an evangelistic medium than younger ones did; and (7) the pastors believed that academic quality was not an issue for members who could send their children to church school. However, the pastors regarded personal relationships and finances as critical factors for enrollment.

Haakmat (1995) found that despite the growth of church membership in British Columbia, Canada,

[Hunt's] analysis revealed that these parents considered a spiritual environment to be the most important factor, followed by concerned and caring teachers, safety, and school climate.

the enrollment at Adventist schools had actually decreased. The study's main findings were that (1) long-time church members expressed a more positive opinion of Adventist education than those who had been members only a short time; (2) respondents for whom Adventist education was a conviction rather than a preference held more favorable attitudes toward the support of church schools; (3) church leadership was not perceived as contributing to a more positive attitude toward church schools; (4) respondents who favored or opposed accepting government funds for church schools did not hold significantly different attitudes toward Adventist education. Respondents in general seemed not to have strong positive attitudes toward the support of church schools and did not perceive them as playing a significant role in the spiritual nurture of students. Many respondents viewed Christian education as an ideological or philosophical conviction rather than a

preference that they would act upon.

Hunt (1996) examined factors that parents with children attending Adventist K-10 schools in Eastern and Southern states considered important in determining whether their child would attend an Adventist boarding school. His analysis revealed that these parents considered a spiritual environment to be the most important factor, followed by concerned and caring teachers, safety, and school climate. Parents who decided not to enroll their children after they had been accepted cited reasons of cost and location.

Baker (1996) examined attitudes and perceptions of southern Califor-

nia pastors toward Adventist K-12 education within their pastoral districts. This study concluded that (1) the ministers' philosophical and attitudinal support for denominational schools was generally strong, although tangible, demonstrated support was at a lower level; (2) the ministers were generally satisfied with their local church school; (3) there was no correlation between the ministers' age, whether or not their parents were Adventists, the number of years the pastors had attended denominational schools, and self-perceived levels of value and support; and (4) issues relating to financial support of the denominational school system were an area of dissatisfaction for many ministers. Most ministers expressed a strong belief that the denominational educational system was critical to the future health and survival of the church.

Mainda (2001) studied factors influencing school choice among Adventist parents in southwest Michi-

gan. This author concluded that the following factors predicted enrollment in church schools: (1) a belief that Adventist education was the best; (2) a conviction that teachers should be spiritual; (3) the child's influence on the parents—the stronger the influence, the more likely that the child would be enrolled in a Adventist school; (4) information about the school—the more the parents knew about the school, the more likely they were to enroll their child; and (5) perceived value and financial status—parents who viewed Adventist education as worth the cost and who had less need for financial aid tended to enroll their children at Adventist schools. Mainda found no significant relationship between school choice and parents' perceptions about social factors (physical education, extracurricular activities, racial harmony in the school, active social life, school spirit, and parental involvement) or school proximity. Parents with children in Adventist schools and those with children in public schools tended to hold different views in the area of academic programs. However, both groups of parents believed in the superiority of the Adventist educational system over the public one. This study found that the declining demand for Adventist education could be attributed to a perceived decline in its distinctiveness, primarily in the area of spiritual values.

Booker (2004) examined factors influencing African-American parents from Ohio and Pennsylvania who supported Adventist primary schools. He concluded that (1) parents who had attended an Adventist school tended to have a more negative perception of the quality of Adventist education than those who had not attended an Adventist school; (2) parental beliefs in children's development and the integration of faith were probably the most important factors in whether they sent their children to an Adventist school; (3) cost and distance influ-

[Lekic found that] respondents perceived spiritual focus as the most positive aspect of Adventist schools, followed closely by interpersonal relationships and student personal development.

enced whether these parents enrolled their children; (4) parents who had a high school diploma or less showed the greatest variance and most negative predisposition toward Adventist education; and (5) parents who had attended an Adventist school were more likely to send their children to a church school.

Lekic (2005) investigated perceptions and attitudes toward Adventist schools in Canada. He explored the differences between Adventist parents with and without children in Adventist schools, as well as the attitudes of non-Adventist parents whose children attended an Adventist school. He concluded that non-Adventist parents, especially

mothers, had a more positive attitude toward the schools than did parents in families where the couple were both Adventist, whether or not the Adventist families had children in church-operated schools. Furthermore, younger single parents who earned less than CAD\$30,000 a year or who were unemployed had more positive attitudes toward Adventist education than older married parents who earned more and were employed.

Respondents perceived spiritual focus as the most positive aspect of Adventist schools, followed closely by interpersonal relationships and student personal development. For Adventist parents, the top three reasons for sending children to church

schools were spiritual focus, a safe and caring environment, and dedicated school personnel. For non-Adventist parents, the three main reasons were a safe and caring environment, high-quality academics, and spiritual focus. Adventist parents who did not send their children to church schools gave the following reasons: distance from home, high cost of tuition, and lack of high-quality academics.

Other areas of concern about Adventist education were affordability, bullying, availability of extracurricular activities, facilities, the variety of resources, and lack of provision for special-education students.

