

Thirty Years of Research

Adventist Schools on Students

On the Impact of

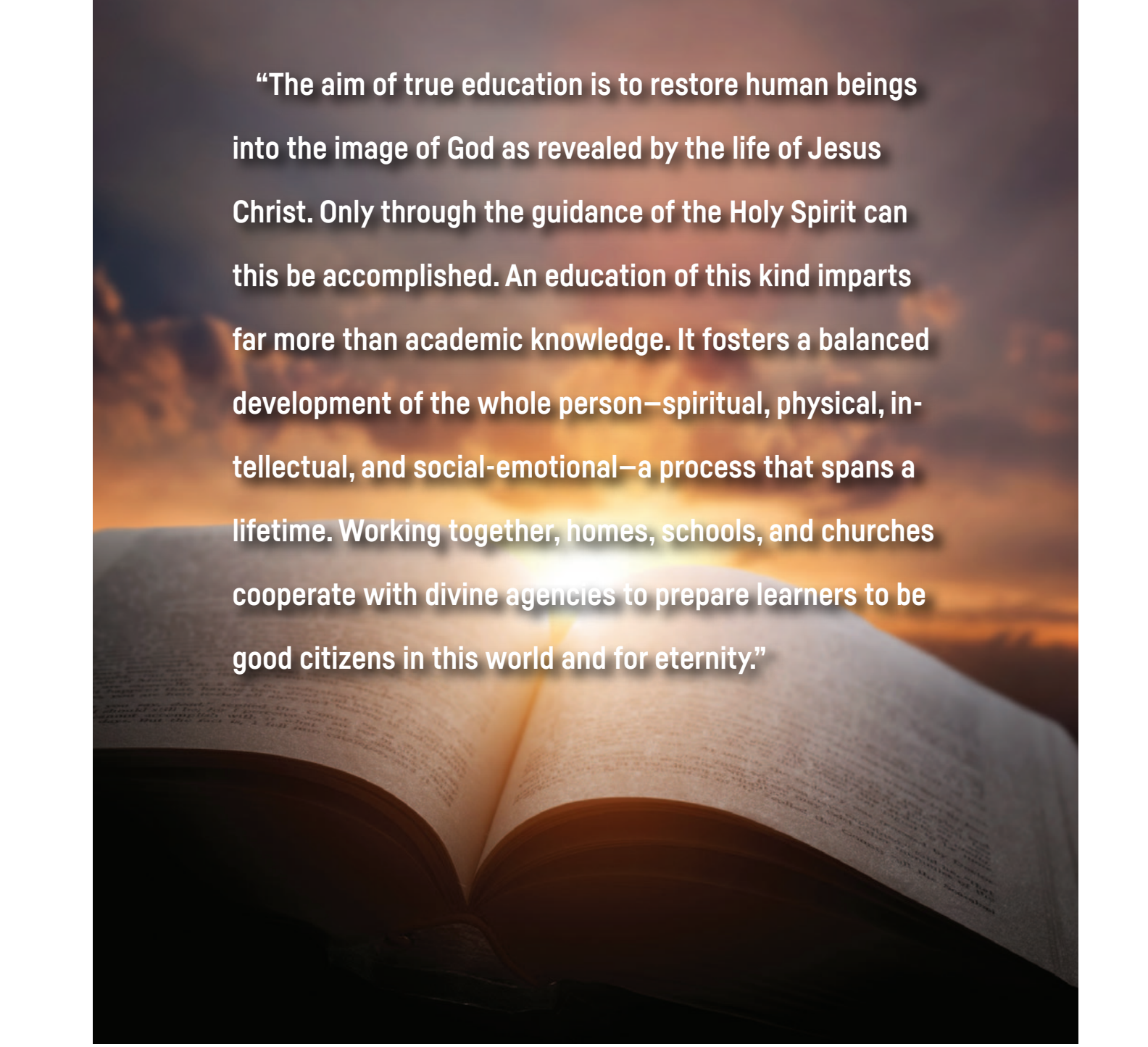
This article reviews key findings of several landmark studies on the impact of Adventist education on Adventist students attending denominational schools, with the goal to inspire continuing research and further study.

