

Improving Your School Through Research-Based Initiatives

BY PHIL SUITER

Let me express my thanks for having been asked to speak at the education conference, Congress 2005, of The American Association of Christian Schools. I especially appreciate having been asked to speak on "School Improvement." As I began to prepare for this task, I first asked myself this question: "*Can the idea of general school improvement be justified on the basis of Scripture?*" I must answer that question with a resounding YES. Recall the words of Jesus to Peter as recorded in Mark 8:33b ". . . Get thee behind me, Satan, for thou savorest not the things that be of God, but the things that be of men." These words were uttered at Caesarea-Philippi after Peter had acknowledged the person of Jesus by saying, "Thou art the Christ." Those words are recorded in Mark 8:29. The word "savors" speaks of the setting of one's mind. So, Jesus is telling Peter that his mind is set in the wrong direction. You have a taste for the things of men and not for the things of God. Or, Peter, your learning and understanding is not up to my expectation yet. There is some improvement to be made.

Then, recall other passages that speak of our testimony to the world. Paul urges the people of Thessalonica to ". . . walk honestly toward them that are without . . ." (I Thess. 4:12). In giving the qualifications for a church leader in I Timothy 3:7, Paul says "he must have a good report of them which are without . . ." It would appear that Paul is urging those of his day and those of our day to be concerned about our testimony to those who are outside the body of Christ. A quality program is crucial to that testimony.

It is my judgment that those of us involved in Christian education must offer quality programs for those students enrolled in Christian schools. That obligation extends to those paying the tuition bill. It extends to the sponsoring church and the leadership of that church. It certainly is an obligation that we have to God our Father. One can only conclude that school improvement efforts are vital to our movement. I am led to these conclusions:

1. School improvement must be a part of the action plan of every Christian school administrator.
2. Offering a quality spiritual and academic program is a moral obligation that Christian educators have to parents, to pastors, to the constituencies of the school, and most of all, to God Himself.

Those of us involved in Christian education have probably been somewhat negligent in designing and conducting research, in reviewing the literature and designing our own conceptualizations about the nature of school improvement programs, particularly the variables to be considered. As a starting point, let me offer one possible paradigm in attempting to bring the issues related to school improvement into focus. A paradigm is simply a model, a framework, or a pattern. If useful, it should

bring into focus one set of variables that might impact a particular enterprise, in this case variables impacting school improvement in Christian schools.

Vision And Core Values

The starting point for any school improvement program is the *vision* that the professional staff and constituents have for the Christian school ministry. The vision must be powerful and it must be palpable. A vision answers this question: "What do we hope to become?" Or, it might be stated this way: "If we are true to our purpose now, what might we become at some point in the future?" Bennis and Nanus (1985) suggest that a vision must present a realistic, credible and attractive future for the school, one that is better and more desirable in significant ways than existing conditions. The vision should be so compelling that the professional staff and others will be motivated to work together to make the vision become a reality. Senge (1990, p. 209) contends that "you cannot have a learning organization without a shared vision." Let me remind you of the words of the writer of Proverbs 29:18, "Where there is no vision the people perish: but he that keepeth the law, happy is he." The writer is saying that where there is no revelation of truth, the people will cast away all restraints and thereby perish. There must be a revelation that guides a school principal and faculty to strive for something that is better.

Any vision statement for a Christian school must present a compelling view of the future for all elements of the school—leadership, teaching, curriculum, parental involvement, achievement, organization, and all other elements. DuFour and Eaker (1998, p. 62-85) present an accurate and clear description of what a vision statement should be for the community of a school.

Equally important is the clarification of values that are shared by all of the Christian school's stakeholders, including the church leadership and parents. In fact, to be effective and powerful, values must be aligned with the vision statement. This is especially true for a Christian school. Nanus (1992, p. 51) writes about the potential of values to galvanize a group and promote a sense of shared ownership. Glickman (1993, p. 16) maintains that the clarification of values will enable a group to accomplish together what they could not do as so many individuals working in terms of their own unique values.

It should be noted that the Apostle Paul gives much attention to the need for single-mindedness in the book of Philippians. For example, he expresses a desire concerning the people in Philippians 1:27, that ". . . I may hear of your affairs, that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel." He expresses similar statements in Philippians 2:2, 5, 20, 21; 3:15, 19; 4:2. Working together, with a like-mindedness, was important in the mind of Paul as he spoke to the church at Philippi.

Again, DuFour and Eaker (1998, pp. 87-99) present a complete discussion of the place of a values statement in a school. Values statements might address such things

as pastor and parental involvement, the uniqueness of each child, the need for collaboration among the staff, the allocation of time for school improvement, and the responsibility of the ministry to God.

