



W. Eugene Brewer

The Power of a Small School

Taste It Again for the First Time

In 1987, the Kellogg Company introduced the slogan, *Kellogg's Corn Flakes®—Taste them again for the first time.*¹ Such slogans can take us back to our childhood days when we would start off the morning with a bowl of our favorite cereal. Revisiting the past can sometimes help us to rediscover our passion, reaffirm what we value, and carve a new path for the future.

In 1852, under the guidance of John Byington,² several early pioneer families in Bucks Bridge, New York, felt passionate about the need to train their youth to serve the Lord and decided that their children should receive a distinctive education. As a result, the forerunner to what would become the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist Church-sponsored school system began in the year 1853 with Martha Byington, daughter of John Byington, as the teacher.³ The effects of that small school were felt throughout the world. Out of the 17 pupils enrolled, two became overseas missionaries.⁴ Martha, who outlived all of her students by reaching the age of 103, thus started what now constitutes one of the largest parochial school systems in the world⁵: a system that includes many small elementary and secondary schools, worldwide.

The theme of this special issue of the JOURNAL is Small Schools, yet it is by no means a definitive account of all that could be said about this topic. Shared within these pages are the experiences and stories of those at the heart of small schools—teachers! There is nothing more important to the success of a school than the classroom teacher.

So, what exactly is the definition of a “small” school? At the Small Schools Workshop Website, the authors note that “Size is one determining characteristic of a small school, yet small schools are about much more than size.”⁶ The Website then describes several features that often characterize small schools:

- “A maximum population of 250-300 students in a heterogeneous mix that represents the local school community
- “A coherent focus and philosophy of education, and

a curriculum that is integrated around that focus

- “A sense of shared leadership and investment among those in the small school.”⁷

Most of the research on small schools has been done in large public school systems, where the term “small school” means something quite different from its definition in Adventist education. Although experts disagree over what constitutes a “small school,” the number most commonly accepted is 300 or fewer.⁸ Using these criteria, the majority of Adventist elementary and secondary schools in the North American Division, and many more worldwide, would be considered small schools.

The writers for this issue reflect on the impact and legacy as well as the challenges of small schools within our Adventist system: Are there advantages to grouping children like family? How should teachers and administrators address parents’ and constituents’ concerns about the quality of instruction in a school that lacks some of the amenities of large educational institutions? And more importantly, is it time for our church to rediscover a unique Adventist educational advantage—the small school?

Public education has proclaimed that “bigger is better” for so long that many Seventh-day Adventists have embraced this maxim without careful examination. There exists in most small schools a sense of pride, an attitude and sense of personal possession and involvement on the part of students, parents, teachers, administrators, and church members. Even though larger schools might appear more impressive on the outside, upon closer scrutiny, the small school may well provide a better quality of education.

This issue of the JOURNAL features testimonials, research, and examples of best practice. These constitute the main components of any effective learning environment—the need for **positive experiences** (Michelle Nash, Andy Nash, Shirley Fuquay, and Sandra Doran with Nancy Pinter); **research-based practice** (Martha Havens, Jerome Thayer, and Elissa Kido); and **effective instruction** (Carol Spaulding Serna, Judy Harward, and Debbie Mutthersbaugh).

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I would like to borrow a quote from Michelle Nash's article as an encouragement for Seventh-day Adventists to rediscover an Adventist advantage—the small school:

“The more we learned [about multigrade classrooms], the more we realized that grouping children like a family is a more logical and humane way to raise children, educationally speaking. . . . And frankly, we are highly impressed with the effect the family-grouped classroom had upon our at-risk learners, our gifted learners . . . our late bloomers and everyone in between.”

In the future, many educational centers within and outside of the Adventist system might just (as the Kellogg's ad suggests) consider “tasting” the small school model *again* . . . for the first time.

W. Eugene Brewer, Ed.D., the Coordinator for this special issue on Small Schools, began his educational career teaching six grades with a total of six students! Dr. Brewer has been a principal at the elementary and secondary level, vice president/superintendent of education of the Florida Conference; and until his recent retirement, as an associate director of education for the Southern Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists in Norcross, Georgia. He has contributed 48 years of service to Seventh-day Adventist education, and remains active in teaching graduate classes and educational consulting. The JOURNAL editorial staff express heartfelt appreciation for the many hours Dr. Brewer devoted to selecting topics, obtaining peer reviewers, providing input on article con-

tent, as well as his prompt response to the editor's questions during the planning and production of the issue.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. In 1987, the Kellogg Company launched an ad campaign based on the slogan “Taste them again for the first time” to boost sales of its Corn Flakes® breakfast cereal worldwide. This included several print and television commercials.
2. From 1863-1865, John Byington served as the first president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. Read more about his life in Jill Reynolds, “Behold the Stone! John Byington and the Beginnings of SDA Education,” *The Journal of Adventist Education* 48:5 (Summer 1986):18, 19, 39: <http://circle.adventist.org/files/jae/en/jae198648051803.pdf>.
3. This early school was established seven years prior to the formal organization of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 1863. Martha Byington taught for one of the three years that the school was in existence. For more information, see Floyd Greenleaf, *In Passion for the World: A History of Seventh-day Adventist Education* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 2005), pages 16, 17.
4. Eddie Hilliard served in Australia and India; Parmelia Hilliard served in the British Isles (Reynolds, “Behold the Stone,” *The Journal of Adventist Education*, op. cit., p. 19).
5. Ibid.
6. The Small Schools Workshop Website provides additional criteria for small schools: <http://smallschoolsworkshop.wordpress.com/small-schools/>. Accessed January 2015.
7. Ibid.
8. Doug Swift, *Finding and Keeping Teachers: Strategies for Small Schools* (Las Cruces, N.M.: ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, 1984).
9. Wendy Kasten and Barbara Clark, *The Multi-Age Classroom: A Family of Learners* (Katonah, N.Y.: Richard C. Owens Publishers, Inc., 1993), p. vi.

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