

RENAISSANCE ADVENTIST EDUCATION SUMMIT REPORT

What we learned from our think tank sessions February 27, 2010

Orlando, Florida

The mission of the Alumni Awards Foundation (AAF) is to awaken the Adventist community to the *full potential* of the Adventist education system. The notes below were taken from discussions at the recent *Renaissance Adventist Education* event in Orlando, Florida. If you have additional thoughts for AAF, please send them in the enclosed envelope. You can find these notes, photos, the Pilot Light Podcast, and the keynote presentation online at alumniawards.com.

PART 1: What are the attributes of a healthy, excellent Adventist K-12 School?

- Strong, visionary leadership at all levels (school, church, conference, etc.)
- Strategic visioning on the local level
- Constituency (both home & local church) dedicated to school improvement
- Teachers loyal to the church and consider his/her position a “calling”
- Well-educated teachers who engage in professional development
- Adequate resources to support teachers
- Innovative, cutting-edge teaching methods and utilization of known best practices
- Competitive with secular institutions. Academic standards are reflected in measurable ways
- School is involved and known in the local community
- Christ-centered. Staff knows how to share Adventist core values/Jesus with kids
- Life-long relationships between students and teachers
- Emphasis on character development, including service, ethics and respect
- Emphasis on students’ critical thinking skills
- Consistency in students’ activities at home and school
- Balance between standards and support for students; also balance between compassion and discipline
- Affordable, yet has financial capital/profitability
- Safe facilities
- Strong marketing program
- Extracurricular activities and sports programs
- Emphasis on nutrition & physical education
- Equipped to manage diverse student needs (troubled students, special needs, etc.)

PART 2: What obstacles or barriers prevent Adventist schools from thriving?

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. While it’s hard to quantify all that was said, the following list of “barriers” starts with what came up most frequently, and ends with what was discussed in just one or two groups. (Although these items are ordered by popularity, that does not necessarily signify their level of importance).

BARRIER 1: ABSENCE OF VISIONARY, TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

Contributing factors identified by think tank:

- **School board competence:** Boards receive inadequate training for governing schools. Weak school boards don’t follow a strategic plan and fail to hold their staff and leadership to high standards. Board members are not chosen according to their credentials.
- **Poorly qualified principals:** High turnover in the administration of schools creates instability. There are no training or residency programs to develop competent school leaders. School administrators are sometimes ill-qualified for the position and seem disconnected from the financial realities of running a school.
- **Lack of recruitment/retention initiatives:** The Adventist school system does not attract highly-qualified professionals, largely because of low teacher and principal salaries. Schools are only as strong as the people leading them.
- **Lack of accountability structures:** Principals and staff are not held accountable to measurable objectives.

BARRIER 2: DYSFUNCTION IN THE PRESCRIBED ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE FOR OPERATING SCHOOLS

Contributing factors identified by think tank:

- **Oppressive church hierarchy:** Church leaders cannot be objective in making decisions about the education system due to political pressures associated with their rank and position. (“Turkeys don’t vote on Thanksgiving,” one guest put it.) The model for the Adventist school system is therefore dependent on a church leadership structure that lacks accountability and willingness to explore new models. Schools need a structure that incentivizes innovation and excellence rather than one that keeps “doing what we’ve always done.”

- **Lack of a viable business model:** Schools are dependent on a constituent-run rather than business-driven model, and there is resistance to changing that model. There is no top-down strategic plan for growth of the Adventist school system coming from the North American Division, partly because schools follow a constituent-run model.
- **Fear of change.**

BARRIER 3: DISAGREEMENT WITHIN THE ADVENTIST COMMUNITY ABOUT THE MISSION OF ITS SCHOOLS

Contributing factors identified by think tank:

- **Disagreement over the mission of Adventist education:** Church members are in disagreement about whether schools exist for the community or for Adventist families. There is also confusion over the evangelistic nature of Adventist schools. Should Adventist schools market themselves to non-Adventists?
- **Loss of Adventist identity in schools:** Schools have lost their distinctively Adventist attributes. They have become too “mainstream” for Adventists, and yet remain “too Adventist” for non-Adventist families. Schools are confused about who their market is and how that should affect their Adventist culture.
- **Loss of brand loyalty:** Adventist families no longer send their children to an Adventist school just because it is Adventist. Other Christian schools are emerging as real alternatives to Adventist education, and the Adventist community has lost sight of the value of Adventist education.