Since the Seventh-day Adventist Church invests significant resources in elementary and secondary education, it is important to determine what impact its schools have on students. Schools affect students in both planned and unplanned ways. The Adventist educational curriculum is developed to foster desired goals and objectives, but schools also have an impact on students in areas that are not specifically taught in the curriculum. Based on data from research studies between 1985 and 2014, this article describes how attendance at an Adventist school in the North American Division (NAD)¹ relates to achieving the goals and objectives of Adventist education.

Ellen White outlined the goals of Adventist education in broad strokes, emphasizing the breadth and depth of outcomes desired. In terms of breadth, she called for “the harmonious development of the physical, the mental, and the spiritual powers.”²

She believed that, rather than schools’ “imparting to them only technical knowledge,” students should be inspired “with principles of truth, obedience, honor, integrity, and purity” and “above all else, to learn life’s great lesson of unselfish service.”³ In terms of depth, she declared that “Higher than the highest human thought can reach is God’s ideal for His children. . . . [They] will ad-

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“The aim of true education is to restore human beings into the image of God as revealed by the life of Jesus Christ. Only through the guidance of the Holy Spirit can this be accomplished. An education of this kind imparts far more than academic knowledge. It fosters a balanced development of the whole person—spiritual, physical, intellectual, and social-emotional—a process that spans a lifetime. Working together, homes, schools, and churches cooperate with divine agencies to prepare learners to be good citizens in this world and for eternity.”

vance as fast and as far as possible in every branch of true knowledge.”⁴

The NAD Office of Education Website contains the following statement of the Adventist philosophy of education and its core curriculum goals:

- “The Seventh-day Adventist Church recognizes God as the ultimate source of existence, truth, and power. In the beginning, God created in His image a perfect humanity, a perfection later marred by sin. Education in its broadest sense is a means of returning human beings to their original relationship with God. The distinctive characteristics of this Adventist worldview, built around creation, the fall, redemption, and re-creation, are derived from the Bible and the

inspired writings of Ellen G. White.

- “The aim of true education is to restore human beings into the image of God as revealed by the life of Jesus Christ. Only through the guidance of the Holy Spirit can this be accomplished. An education of this kind imparts far more than academic knowledge. It fosters a balanced development of the whole person—spiritual, physical, intellectual, and social-emotional—a process that spans a lifetime. Working together, homes, schools, and churches cooperate with divine agencies to prepare learners to be good citizens in this world and for eternity.

- “Learners will choose to accept God as the Creator and the Redeemer.

- “Learners will grow in their knowledge and understanding of God’s creation.
- “Learners will creatively apply their spiritual, physical, intellectual, and social-emotional knowledge.
- “Learners will demonstrate their commitment to the Creator through service to others.”⁵

These statements combine three elements: (1) the curriculum is based on Scripture and the writings of Ellen G. White; (2) aims are to be both spiritual (e.g., Christian, Adventist) and non-spiritual (e.g., mental, physical, social) areas, and (3) the desired outcomes embrace the cognitive (e.g., knowledge, understanding, application), affective (e.g., attitudes and values), and behavior (e.g., lifestyle) domains.

This article reviews published and unpublished reports of research projects that evaluated the extent to which NAD schools accomplished important goals of Adventist education. In addition, secondary analyses of data sets of major research projects were conducted for this article. The researchers for the studies referenced in this article collected data for hundreds of outcome variables; because of space limitations, only the results for the most important outcomes directly related to the objectives of Adventist education are reviewed here. An earlier, more comprehensive report of this review is available online. (See <https://bit.ly/2ruL41q> for a more detailed explanation of sampling and data collection procedures).⁶

In this article, educational outcomes are classified into six categories, based on the three domain areas (cognitive, affective, and behavior), and two content areas spiritual outcomes and non-spiritual outcomes (mental, physical, and social).

The degree to which the outcomes of Adventist elementary and secondary education indicated above were achieved are evaluated (1) for Adventist students who had not attended Adventist schools, (2) for those who had attended Adventist schools for part, but not all of their schooling, and (3) for those who had attended only Adventist schools. Adventist students in Adventist schools are compared to Adventist students not in Adventist schools or in public schools. This review will not evaluate the impact of different methods or different experiences within Adventist education. While some studies controlled for other variables such as home characteristics, including parents’ religious affiliation, and church characteristics, these findings will not be reviewed in this article.

