

# Christian schooling WHY BOTHER?

## PART 2

This is the second in a series of four articles published throughout this year. These articles discuss the rationale for Christian schooling in the contemporary context and seek to offer apologetic tools to teachers and parents, who are often called upon to defend the existence of Christian schools. The first article was a positive statement outlining the necessity of Christian schools. The subsequent articles will address clusters of arguments against Christian schooling that can be summarised as: quality, equality and qualification. This second article will seek to address the claim that the quality of education is compromised at the Christian school.

### EDUCATIONAL QUALITY

The frequency of questions about the quality of the education at Christian schools demonstrates that there is a perception (sometimes strongly held) of a choice: quality education or Christian education. How has this view developed? What are some of the charges given in claiming academic disadvantage? In exploring these claims we will look at the following issues:

- external test results
- special needs ('hospital') schools
- extension of 'gifted' students
- quality of teachers
- academic rigour
- school size

### EXTERNAL TEST RESULTS

The gospel of the Lord Jesus demands that Christian schools be inclusive in their enrolment. In this sense, Christian schools provide public education. Enrolment is not dependent on academic achievement, sporting prowess or gifts in the performing arts. This situation results in a broad mix of academic ability levels compared to more exclusive independent schools, which may have an enrolment policy that academically biases student population. The comparing of schools through the window of student results in external tests may not be a fair comparison of the quality of the education that is offered. A much fairer comparison would be to track how student progress has developed through time in each school context. Independent of the academic starting point of an individual student or a class, how have they progressed in their time at the school? Unfortunately, this is more difficult to measure and is rarely reported. This adds to the unfounded perception that Christian schools offer an academically disadvantaged education when compared to more selective independent options.

### SPECIAL NEEDS ('HOSPITAL') SCHOOLS

It is sometimes suggested by parents that they are glad that Christian schools exist as they provide a wonderfully nurturing, caring, educational community for children with certain needs. However, because their children are not troubled academically or behaviourally they enrol them in the local state or independent school. With this thinking, the local Christian school becomes the local 'hospital' school. This thinking is widespread within certain communities and some Christian schools may find themselves in a positive feedback loop where their commitment to love and serve all their students promotes a view that they are specialists in loving and teaching the less 'lovable' or less academic.

In defending this claim, the starting point is to state that it is true! There is a deep commitment by Christian schools to develop nurturing, caring, educational communities. There is a commitment to recognise the individual needs of every child – the gospel demands no less. The commitment of Christian schools to only employ teachers with a mature, authentic faith in the Lord Jesus and who are committed to a self-sacrificial, truth-honouring relationship with their students will bring healing! The unfortunate perception that their strength is in 'treating' certain students is a result of their attempt to love all students. This perception needs to be addressed.

### EXTENSION OF 'GIFTED' STUDENTS

A similar claim can sometimes be made that the Christian school academically disadvantages those students who are gifted and talented. It is suggested that emphasis and resources are given to those students whose gifts are not in the academic area and the more academic student is not nurtured, encouraged or extended. It may well be that Christian schools have been a little unsure of how exactly to treat the academically talented. Hesitations with publicly acknowledging standout academic achievement for fear of promoting elitism mixed with hesitations about awarding academic achievement in light of the conflict between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, have both been misread by some parent communities as a devaluing of rigorous academic pursuit.

If students are not lifted up and praised publicly in front of their less gifted peers for their academic achievements and the school marketing material does not highlight the top band of student results in external tests, it does not necessarily mean that the academically gifted student is not loved, nurtured, extended and challenged. They may

well be achieving at a high level but are being challenged to use their gifts in the service of others rather than to serve themselves or for the promotion of the school.

### QUALITY OF TEACHERS

A distinctive feature of Christian schools is their non-negotiable commitment to employ only Christian teachers. It is ridiculous to expect teachers to teach all things from a Christian worldview when they have not personally embraced the gospel. This commitment, however, can result in the perception that because the employment pool is reduced, there must be a compromise in quality. The logic appears to be that there are not enough Christian teachers of sufficient academic and professional standard to maintain quality. This assumption is perhaps quite unfounded.