BARRIER 4: INCONSISTENT ACADEMIC QUALITY / LIMITED ACADEMIC OPPORTUNITIES

Contributing factors identified by think tank:

- **Lack of accountability structures for teachers:** Teachers do not receive regular performance reviews that hold them accountable to improvement. Poor performers are moved around rather than terminated. Teachers are retained based on seniority rather than performance.
- **Outdated/ineffective teaching methods:** Adventist schools are slow to adopt cutting-edge teaching methods that have been proven more effective in student learning.
- **Outdated technology in the classroom.**
- **Shallow pool of qualified, talented teachers:** Young people are not choosing a career in teaching, partly because teachers don't receive adequate compensation or continuing education opportunities.
- **Limited opportunities for students:** Adventist schools have inadequate resources for special needs or gifted students. Non-Adventist schools often offer greater academic and extracurricular opportunities.
- **Inconsistency in the academic quality of the “Adventist Brand”:** There is no universal criteria for rigorous academic excellence in Adventist education. While some Adventist schools provide high quality education, others remain “subpar.” Low standards in some schools create the perception of poor quality across the board.

BARRIER 5: LACK OF FINANCIAL RESOURCES

Contributing factors identified by think tank:

- **Changing demographics in Adventist Church:** The Adventist Church in North America grows, but its new membership cannot afford tuition at an Adventist school. Schools are challenged to set reasonable tuition costs for “Have-nots,” while meeting high expectations of the “Haves.” Furthermore, Adventist schools are located in regions where there is no longer an Adventist population to sustain it.
- **Insufficient subsidy:** Schools cannot survive or grow on subsidy from the church alone. Some say more tithe dollars should be going to education.
- **Difficulty creating an affordable product:** Tuition is already too expensive for many Adventist families and yet it does not begin to cover the cost of operating a school. Furthermore, there is disagreement about whether or not all Adventist children are entitled to an Adventist education.
- **Lack of an innovative finance scheme:** As problems get worse, a new model is desperately needed.
- **Poor financial leadership:** Finances are sometimes poorly managed by ill-qualified personnel. School leaders appear disconnected from financial realities. Leaders feel forced to think in terms of surviving rather than thriving.

- **Competition from alternatives:** Adventist education must compete with public schools, which are free.

BARRIER 6: TURF WARS BETWEEN CHURCHES AND THEIR LOCAL CHURCH SCHOOLS

Contributing factors identified by think tank:

- **Schools place a “financial drain” on local churches:** Churches give a major portion of their local budget to their local schools, which can breed resentment and a lack of support from church leadership.
- **Lack of support from pastors and church members:** Many pastors didn’t attend an Adventists school in grades K-12; they don’t see the value in it and don’t encourage their congregation to support it. Families, in turn, do not make sacrifices to send their children to an Adventist school. Local churches have become complacent about their struggling schools, lacking action and commitment to success.

OTHER BARRIERS IDENTIFIED:

- **Complacent parents:** Parents do not take ownership in helping their local school thrive.
- **Breakdown of the home:** Social dysfunction in families has impacted the quality and atmosphere at Adventist schools.
- **Poor communication structures between the school and students, parents and community.**
- **Insufficient marketing:** Schools lack an aggressive marketing plan to recruit students.
- **Exclusivity:** Schools are “afraid” of “opening their doors” to non-Adventist students.
- **Inferiority complex among Adventist community:** Misconceptions about Adventist education have created an exaggerated feeling of inferiority in the Adventist community (i.e. The mentality that *all* Adventist schools offer a subpar education or that smaller schools are not as effective as larger ones).
- **Lack of spirituality and Christ-centeredness:** Schools are not “loud” about their faith.
- **Racial issues divide school communities.**

PART 3: What is needed to overcome the challenges listed in Part 2?