Research Studies

This article reviews 18 research studies/reports on 12 sets of data. Both original analyses and secondary analyses of the data sets done for this article are included. Six of the studies are doctoral dissertations with relatively small sample sizes and a narrow focus: Minder (1985), Rice (1990), Epperson (1990), Pawluk (1992 and 1993), Carlson (1996), and Santiago (2014).⁷ Three of the studies involved major research projects with large sample sizes and a broad scope: The Youth Retention Study—Dudley (1989), Dudley and Kangas (1990), Dudley (2000), and Thayer (2008); Value-

genesis¹—Dudley (1992) and Thayer (2008); and Cognitive-Genesis—Cruise, Kido, and Thayer (2007), and Thayer (2013).⁸ Three of the studies involved large multi-year projects with large sample sizes but with a narrow focus all conducted by Thayer (1978), (1992), and (2006).⁹

Results

The impact of Adventist schools on students is presented for outcome variables in seven sections: general results, cognitive spiritual outcomes, cognitive non-spiritual outcomes, affective spiritual outcomes, affective non-spiritual outcomes, behavior spiritual outcomes, and behavior non-spiritual outcomes.

The impact of our church’s schools on the objectives of Adventist education are reported as having one of three outcomes: a positive relationship, a negative relationship, or no relationship. A positive relationship means Adventist students in Adventist schools met the objectives of Adventist education at a higher level than Adventist students not enrolled in denominational schools (most of whom were in public schools), or that students with more years in an Adventist school scored higher in meeting the objectives of Adventist education than those who had spent fewer years in an Adventist school. A negative relationship means Adventist students in Adventist schools met the objectives of Adventist education at a lower level than Adventist students not in denominational schools, or that students with more years in an Adventist school scored lower in meeting objectives of Adventist education than those with fewer years in an Adventist school. No relationship means there was no difference in meeting the objectives of Adventist education between Adventist students in church-operated schools and Adventist students in non-Adventist schools, or between Adventist students with more years in Adventist schools and those who had spent fewer years in Adventist schools.

General Results

Two major research projects dealt with a large number of subjects and a broad range of variables related to desired educational outcomes: Valuegenesis¹ and the Youth Retention Study. Five analyses are reported in this article for these research projects.¹⁰ Dudley and Thayer¹¹ reported on the Valuegenesis¹ study and Dudley and Kangas, Dudley, and Thayer¹² reported on the Youth Retention Study.

Both studies found mixed results—for some outcomes, there was a positive relationship between Adventist education; but for many others, there was no relationship. Only two variables favored Adventist students not in Adventist schools—social action and social concern. On most variables, there was a stronger relationship between desirable outcomes and attending Adventist secondary schools than with attending Adventist elementary schools.

The Impact of Adventist Education on Cognitive Spiritual Outcomes

Only one study dealt with the impact of Adventist education on cognitive spiritual outcomes—Thayer (1992).¹³ Stu-

dent achievement on cognitive (e.g., knowledge, understanding) outcomes related to the NAD Bible/religion curriculum was positively related to years of Adventist education.

The Impact of Adventist Education on Cognitive Non-spiritual Outcomes

Four studies dealt with cognitive non-spiritual outcomes. These studies surveyed K-12 students from the Atlantic Union, Southern New England Conference, North Pacific Union, and the North American Division¹⁴—Thayer (1978), Pawluk, Thayer (2006), and Thayer (2013).¹⁵ All of these reports evaluated both academic achievement (reading, language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, and sources of information) and cognitive ability (verbal, quantitative, and nonverbal). The most recent and comprehensive research was CognitiveGenesis,¹⁶ which studied students in grades 3 to 9 and 11 in all Adventist schools (K-12) in North America from 2006-2009. Results of all of these studies indicated that students in Adventist elementary and secondary schools achieved much above the national average and achieved much above what would be predicted by cognitive ability tests. The relationship held true for all grades, for all types of schools (small and large), and at all cognitive ability levels. These studies showed a positive relationship between the number of years of Adventist education and development of both academic achievement and cognitive ability.