Bryson (2006) sought to determine the most important factors related to increasing and declining enrollment trends in Adventist boarding academies in North America. She studied eight key factors: academics, climate, cost, facilities, location, mission, support, and leadership, and concluded that the respondents (educators, students,





and parents/guardians) regarded climate, mission, and academics as the most decisive factors affecting enrollment. Cost was the weakest predictor. Respondents from academies with increasing or declining enrollment scored similarly on levels of satisfaction and perceptions influencing enrollment. These findings confirmed several enrollment theories that regard enrollment as affected by personal interactions, belief systems, academics, and social influences that attract and keep a student enrolled in a private or parochial school.

Based on this author's literature review, it can be inferred that within the North American Division territory, enrollment in Adventist K-12 schools seems to be affected by the following set of beliefs, perceptions, and factors:

1. *Parents' perceptions.* Several studies concluded that limited curriculum, staff, and amount of available involvement were among the reasons for withdrawal; however, at the same time, parents seemed to agree, at least philosophically, that Adventist education was very good. Perceptions about teachers' and ad-

ministrators' training and qualifications were mixed and in some cases might negatively affect enrollment. Perceptions about the schools' spiritual environment, such as teachers' dedication and school climate, were considered important factors in the decision whether to enroll.

2. *Identification with Adventist education.* Parents exposed to the

church's education system tended to send their children to an Adventist K-12 school. Also, both parents being church members increased the probability of their child being enrolled at an Adventist elementary or secondary school. A paradoxical situation was observed that affected enrollment. Although most parents surveyed viewed Adventist educa-

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tion positively, this did not necessarily influence their decision about where to enroll their children.

3. *External factors.* Distance and cost of tuition were often cited as influential factors affecting enrollment. For most K-12 students in day schools, distance is a very difficult obstacle to overcome.

4. *Promotional factors.* Greater marketing by pastors, teachers, and church leaders, especially to newly converted parents, would improve enrollment rates. Conference leaders could also be crucial in ensuring stronger promotion.

5. *Church leadership.* Pastors and church leaders perceived themselves as cooperative and supportive of Adventist education; however, some parents saw these leaders as less supportive, which negatively affected enrollment.

## Conclusion

From the literature review, we can infer that the decreasing demand for primary and secondary Adventist education in North America is linked to a perceived decline in its quality and spiritual values. Influencing parental perceptions will continue to be the strongest factor for overcoming obstacles such as cost and distance. Administrators, pastors, and teachers must focus on the distinctive features of Adventist education. The question that has to guide administrators, teachers, church members, and pastors is “*What is distinctive about our approach to educating young people?*” Yes, spiritual values and faith are the core of Adventist education. But the challenge is to combine these values with high-quality curricula, facilities, environment, teachers and

administrators, and supportive leaders.

Table 2 below shows another dimension, the organizational one. These statistics illustrate the struggles and problems that teachers and administrators face in running almost 1,000 K-12 schools. Dividing the 2005 North American enrollment of 57,809 by the total number of schools, 966, gives an average of about 60 students per school. Some boarding academies have enrollments of fewer than 100 students!

Statistics for 2003, the most recent year for which these figures are available, reveal that more than 60 percent (584 units) of K-12 schools in the NAD had one through three teachers, which classified them as very small institutions. The percentage would be even higher if 9-12 schools were factored out! The question is: How can administrators, teachers, and churches maintain quality with so few students?

Schools need computers, updated libraries, training opportunities, facilities for programs, and innumerable other resources.

Perhaps a set of new strategies from the union or conference level could help. Promoting Adventist education and its virtues among parents, pastors, seminarians, and constituents would be a good start. New pastors need training about Christian education. They also must have local and conference leaders who really support schools and are actively involved in helping address their challenges. Raising the minimum standards for schools to operate will encourage local members and administrators to do more for their schools. If everyone is convinced of the wonderful results that

Adventist education can bring, resources will flow in. We can reverse negative trends, but we must fight for the future of Adventist education with a clear purpose and effective strategies. ✍



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3. \_\_\_\_\_, *Private School Universe Survey 1999-2000* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2001), p. 6.
4. \_\_\_\_\_, *The Condition of Education 2007* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2007).
5. Jason Fields, *America's Families and Living Arrangements: 2003. Current Population Reports* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau, 2003).
6. The number of Adventist students enrolled in NAD primary schools (K-8) dropped by 6,838 between 2001 and 2005. In 2001, they represented 75.1 percent of total K-12 enrollment; this had dropped to 68.4 percent by 2005. At the secondary level (9-12), the number of Adventist students decreased by 1,541 between 2001 and 2005. Their percentage of total secondary enrollment was 88.2 percent in 2001; it had decreased to 81.1 percent by 2005. (“Adventist student” was defined as a child who was baptized and/or had one or more Adventist parents.) Figures are based on an analysis by C. Garland Dulan, September 2007.
7. Due to space limitations, not all studies on Adventist education are included here. For information on studies about non-NAD education, and on older studies, see <http://circle.adventist.org/download/FactorsInfluencingK12Enrollment.pdf>, or contact Gus Gregorutti at [ggregorutti@hotmail.com](mailto:ggregorutti@hotmail.com).
8. North American Division Annual Report, 2005.

**Table 2. NAD K-12 schools by type and size, 2003-2004 school year<sup>a</sup>**

School Type and Size	Teachers per School								
	K-8	K-9	K-10	K-12	9-12	1	2	3	4+
NAD Totals	679	53	111	68	55	281	186	117	368