

RENAISSANCE ADVENTIST EDUCATION SUMMARY NOTES

What We Learned From Our Focus Groups September 19, 2009
Riverside, California

Our mission at the Alumni Awards Foundation (AAF) is to awaken the Adventist community to the *full potential* of the Adventist education system. AAF is an independent, nonprofit organization driven by a community of lay people who are passionate about seeing greater excellence in Adventist schools. Throughout the coming year, AAF's primary focus will be to facilitate a rebirth in Adventist K-12 education. That process starts (and ends) with committed people like you.

The notes below were taken from discussions at the recent Renaissance Adventist Education event in Riverside, California. If you have additional thoughts for AAF, please send them in the enclosed envelope. Your insight and perspective will be used to affect positive change in Adventist schools. Photos from the event can be viewed at alumniawards.com.

PART 1:

What Makes an Adventist K-12 School Excellent?

- Strong, visionary leadership at all levels (school, church, conference, etc.) with “political guts”
- Competent school board that focuses on continual improvement, big-picture thinking and sound business practices
- Passion for an authentic, relevant vision and mission
- Environment that inspires caring, respect and civility
- Spiritual mission; Adventist-Christian faith and values
- Opportunity to develop meaningful, lifelong relationships
- Healthy, safe faculty-student interaction
- Capable teachers
- Healthy parent-teacher relationships
- Parental and community involvement
- Support from local pastors and churches
- Steady flow of resources from the constituency
- Strong, distinctive curriculum
- Academic excellence that allows students to develop individual potential; programs for gifted students; AP classes
- Opportunities beyond academic essentials: “bells-and-whistles” academic opportunities
- Health education and service learning
- Extracurricular events
- Education in social competency, critical thinking, character, and culture
- Attractive facilities and grounds
- Critical mass of students (at least a break-even size)
- Loyal, spirited alumni

PART 2: What barriers prevent Adventist K-12 schools from achieving excellence?

& PART 3: What can we do about those barriers?

During Part 2 of our Focus Groups, guests identified barriers or “Elephants in the Room”--issues that remain unaddressed and prevent progress in Adventist schools. During Part 3, guests identified potential actions to overcome those barriers. From those discussions, we've summarized 7 critical issues that affect progress in Adventist schools.

BARRIER 1: ABSENCE OF VISIONARY, TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Issue.

Many school principals are ill-equipped to serve in an administrative role. Most current Adventist school principals have not been educated in business or administration, yet they're expected run their own small business. The CEO-type personalities needed to run the schools often pursue careers with better compensation and more prestige in areas such as healthcare, senior living, or even higher education. The clergy-dominated wage scale inhibits the business-minded, incentive-driven talent from benefiting the system.

Furthermore, the leadership structure within the Church discourages leaders from taking an honest, realistic look at the school system. Each administrator's desire for rank, status and job security prevents them from speaking out about issues. As talented, courageous leaders move through the ranks, political pressures prevent them from being effective at the local level.

Your Ideas.

- Remuneration: Explore ways to improve the compensation of principals, ultimately attracting *and* retaining top-notch leaders and educators. Schools need the best, brightest, most dynamic leaders available; compensation should reward innovation and excellence.

- Mentorship: Offer incentives that encourage administrators to grow into strong leaders. Facilitate a mentorship program that would partner principals with local business leaders, empowering them to “exit the box” and become more known in their local communities, chamber, rotary, etc.
- Church Hierarchy: Develop a church/school leadership structure that allows for open dialogue.

BARRIER 2: LACK OF EFFECTIVE, COMPETENT SCHOOL BOARDS

Issue.

School boards are often made up of ill-qualified members appointed by a church board. Due to weak principal leadership, they poorly micromanage schools. Often boards do not engage in strategic planning or creative leadership. These boards have a tendency to get caught up in minute administrative details of the school rather than having vision and influence. Conferences and schools place passive expectations on board members as the primary leaders of a school's future.

Your Ideas.

- Board Recruitment: Develop evaluation tools that can be used to recruit and select effective board members who are key stakeholders in the school.
- Training: Establish a training program to ensure optimal performance of a board team. Boards should be required to develop vision and action plans. There could even be an annual conference or training program in which every school board is required to participate.

BARRIER 3: INSUFFICIENT FINANCIAL RESOURCES

Issue.

Even before the recession, most Adventist schools were already facing the stark realities of a lack of funding. Many families who send their children to Adventist schools cannot afford it and are very dependent on financial aid. Some schools are located in regions that have become too expensive, or in areas where the Adventist population is dwindling. Despite the need to function at critical mass, many schools don't open doors to the community.