The Impact of Adventist Education on Affective Spiritual Outcomes

Two studies dealt with affective spiritual outcomes—Valuegenesis¹ and the Youth Retention Study. In the first year of Dudley's 10-year Youth Retention Study, all subjects were asked to evaluate the influence of home, church, and school on their spiritual experience. Dudley and Kangas¹⁷ reported that the percentage of subjects who thought each group was a helpful influence on their spiritual experience was 74 percent for members of their home family, 55 percent for members of their church family, and 34 percent for members of their school family. Since approximately half of the students were in public schools, the low rating for the effect of schools on spiritual experience is understandable. In his re-analysis of the Youth Retention data, Thayer's 2008 analysis¹⁸ found that limiting the analysis to students in Adventist schools and using more direct questions such as "What I learned at home," "What I learned at church," and "What I learned at school," the percent of subjects who thought each entity was a helpful influence on their spiritual experience was 82 percent for home, 74 percent for church, and 70 percent for school.

Both Valuegenesis¹ and the Youth Retention Study found consistent positive correlations between Adventist education and most variables related to the Adventist Church, such as denominational loyalty, denominational orthodoxy, relationship to the church, intention to remain an Adventist, and intention to marry an Adventist. There were inconsistent findings between Adventist education and more general spiritual

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outcomes, such as faith maturity and commitment to Jesus Christ and one variable related to the Adventist Church—the intention to be an active Adventist.

The Impact of Adventist Education on Affective Non-spiritual Outcomes

Three studies examined affective non-spiritual outcomes: Valuegenesis¹, the Youth Retention Study, and Carlson.¹⁹ When looking at the relationship between Adventist education and attitudes toward standards of behavior, one study found that students attending an Adventist school were more in agreement with the Adventist standard of no premarital sex than those not enrolled in an Adventist school. Another study found no relationship between years of Adventist education and agreement with six Adventist standards—those related to tobacco, alcohol, dancing, drugs, sex, and dress, but a negative relationship between Adventist education and agreement with three standards—those related to jewelry, rock music, and attending movie theaters. Two of the studies

found a negative relationship between Adventist education and social concern: One study found that students in Adventist schools scored lower on social concern than those in public schools, and one study found students with fewer years in an Adventist school scored higher on social concern than those with more years in an Adventist school.

The Impact of Adventist Education on Behavior-related Spiritual Outcomes

Eight studies examined behavior-related spiritual outcomes, the most of any of the seven sections. Most studies found positive relationships between Adventist schooling and behavior-related spiritual outcomes, both general Christian outcomes such as attending church, reading the Bible, personal prayer, paying tithe, and talking to others about one's faith and Adventist-related outcomes such as Adventist church membership, being an active Adventist, not dropping out or no longer attending church, and marrying an Adventist. One study found negative relationships between Adventist education and the Adventist piety and Adventist evangelism scales.

The Impact of Adventist Education on Behavior-related Non-spiritual Outcomes

Research dealing with behavior-related non-spiritual outcomes was reported by two studies. The only outcomes reported in this section are related to health and social action. One study found a positive relationship between the number of years of Adventist schooling and taking care of physical health while in school, and the other study found no relationship between the number of years of Adventist schooling and taking care of physical health five years later. Both studies found a negative relationship between number of years in an Adventist school and social action.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The results of these research studies, although more than 10 years old, are quite positive regarding the effect of Adventist education on a broad array of outcomes. The author of the most comprehensive study containing data that can be used to measure both the short-term and long-term impact of Adventist education states that “. . . the information gathered during 10 years [1987-1997] is a ringing testimony to the benefits of Adventist education. . . . Some of the differences . . . were great and some were small, but with one exception [social concern], they all favored Christian education.”²⁰

However, one must be cautious in interpreting the results reported in this article because presence or absence of a relationship is not sufficient evidence for presence or lack of a causal link between Adventist education and outcomes being studied. It is difficult to separate out the effects of parents, church, and school. For example, it is reasonable to assume that parents who more closely identify with the Adventist Church are more likely to send their children to an Adventist school. In addition, difficulties in identifying and surveying a representative group of Adventist public school students and following up on persons who have dropped out

of the church make one cautious in interpreting the results reported here. Furthermore, most of these studies are more than 10 years old. For this reason, research on the impact of Adventist schooling on students must continue.

