

RENAISSANCE ADVENTIST EDUCATION SUMMARY NOTES

What we learned from our focus groups November 14, 2009

Chattanooga, Tennessee

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 Chattanooga, Tennessee. 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. You can download discussion notes from any Renaissance Adventist Education summit at alumniawards.com

PART 1: What are the attributes of an excellent Adventist K-12 School?

- Not subpar just because the school is Adventist, Christian, a “safe haven,” etc.
- Strong, visionary leadership at all levels (school, church, conference, etc.).
- United school community with frequent, open communication among constituencies.
- Healthy, effective school board that focuses on continual improvement, big-picture thinking and sound business practices.
- High standards among teachers and administrators.
- Spiritual focus and Biblical standards. “Doesn’t inculcate allegiance to an institution, but rather allegiance to Christ.” Challenges students to be thinkers, developing their spirituality, not “religiosity.”
- Education in critical thinking, character, and culture. (Full brain development)
- Capable, safe teachers that use current teaching methods.
- Healthy parent-teacher relationships.
- Opportunity to develop meaningful, lifelong relationships.
- Academic rigor that allows students to develop individual potential; programs for gifted students; AP classes.
- Opportunities for community service and student leadership.
- Prepares students for the “real world” and cultivates a strong work ethic.
- High behavioral standards.

PART 2: What barriers prevent Adventist schools from achieving a higher level of excellence?

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.

- **Fear of change.**
- **Absence of visionary, transformational leadership.** Several factors contribute to this including poor compensation and incentives to recruit and retain skilled leaders, and inadequate training programs for professional development.
- **Not enough talented teachers.** Education is not an attractive career field for 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. Some schools perpetuate mediocrity by retaining teachers based on seniority or convenience rather than on performance. Staff receive inadequate professional and emotional support.
- **Poor accountability structures.** Adventist schools are not evaluated/audited with an independent, politically unbiased perspective. There are no standardized auditing procedures to ensure schools are well-inspected with high standards. Consequences are ill-defined, and expectations of schools are unclear and inconsistent.
- **Religion often trumps excellence.** Schools rely too much on their “Adventist Brand Name” to draw in students. Today’s parents expect more out of Christian schools, and are looking elsewhere.
- **Lack of resources and decision about resources.** The Church’s commitment to excellence wavers, and funds are sometimes misallocated away from education. Schools are not strategic about spending and consolidating.

- **Increased awareness of alternatives.** Postmodern culture encourages families to pursue other non-adventist options for education or homeschooling.
- **Poor, outdated business models.** Schools still use the same “business strategies” that they did when they were established in the 1800s. Schools lack strong management, financial stability, strategic planning for growth, and fundraising plans.
- **Cumbersome church hierarchy.** The church leadership structure has become decentralized, overly political and bureaucratic. As leaders move up through the system they become less effective.
- **Ineffective school boards.** School boards do not act as primary leaders their of schools’ futures. Boards often do not engage in strategic planning or creative leadership. Many have become chaotic, politically-charged and poorly run.
- **Outdated, limited curriculum and teaching methods.** Adventist schools often fail to meet the needs of gifted or special-needs students by having limited course offerings and outdated textbooks. Teachers are not always encouraged or prepared to use innovative and “cutting-edge” teaching methods.
- **Lack of community vision and church support.** School constituencies often flounder in need for direction and ownership. Many churches have “divorced” or become less supportive of their church school, hence dividing the school community. Low support from church boards and pastors can have a detrimental effect on local schools.
- **Cost and affordability.** Tuition has become too high, and the operational expenses have become overwhelming.

PART 3: What can we as individuals do about these barriers?

During Part 3 of our Focus Groups, guests identified what we will do as individuals to *change* Adventist education. How can we become proactive about bringing greater excellence to Adventist schools? Some groups even made a commitment to do something that week for their schools. Other guests formed “action groups” to oversee progress in their own communities.

- **Give more, invest more.**
- **Reward talented leadership.** Meet with school boards to explore methods of encouraging innovative leadership. Find leaders who are qualified and provide adequate compensation and incentives.
- **Shake up school boards.** Don’t stop talking about progress. Demand accountability, excellence and strategic thinking. Find resources to train boards on roles and responsibilities.
- **Support teachers.** Affirm and get to know staff. Develop programs that offer growth opportunities for teachers (i.e. mentorship programs, real-world experience opportunities, continuing education, collaboration on teaching methods).
- **Create new programs for schools.** Some of ideas generated include character development initiatives, “going green” practices, internships for students, and community service opportunities.
- **Identify and adopt best practices from local non-Adventist schools.**
- **Make learning relevant.** Invest more money toward technology and personal finance courses.
- **Make a spiritual commitment.** Bathe your school in prayer by forming prayer groups. Rediscover why you believe in Adventist education.
- **Be visionary.** Clear the table of preconceptions on “How to do school” and ask “What do we want our school to be?” Initiate a revisioning process for where your school could be and how you plan to get there.
- **Get the church involved.** Involve local pastors, the church constituency and local church administration. Require pastor support, and remind membership of the need for evangelism to the youth already *in* the church.

PART 4: How can the Alumni Awards Foundation be a part of the solution?

During Part 4, guests identified how the Alumni Awards Foundation can be a part of the solution to the issues described above. Here is what you said AAF can do to awaken change in Adventist education:

- **Fund experimentation.** Offer grants to encourage a culture of transformation and progress.
- **Explore new business models.** Consider fewer, better schools/consolidation; franchise/corporation concepts; business strategies with clear benchmarks, goals and incentives.
- **Create accountability structures.** Develop educational auditing and evaluation tools to provide an unbiased “inspection of the product.”
- **Facilitate a movement.** Convene the voice of lay church members who wish to bring about reorganization to the structure of the Adventist school system. Generate discussions and energy through a video and/or newsletter. Host events for people who have withdrawn their children from Adventist schools, and encourage the entire Adventist community to make education a priority until something is done.
- **Create programs that recruit and retain talented leaders and educators.** Programs could offer sabbaticals, masters degrees, competitive compensation packages, business internship/apprenticeship opportunities, leadership training and continuing education.
- **Provide mentoring and consulting programs to school boards.**
- **Conduct a teacher’s survey.** Tap into the often-overlooked voice of teachers, and harvest their ideas.
- **Identify and celebrate best practices in Adventist K-12 schools.**
- **Be the “voice” of lay people.** Represent the voice of lay members and collaborate with the North American Division on potential solutions to issues. Challenge the NAD to get pastors involved in the revitalization of Adventist schools.
- **Meet the needs of gifted students.** Provide resources that would enable schools to broaden their curriculums so that students reach their individual potential.
- **Set up pilot or magnet schools.** Select certain schools or school districts where experimentation with new programs and practices can be tried.

FULL GROUP DISCUSSION SUMMARY:

Three 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 mediocrity.
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.
3. Talented leaders and educators should be more aggressively sought after.

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.