The reality is that Christian schools want teachers who are Christians and who have high professional skills and standards. The level of Christian commitment does not replace the capacity to carry out the required professional tasks. However, professional skills and understanding can be developed given the right attitude and aptitude. Wise principals and boards look not only at the skills a prospective teacher brings but also at their total contribution, potential and teachability. But Christian commitment cannot be taught or developed – it needs to be the starting point.

### ACADEMIC RIGOUR

It is claimed at times that Christian schools lack an academic rigour. When this is explored further it is suggested that there are lower expectations for student achievement and behaviour. Although there may be examples where this has been true, it does not need to be the case and most often isn't! In a learning community where it is acknowledged that individual learners have been created with a diverse range of abilities and that teaching needs to have realistic, differentiated expectations for all students, it can be misinterpreted that the expectations are lower for all students. A program of individualised high expectations is a far more just approach to educating compared to an inflated expectation that all must meet. Only the academically exceptional student can fulfil this expectation while the majority can't reach the bar. It is unfortunate if the customising of realistic learning outcomes is understood as a lack of academic rigour.

Christian schools seek to develop curriculum that is based on a biblical understanding of the world. Christian schools do not balk at guiding students through government syllabuses while seeking to teach discernment

and a critical thinking to review all things through a Christian worldview. It is therefore suggested that the academic rigour at the Christian school is potentially deeper and richer than those to which it is compared due to the additional worldview critique, and skills in wise discernment, that are nurtured and emphasised.

### SMALLNESS OF SCHOOLS

Many Christian schools are small by design. What is seen as an advantage by the community of parents who established the school, is sometimes seen as a disadvantage by the wider community. Claims of reduced subject choice (particularly in the secondary school), reduced exposure to extra-curricular activities and a lack of critical mass for the building of like-minded social networks can be heard. What is interesting is that educational research does not support these claims.

The illusion that large schools provide a superior educational experience was initially questioned by Baker and Gump back in 1964 with the research that they conducted for their book *Big School, Small School: High School Size and Student Behaviour*. Their research revealed that the number and the variety of extra-curricular activities are significantly higher in small schools. Subsequent research has found that students at small schools are involved in a greater variety of activities and that a greater satisfaction is derived from their involvement (Fowler, 1995).

It has been found that student attitudes and self-concept are both healthier in a small school. The research on student attitudes overwhelmingly favours small schools over larger ones (Bates, 1993; Howley, 1994). When it comes to academic achievement it may not be quite so clear. However, although approximately half of the research suggests no clear conclusion either way, the remaining research indicates that student achievement in small schools is superior to large schools (Wallberg, 1992; Eichenstein, 1994).

The interpersonal climate and relational community of the small school is where the greatest benefits can unfold. Relationship is fundamental to the learning process. Discipleship is the ideal for teaching biblical discernment. Positive correlations between small schools and favourable interpersonal relations have been found by Stockard and Mayberry (1992).

### CONCLUSION

When we assess the quality of something, in this case Christian schooling, we must be sure what we mean by quality. When we are reflecting on the type of school to send

our children to we must ask, "What exactly defines a quality educational experience?" As Christian parents, do we measure the education we want for our children by results in comparative external tests or by the quality of relational structures; by the amount of publicity on academic excellence or on the rigour of biblically based critical thinking; on the amount and scope of programs or on the genuine commitment to people and their needs. Although the priority ought to be on the second options, a diminution of the first options should not be assumed.

Christian schools have not always perfectly fulfilled their vision of providing quality education (though they do not have the monopoly on this type of failure). However, the caricatures that have developed are by and large unfounded and unfair. One does not have to choose between Christian schooling and quality education.

Chris Parker  
cparker@nice.edu.au

Ken Dickens  
kdickens@nice.edu.au

Chris is a lecturer for the National Institute for Christian Education and online communications manager for NICE and Christian Education National.

Ken is the principal of the National Institute for Christian Education.

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