During Part 3 of our Focus Groups, guests identified what we will do as individuals to work for change in Adventist education. Here is what some of you identified as potential solutions:

- **Develop and reward strong leadership:** Develop a strategic plan for recruiting and retaining qualified leaders. Offer competitive compensation, training programs, mentoring and continuing education opportunities.
- **Reinvest in a new church model:** Rethink the organizational structure of the church. Replace unions and conferences with “Research, Development & Administration Centers” that restructure and invest in a new church model.
- **Create accountability structures:** Develop a tool to regularly evaluate conference leaders, principals, teachers, and school boards based on measurable objectives. Follow through with rewards and consequences, and demand excellence.
- **Rethink the way we do school boards:** Create stringent criteria for school board composition and objectives for board governance. Boards members should have strong business and strategic planning skills. Boards should be trained to lead their schools through a re-visioning process that ends with a realistic strategic plan.
- **Aggressively pursue talented educators:** Recruit talented individuals into teaching. Create professional development opportunities that include performance-based incentives. Increase compensation for teachers. Be willing to make tough decisions about incompetent personnel.
- **Encourage controlled innovation:** “Stop doing what we’re doing, and start trying new things before it’s too late. Be willing to step out of our comfort level.”
- **Explore completely new models of operating and financing schools:** Consider models from like and dissimilar organizations. Develop successful templates that can be replicated based on solid business practices, then restructure the schools, finances, and governance accordingly.

- **Create stronger avenues for collaboration between conferences, universities, K-12 schools, and businesses.**
- **Facilitate a grassroots movement:** Create local community action groups that facilitate progress for their local Adventist schools. Involve the local church leadership, parents, grandparents, and members. Raise awareness for issues through church media and a central website.
- **Require support for Adventist education from pastoral leadership.**
- **Increase fundraising activities at schools:** Consider developing endowments or establishing stronger alumni associations.
- **Market more effectively to Adventist families:** Get teachers engaged in recruiting students to Adventist schools. Persistently communicate achievements and dispel misconceptions about academic quality at Adventist schools. Become more customer-service oriented.
- **Eliminate competition among Adventist academies by assigning them to specialties (arts, science, sports, etc).**

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 identified in Part 2. Here is what some of you said AAF can do to awaken change in Adventist education:

Nurture community action: Raise awareness for issues in Adventist education and nurture community action organizations or AAF chapters in various areas. Facilitate a grassroots movement for change in Adventist education.

Set up model schools or “demonstration sites”: Create programs that allow schools to test alternative business models and teaching methods. Allow other Adventist schools to take part in the success by identifying what works. Eventually, these model schools could help identify measurable standards and objectives for the Adventist school system.

Develop a leadership program that provides internships, mentoring and administrative residencies.

Fund innovation: Offer grants for promising initiatives, encouraging a culture of transformation and progress.

Facilitate problem-solving: Sponsor a forum where academic leaders come together for focused “think time” to delve into problems and, more importantly, solutions.

Disseminate communication that identifies “Best Practices” in academics and finance at Adventist schools.

Provide training and consulting to school boards: Consult with struggling schools and identify potential new strategies for operation (i.e. Providing technical or vocational training specializing in certain areas). Educate schools on how to fund themselves using new approaches and business concepts.

Offer grants to fund technology.

FULL GROUP DISCUSSION SUMMARY:

During the final portion of Renaissance Adventist Education guests were invited to voice areas of particular concern. These were the overarching themes that emerged from the final full-group discussion:

1. Adventist schools need a stronger, functional business model that encourages a spirit of innovation and improvement at all levels of leadership. This could require reorganization of the leadership structure of the current education system.
2. There is a loss of solidarity and confusion about the mission of Adventist schools. (i.e. Do schools exist for children of the community or children of the church? Should Adventist schools market themselves to non-Adventist families? If Adventist schools became more “inclusive,” how should that affect the culture of the schools?)
3. There is a lack of universal structure and standards in the Adventist school system that creates fear about the future.