While positive relationships can be assumed to exist between Adventist education in the North American Division and desirable outcomes in many cases, most are not large; and for many important outcomes, no relationship was found. Even for variables where there was a strong positive relationship between the outcome and attending Adventist schools, such as dropping church membership, the outcome still leaves much room for improvement. For example, Dudley²¹ found that 38 percent of the youth who left the church between the ages of 16 and 17 and 25 and 26 had obtained most of their education in Adventist schools.

In some areas, both positive and negative results were found. Dudley and Kangas concluded that within the NAD, “Adventist schooling produces belief in doctrine, faith in an underlying ideal, and resolutions for the future. It does not necessarily result in a more personally experienced religion.”²²

The impact of Adventist education in North America seems to be more pronounced in denomination-specific areas such as remaining an Adventist than in more general Christian areas such as commitment to Jesus Christ. Researchers found a negative relationship between Adventist school attendance and agreement with some Adventist standards (jewelry, rock music, and attending movie theaters) and social concern and social action.

While the results of these studies are quite positive in the effect of Adventist education on most outcomes, at least in the North American Division, they suggest areas where Adventist education in NAD could invest resources to determine the dynamics of why the outcomes in some areas were not as positive as desired and how they can be improved. Adventist schools need to continue and strengthen their work that has resulted in positive results related to Bible knowledge, academic achievement, relationship to the Adventist Church, and most spiritual outcomes. But more attention needs to be given to how Adventist schools can be more effective in having their students meet objectives related to having a personal relationship with Jesus, intending to be an active Adventist, social concern and action, and Adventist behavior standards. ✍

This article has been peer reviewed.



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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Dissertations included in this list studied students in the North American Division with one exception. The study by Edwin P. Alicea Santiago, *The Relationship of Family, Church, School, Peers, Media, and Adventist Culture to the Religiosity of Adventist Youth in Puerto Rico* studied students in Puerto Rico, which is part of the Inter-American Division. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Andrews University, 2014.

2. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1903), 13.

3. *Ibid.*, 29, 30.

4. *Ibid.*, 18.

5. Office of Education, North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists (NAD), "The Approach and Philosophy of Adventist Education and Core Curriculum Goals" (2014). Available from <http://adventisteducation.org/abt.html>.

6. Jerome Thayer, "The Impact of Adventist Schools on Students." Presentation at the 4th Symposium on the Bible and Adventist Scholarship, Riviera Maya, Estado Quintana Roo, Mexico (2008): http://fae.adventist.org/essays/iv_Thayer_Jerry.pdf.

7. Warren E. Minder, *A Study of the Relationship Between Church Sponsored K-12 Education and Church Membership in the Seventh-day Adventist Church*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Western Michigan University, 1985; Robert W. Rice, *A Study of the Relationship Between Attending Seventh-day Adventist Academies 9-12 and Subsequent Commitment to the Seventh-day Adventist Church*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Denver, 1990; James Epperson, *The Relationship of Seventh-day Adventist School Attendance to Seventh-day Adventist Church Membership in the Southern Union Conference*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Loma Linda University, La Sierra campus, 1990; Stephen T. Pawluk, *A Comparison of the Academic Achievement of Students in Multi-grade Elementary Classrooms and Students in Self-contained Single-grade Elementary Classrooms*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, Montana State University, 1992; _____. "A Comparison of the Academic Achievement in Multigrade and Single-grade Elementary Church-school Classrooms," *Journal of Research on Christian Education* 2:2 (Autumn 1993): 235-254. doi.org/10.1080/10656219309484786; Richard G. Carlson, *A Comparison of Faith Maturity and Denominational Loyalty in Seventh-day Adventist Students at Public and Parochial High Schools in the Mid-America Union Based on the Valuegenesis Study*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, 1996; Edwin P. Alicea Santiago, *The Relationship of Family, Church, School, Peers, Media, and Adventist Culture to the Religiosity of Adventist Youth in Puerto Rico*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Andrews University, 2014.