Your Ideas.

- Consolidate: Work with the Church to eliminate waste in spending on education. Schools could consolidate programming in certain areas using technology, joint purchasing, etc.
- Major Giving: Find leaders who fearlessly pursue transformational giving.
- Church support: Develop healthier church-school relationships to ensure support from the constituency (see 4).
- In some areas, there are not enough Adventists to support a school, or it has become too expensive to operate. In such cases, the Latter-day Saints' model could be adopted. Rather than operating their own school system, Latter-day Saints provide exceptional before-and-after-school study and Christian mentoring.

BARRIER 4: POOR PASTORAL SUPPORT; EDUCATION AS A LOW PRIORITY

Issue.

A lack of pastoral support can have adverse effects on community perception, involvement and financial support of a local Adventist school. Many churches view their local Adventist school as a financial burden that drains money away from direct outreach programs. Many clergy perceive the education system as a burden or competitor rather than a means to evangelize. An underlying tension between pastors and educators prevents Adventist schools from growing. This lack of support from the pulpit could be detrimental to the survival of Adventist K-12 schools.

Your Ideas.

- Acknowledge pastor-teacher tensions, and reconnect the clergy to the vision and evangelistic potential that lies in the education system.
- Create better avenues for collaboration between constituency, school, church, and conference.
- Re-prioritize church resources to focus on improvement of education system.
- Demonstrate to all levels of church leadership the evangelistic potential that lies in the NAD education system.
- Develop a Sabbath School lesson on the value of Adventist education.
- Create a political action group that allows lay people to advocate for excellence in Adventist education.

BARRIER 5: SHORTAGE OF TALENTED, QUALIFIED EDUCATORS

Issue.

Elementary and secondary education is not an attractive career field to those in college. The poor reputation of SDA education, low pay and unstable employment discourage talented people from entering education. This has resulted in a shallow pool of talent from which to find teachers. Furthermore, staff selection is not always based on performance. With the economic downturn, some Adventist schools have let teachers go based on seniority rather than performance. Talented teachers are moved out of the system while incompetent ones are held in. This demonstrates an underlying culture of mediocrity (see 6).

Your Ideas.

- Recognize and reward talent.
- Develop evaluation tools to assess quality.
- Develop incentive programs to aid in the recruitment and retention of talented teachers.

BARRIER 6: CULTURE OF MEDIOCRITY; LACK OF OWNERSHIP

Issue.

Being “Adventist” is no longer good enough for most Adventist parents. They are looking for academic excellence in a spiritual atmosphere. However, an attitude of complacency and mediocrity has created a waning appreciation for Adventist education. Parents do not get involved beyond superficial support. Many Adventist families look elsewhere for education, while schools are left in desperate need of students.

Your Ideas.

- Develop grassroots support for school improvement by hosting town hall meetings that involve parents and churches in school improvement.
- Give parents opportunities to offer more than superficial support and stand behind the vision for school progress.
- Set a higher standard for excellence (compare with outstanding private schools rather than public schools).

BARRIER 7: INFERIOR MARKETING PRACTICES

Issue.

Some Adventist schools *do* offer an exceptional educational experience, but do not effectively tell their story. This is a missed opportunity to attract new students from surrounding communities and churches.

Your Ideas.

- Develop a nationwide marketing and branding strategy that creates an identity for Adventist education and promotes it to other churches (cross-selling).
- Focus on changing perceptions in local communities; create community awareness.
- Share excellence where it is found. Assess and publish “best practices” in Adventist schools.
- Develop a model school of excellence, and create a “toolbox” that can be shared with other schools.
- Make academic achievement data available (i.e. CognitiveGenesis).
- Encourage pastors and principals to recruit new students by making personal visits to Adventist families.

FULL GROUP DISCUSSION SUMMARY:

Two overarching themes emerged from the discussion at Renaissance Adventist Education:

1. Adventist schools need a **stronger, functional business model** that encourages a spirit of innovation and improvement rather than protection of the status quo. Schools still use the same model put into place when they were first established more than 100 years ago. “Change the model, or go out of business,” as one guest put it.
2. Constituents and stakeholders need a **voice to facilitate progress** in Adventist K-12 schools. There is currently no organized method of advocating transformational change.

ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS?

Your feedback is important to us. Please write down your thoughts and send them in the enclosed envelope. We'd love to hear from you.