Context Variables and Process Variables

There are two sets of variables impacting the operation of Christian schools. First, **context variables** are the non-instructional factors or situational factors within every school, or the school culture that nurtures and supports the teaching and learning going on in a school. All schools have cultures, but successful schools seem to have strong and functional cultures aligned with a vision for the school and the core values of those working in the school. Fitzpatrick (2002, p. 156) concluded that Christian schools fail or close because of cultural or situational factors such as a lack of leadership, a loss of leadership, or a loss of vision. Even when process variables are the very best, a negative culture may impact the school in such a way that the school must close. For a Christian school, the context variables or culture may include the students' desire to learn, the staff's need for shared leadership and collaboration as the needs of the school are addressed, and, finally, the need for parent and pastor support for the ministry. These variables form the context or the culture that impacts the effectiveness of the school in reaching goals. These variables, and their impact on learning, must be a part of the knowledge base of the leadership of a Christian school. They cannot be ignored in school improvement efforts.

Research clearly indicates that high performing schools possess a strong culture for learning. Kline and Saunders (1993, pp. 44-45) cite the importance of a culture in which curiosity and excitement about learning abound. Frankly, Christian schools need some of that excitement, especially for the Bible curriculum.

The variable of shared leadership does not imply an abdication of the assignments given to principals, administrators, and pastors. It does imply a sense of community in which the task of defining the schools and charting a course for improvement is shared with all of those working within the school. Barth (1990, p. 128) states that "leadership is not a zero-sum game in which one person gets some (leadership) only when another loses some." Rather it is a respect and trust for the abilities of those working within a ministry to offer input in the making of decisions about the ministry. Shared leadership demands time and opportunities for involvement as the school program is designed. It is a sense of inclusiveness whereby all of those involved in the ministry are encouraged to help shape the ministry to accomplish purposes.

The third of the contextual or situational variables is that of parent and pastor support. It is quite clear from biblical teaching that the home and the church have been given the responsibility for the education of children. Neither can be left out of the process. The fervor for Christian education that once came from the pulpits of our nation is no longer there. And, parents have fallen prey to the natural tendency to abdicate their role in the education of their own children by permitting or engaging some other person or agency to perform that task in their behalf. They have removed themselves. Christian

educators, in keeping with the pattern set forth in the Bible, must work to get pastors and parents involved more directly in the Christian education movement.

Second, the top half of the paradigm identifies variables that focus on the improvement of teaching and learning processes and results, called **process variables**. In this model, they are identified as shared general goals, the curricular and instructional systems, and the assessment of results, largely in the form of student achievement measures.

Rosenholtz (1991) declares that “shared goals are central to the mystery of a school’s success, mediocrity, or failure.” This author goes on to say that shared goals communicate expected results to students, convey a hopeful message to all, enable teachers and students to gauge success, allow for meaningful feedback, and promote professional dialogue. For a Christian school staff, shared goals must answer these five questions:

1. What knowledge about God and the Bible should a graduate of our school possess?
2. What should a graduate of our school understand about issues of right and wrong?
3. What academic knowledge and skills should a graduate have to enable him or her to function in the 21st century?
4. What should each graduate of our school know to enable him or her to move on to the next level of education, whatever it is?
5. What can our school do to ensure that the spiritual gifts and natural talents of each student are developed to the highest possible level?

Shared goals should be limited in number and should be clearly focused. This will promote a widespread knowledge of the goals and much conversation around the important ends of the instructional process. Sizer (1996, p. 128) advocates the adoption of a limited number of simple, shared and general goals, well formulated and applying to each student within the school. Answers to the five questions stated above will do just that.

DuFour and Eaker (1998, p. 152) state that a quality school will “provide its students with a curriculum that has been developed by the faculty through a collaborative process and enables the school to foster a results orientation in its most critical area—student learning.” They go on to say that the “link between collaborative processes to resolve key instructional questions and a commitment to results cannot be overstated.” There is a tendency among Christian educators to think that the purchase of textbooks equates to adopting a curriculum. Nothing could be further from the truth. Building a Christian school curriculum must involve an entire faculty, collaborating under the guidance of a wise principal, and identifying the basis for making judgments about success, mediocrity, or failure. There is a critical link between responsibility and authority; the two should not be separated. Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1999)

state that “. . . teachers will need to know how to design curriculum and adapt their teaching so that it responds to student understandings, experiences, and needs as well as to family and community contexts.”

For the most part, any discussion about school improvement centers more on what adults do than on what students do. That must change. Central to the core of this paper and current research on school improvement is the idea that all of those involved in a Christian education ministry need to know and understand the criteria for student performance and they should be involved in interpreting achievement data from all sources. Such data is vital when school improvement programs are evaluated.

Conclusion

There is much research being done today to improve the quality of education offered to the youth of this nation. While there is not much research conducted in Christian education, professionals involved in this movement can become a consumer of research being done in the secular arena. School improvement for Christian schools must begin with an examination or re-examination of the core beliefs upon which the movement is based. Few Christian school staffs have done that. Core beliefs should be written and accepted at the school building level. It is only then that a quality vision statement can be written. Beyond the vision statement, school improvement efforts must consider the two kinds of variables that impact the quality of education within a school—context or cultural variables and process variables.

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