8. Roger L. Dudley, *A Ten-year Study of Youth Retention in the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Institute of Church Ministry, 1989); _____ and Janet Leigh Kangas, *The World of the Adventist Teenager* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 1990); Roger L. Dudley, *Why Our Teenagers Leave the Church: Personal Stories From a 10-year Study* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 2000); Jerome Thayer, "Youth Retention Study Reanalysis." Unpublished manuscript. Andrews University, 2008; Roger L. Dudley, *Valuegenesis: Faith in the Balance*. Riverside, Calif.: La Sierra University Press, 1992); Robert Cruise, Elissa Kido, and Jerome Thayer, "Cog-

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9. Jerome Thayer, "Will My Child Suffer Scholastically if He Attends Church School?," *Adventist Review* 155:35 (August 31, 1978): 899-901. _____, "What We Have Learned About Religious Education From the Religion Achievement Test Results." A report prepared for the North American Division Commission on Religious Education. Unpublished manuscript. Andrews University, 1992; _____, "Southern New England Research Report." Unpublished manuscript. Andrews University, 2006.

10. Three Valuegenesis studies by V. Bailey Gillespie collected data on faith maturity, values, and commitment from Adventist students in Adventist and public schools in the North American Division. Valuegenesis¹ (1990), cited in this review, set the foundation for subsequent studies: Valuegenesis² (2000) and Valuegenesis³ (2010). For more information on these subsequent studies, contact the Hancock Center for Youth and Family Ministry at hcyfm@lasierra.edu. Additionally, search <http://circle.adventist.org>, using keyword *Valuegenesis* for a list of related reports: http://circle.adventist.org/browse/?browse_node=252.

11. Roger L. Dudley, *Valuegenesis: Faith in the Balance* (Riverside, Calif.: La Sierra University Press, 1992); Jerome Thayer, "The Impact of Adventist Schools on Students."

12. Dudley and Kangas, *The World of the Adventist Teenager*; _____, *Why Our Teenagers Leave the Church: Personal Stories From a 10-year Study*; Thayer, "Youth Retention Study Reanalysis" (2008); _____, "Valuegenesis Reanalysis." Unpublished manuscript. Andrews University, 2008.

13. Thayer, "What We Have Learned About Religious Education From the Religion Achievement Test Results."

14. For a breakdown of the various grade levels sampled in each study, see Thayer, "The Impact of Adventist Schools on Students."

15. _____, "Will My Child Suffer Scholastically if He Attends Church School?"; Pawluk, "A Comparison of the Academic Achievement in Multigrade and Single-grade Elementary Church-school Classrooms"; Thayer, "Southern New England Research Report"; _____, *CognitiveGenesis Report*, 2013.

16. See the four CognitiveGenesis yearly reports available at <https://crae.lasierra.edu/cognitivegenesis-2/publications/>. The 2006-2009 study collected data on students' academic achievement in Adventist schools throughout the United States, Canada, and Bermuda. Data were analyzed separately with one combined report for eight unions. The Canadian Union was not included in the combined report because Canadian students take different achievement and ability tests. For more information, see "Assessing Adventist Academics: A Mid-point Update on Cognitive Genesis" by Elissa E. Kido, Jerome D. Thayer, and Robert J. Cruise in *The Journal of Adventist Education* 71:2 (December 2008/January 2009): 5-10: <http://circle.adventist.org/files/jae/en/jae200871020506.pdf>.

17. Dudley and Kangas, *The World of the Adventist Teenager*.

18. Thayer, "Youth Retention Study Reanalysis."

19. Valuegenesis Report¹ (1990); and Carlson, *A Comparison of Faith Maturity and Denominational Loyalty in Seventh-day Adventist Students at Public and Parochial High Schools in the Mid-America Union Based on the Valuegenesis Study*.

20. Dudley, *Why Our Teenagers Leave the Church: Personal Stories From a 10-year Study*, 160.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Dudley and Kangas, *The World of the Adventist Teenager*, 84.