

Can Education Be Adventist and Excellent, Too?

Spirituality and Scholastic Strength can be used in the same sentence

BY PAUL BRANTLEY AND DEBRA FRYSON

FROM THE FIRST EXPERIMENTAL school at Buck's Bridge, New York, in 1853 until the present, Adventist education has made commendable progress. Adventist schools have enabled many youth to find Christ, prepared leaders for the world church, and provided an environment for good friendships as well as good test scores. By most measures, Adventist education is synonymous with good schooling.

But in his best seller *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't*, Jim Collins makes the point that *good* is often the mortal enemy of *great*. Speaking of American education, "We don't have great schools," Collins says, "principally because we have so many *good* schools."¹ Few people attain greatness when it's so easy to settle for a merely *good* life.

Christian and Excellent, Too?

In American education, few great ideas about education within the past 50 years are associated with anything religious. Many schools run by Catholic and Protestant churches are essentially warmed-over public schools with a bit of religious symbolism tossed on top. Consequently, little attention has been given to religious education as a driving force for quality teaching and learning.

And yet Scripture affirms a God of excellence. In Genesis 1, we repeatedly read that "God saw that it was good." Extending the Creation theme, the psalmist, in considering "thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained" (Ps. 8:3), exclaimed, "O Lord our Lord, how *excellent* is thy name in all the earth!" (verse 1).

And this excellence has been manifested throughout history in God's followers. The precise construction of Solomon's Temple obviated the need of hammer and nail (1 Kings 6:7). Daniel and his companions followed lifestyles of disciplined excellence. They were found to be 10 times better than all that were in the king's realm (Dan. 1:19, 20).

One can only imagine the quality that went into an item of furniture produced by Jesus in the carpenter shop! From a motley assortment of functional illiterates, Christ forged a team of thought leaders who eventually changed the course of human history and turned the world upside down (Acts 17:6). The label "Christian" gives no excuse for shoddy, inferior work. "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do," says the wise man, "do it with thy might" (Eccl. 9:10).

Adventist and Excellent, Too?

The first organized Adventist school was begun by Goodloe Bell in 1872. From that one-room school has emerged one of the most notable and global Christian school systems in the world today. And for good reason.

In the year Bell established his little school, Ellen White received an inspired message from God about the way such a school should be conducted. Her very first testimony on education in 1872 offers appropriate advice for schools today.

Ellen White began with the statement "It is the nicest work ever assumed by men and women to deal with youthful minds" (*Testimonies*, vol. 3, p. 131). She even proceeded to set forth principles of schooling that are strikingly current in their application. They include varying the manner of instruction (p. 131); character education (p. 131); home education (p. 137); critical thinking (p. 132); physical education (pp. 136, 137); school-to-work concepts (pp. 147-160); developmentally appropriate early schooling (p. 137); and proficiency in the basic skills (p. 160).

Mrs. White later amplified this counsel to include nongraded instruction, mastery learning, and behavioral objectives. "Higher than the highest human thought can reach," she wrote, "is God's ideal for His children" (*Education*, p. 18). What a prescription for excellence and greatness!

Although North American Adventists point with pride to past accomplishments, they are also sobered by present realities: (1) youth caught up in the popular culture and alienated from church life, (2) teachers who lack proficiency in their sacred work, and (3) parents financially strapped with escalating tuition.

The Journey to Excellence Model

Launched in 2003 by educators in North America, the Journey to Excellence initiative challenges homes, schools, and churches to confront what Collins calls the "brutal facts" and move Adventist education from *good* to *great*.²

The Journey to Excellence Model (see Figure 1) is not simply a one-way trip from point A to point B. It is a continuous pathway to quality education that may start at any point of the sequence and work forward and/or backward. When the Journey to Excellence becomes an operative part of a school, a college, or a school system, the result is a culture of continuous improvement and high performance.

Purposes

An excellent school or system must clearly define its reason for existence. When schools create a renewed sense of purpose, parents, educators, and the students themselves are energized to accomplish great things.

To many in the world of education, excellence is best represented by a standardized test or IQ score, or some other ephemeral, fragmentary measure of human performance. But a century ago Ellen White wrote, "It is the degree of moral power pervading a school that is a test of its prosperity" (*Testimonies*, vol. 6, p. 143). Although counsel from the Spirit of Prophecy repeatedly called for high scholastic standards in Adventist schools and colleges, excellence was always cast in the larger context of redemptive, harmonious education. However, this in no way implies that religion is a substitute for high scholarly attainment.

Our church is at risk, according to the findings of Valuegenesis researchers. Many students (and, sad to say, many of their parents and teachers) fail to see a sufficient difference between Adventist education and other forms of schooling.

Schools of excellence must have high and clear expectations. Quality Adventist schools must cooperate with homes and churches to help young people harmoniously develop their physical, mental, and spiritual powers and to inspire them to live lives of unselfish service to God and humanity.

The world church has called for each school to give evidence of its total commitment to the Lord's work. Several divisions have prepared statements identifying the goals and essential core elements of Seventh-day Adventist education. Schools and school systems around the world must examine their reasons for existence and inspire each student and educator to accomplish clearly defined purposes.

Plans

An effective Journey to Excellence program requires careful planning. "To fail to plan," so the saying goes, "is to plan to fail." As a part of the plan, attention must be given to *what students are to learn*, ensuring that the curriculum is tightly aligned to the system philosophy and goals.³

Resources must be allocated at all organizational levels in new and creative ways to support school improvement initiatives. Based on educational trends and research, innovative approaches in the use of resources are needed in areas such as information technology and time.⁴

The focus on excellence in Advent-ist schools will be only as good as the caliber of its teachers and school leaders. Supporting churches and school leaders at all levels should ensure that there are ongoing *professional development opportunities* for all teaching personnel. Administrators and governing boards must recognize that innovative practices will require substantial increases in time and funding in order to make *good* schools truly *great*.

Practices

Plans are necessary but insufficient. The highway to excellence is strewn with schools and school systems that were never able to put their bold visions into practice.

As one example, Ellen White advocated more than a century ago that the ideal school would nurture "thinkers rather than mere reflectors of other men's thoughts." And yet, in too many Adventist schools, lectures and telling dominate class activity. Consequently, too many students fail to become capable of vigorous, independent thought and are conditioned to merely reproduce on tests the thoughts of others.

A Journey to Excellence program requires trained leaders who can assess existing educational practices and collaborate with others to develop and implement innovative plans in a recurring cycle of excellence.

Effective schools are safe and nurturing environments in which curriculum is delivered in a relevant and responsible manner. These schools will continue to improve assessment and evaluation procedures utilizing research-based methods.

A few practices that will generate new realities are:

- Classroom instruction utilizing instructional designs that create an environment of excitement and high performance, such as faith-sharing activities, direct instruction, problem-based learning, social learning, remediation, and enriched activities.
- Creating a safe and nurturing climate that encourages every individual to accept personal responsibility for behavior and choices.
- Encouraging greater Christian understanding between persons from various races, cultures, ages, economic groups, religions, and physical abilities.
- Integrating curriculum from which teachers can enable students to see connections such as Christian faith and life in their multifaceted fields of learning.

- Teachers using a variety of ways to meaningfully monitor student progress.

Products

Finally, the excellent school or school system must examine its total effect on each student to determine if a quality product has been produced and if desired results have been achieved. Only then can we know if the goals of Adventist education have been achieved. This assessment may be informal or formal, resulting in data that measures comprehensive goal attainment. Excellence is not a single accomplishment or a one-time event; it is a continuous cycle that pervades the classroom, the school, the church, and the entire system.

An example of the value of assessment comes from the massive 1990 Valuegenesis survey of nearly 12,000 Seventh-day Adventist students and their parents, pastors, and teachers. While the survey uncovered some good news, it also highlighted some problems. Far too many Adventist students failed to develop a vibrant relationship with God. Many engaged in at-risk behaviors, and only a minority saw the religious and Bible teachings of their schools as challenging and valuable. These findings have been mirrored in various assessments taken at the college and university level. This survey was repeated with more than 16,000 students in 2001 as Valuegenesis2. Results identified a significant improvement in faith maturity areas, thus suggesting that schools are doing a better job at personalizing religion.

Assessment helps the system determine how it is doing. The excellent school does not hesitate to look into this mirror as it seeks to enhance its performance. Once assessments are made, evaluation looks for discrepancies among the system elements (see Figure 1) and points out changes that will improve the system. Excellence is not a simple attainment; it is a continuous cycle-and a way of thinking that must pervade the school and classroom.

The Journey to Excellence: So What's the Destination?

In classrooms where these changes are beginning to have an impact, teachers and students are excited about school. Classrooms are alive with interaction; students are involved and take ownership of their learning. Students understand that they learn differently from one another and are more willing to help each other. They are remembering skills from early in the year and are building, expanding, and transferring those concepts to other areas.

More than this, students, teachers, parents, and supporting churches are becoming copartners in growth and learning. This lifelong learning is the kind of education Ellen White speaks of as preparing God's people for "the joy of service in this world and for the higher joy of wider service in the world to come" (*Education*, p. 13).