

RENAISSANCE ADVENTIST EDUCATION SUMMIT REPORT

*What we learned from our think tank sessions April 24, 2010
Washington, D.C.*

The mission of the Alumni Awards Foundation (AAF) is to awaken the Adventist community to the *full potential* of Adventist K-12 education. The notes below were taken from discussions at the recent *Renaissance Adventist Education* summit in the Washington, D.C., area. If you have additional thoughts for AAF, please send them in the enclosed envelope. You can find this report and event photos online at www.alumniawards.com, or visit our Facebook page.

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

During Part 1 of our Focus Groups, guests defined what an excellent Adventist school looks like.

- Safe atmosphere
- Solid financial management that creates affordable yet quality product
- Visionary, competent leadership
- School has a strategic plan and vision for the future based on sound business principles
- Constituency focused on school improvement
- School offers adequate support for staff with competitive salaries and professional development opportunities
- Teachers pursue innovative, cutting-edge teaching methods
- Well-developed extracurricular programs in athletics and the arts
- High academic standards
- Strong alumni organization
- Adequate maintenance of physical plant
- School offers distinctive and desirable product
- Superior marketing with emphasis on customer service
- School is involved and known in the local community
- Emphasis on character development, respect and critical thinking
- Work study and financial aide available
- Internship and college preparatory opportunities
- Service and discipleship instilled in students
- Spiritual needs of students and constituency are met
- Caring, loving faculty who values each child as a gift from God
- SDA world view and heritage is taught
- Equipped with resources for special needs or gifted students

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: MONEY

Contributing factors identified by think tank:

- **Affordability:** 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 Adventist education should be made available to all Adventist families, regardless of their ability to afford it.
- **Lack of a sustainable finance scheme:** Schools do not invest in financial models that will ensure their future such as the development of endowments.
- **Poor financial leadership:** The system lacks accountability in financial management. School leaders appear disconnected from financial realities, and they avoid making the tough decisions that ensure financial stability. School finances are often managed by ill-qualified personnel without a solid background in business and finance.
- **Misallocation of financial resources by conferences:** Conferences continue pouring money into “dying” schools that hold little promise for improvement, while more excellent schools do not get the financial

assistance they deserve. Although conferences subsidize more schools than they can afford, some feel they should still allot more money for education over other ministries.

- **Lack of trust = lack of money:** Tithe goes down when church members do not trust the church leadership. Schools are among the first hit as financial support for the church wavers.

BARRIER 2: ABSENCE OF VISIONARY, TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

Contributing factors identified by think tank:

- **Insufficient focused training for principals:** Principals are not required to complete any kind of training or residency program to equip them with necessary skills for running a private school.
- **Tendency to inbreed leadership:** The tendency to “inbreed” leadership staff prevents leaders with a fresh vision, strategies and expertise from entering the system. Senior teachers are moved into leadership positions with only a background in teaching and very little knowledge about managing a successful business or creating a realistic strategic plan.
- **Unattractive compensation & incentives:** Qualified professionals and young people in college do not consider a career in Adventist education because of limited pay and low prestige.
- **Lack of accountability structures:** Principals and staff are not regularly evaluated based on measurable objectives with defined consequences.

BARRIER 3: SHORTAGE OF QUALIFIED EDUCATORS PREVENTS ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

Contributing factors identified by think tank:

- **Lack of training & support for education professionals:** Professional growth and continuing education opportunities for teachers is limited, and sometimes non-existent.
- **Irrational expectations placed on teachers:** In an effort to conserve money, teachers are often required to teach outside of their subject matter. Some teachers are given exhausting work loads, preventing them from delivering the highest quality education to their students.
- **System protects mediocre educators:** Poor performers are moved around rather than terminated. Teachers are often retained based on seniority rather than performance.
- **Outdated curriculum & teaching methods:** Schools often use outdated textbooks and are slow to adopt cutting-edge teaching methods that have been proven more effective in student learning.

BARRIER 4: DYSFUNCTION IN THE INFRASTRUCTURE FOR ADVENTIST K-12 EDUCATION

Contributing factors identified by think tank:

- **Lack of innovation & fear of change among church leaders:** The model for the Adventist school system is dependent on a church leadership structure that lacks accountability and willingness to explore new models. Rather than having leaders that incentivize innovation and excellence, there is a widespread suspicion to open thinking, especially if it threatens existing power structures. Furthermore, too many education decisions are often made by pastors rather than business or education professionals.
- **Misallocation of financial resources:** See “Barrier 1: Money.”
- **Oppressive church hierarchy:** Movers and shakers who wish for change get “committed to death.” The current system is overly bureaucratic, inefficient and dangerously slow-moving. The conference-union structure is an anachronism, based on needs of the early church rather than today’s church.
- **Tension between school boards & the local conference:** Conference personnel are given too much “veto power” on school boards, and therefore school boards have little ability to make innovative changes in

their schools. Some focus groups suggested the contrary: The constituent-driven model that schools follow prevents the local conference from making necessary changes.

- **Lack of trust & dialogue:** Constituents are not given enough opportunity to dialogue with church administrations about longstanding concerns. They give up or go elsewhere because they do not want to fight the system.

BARRIER 5: APATHY AND LACK OF VISION AMONG THE ADVENTIST COMMUNITY

Contributing factors identified by think tank:

- **No unified vision:** No master plan for schools has been communicated from any level of the denomination.
- **Unclear mission:** The Adventist community is unclear and often in disagreement about the mission of Adventist schools.
- **Discouragement or apathy among Adventist community:** The Adventist community has lost sight of the value of Adventist education. Many families have become discouraged by the lack of change in Adventist education and have pursued alternative options for education.
- **Adventist schools lack consistent standards of quality:** Every school seems to offer a different education experience. Adventist families do not know what to expect, and therefore have lost confidence in the “Adventist education brand.”
- **Disagreement about whether education reform is a high-priority:** Although the Church heavily subsidizes schools, education reform is not a priority at the upper levels of church administration. Meanwhile, other ministries such as global evangelism take the agenda. Some suggest that reforming the education system would be the best way to boost evangelism in North America.

BARRIER 6: TENDENCY TO FEEL INFERIOR

Contributing factors identified by think tank:

- **Negative perceptions:** Poor quality in some schools create the feeling of poor quality across the board.
- **Fascinations with bells & whistles:** Adventist families fault Adventist education if schools are too “basic.” Bigger is not always better.

BARRIER 7: 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 do not see the value in Adventist education and do not 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 progress.
- **Lack of partnership between teachers and pastors:** They compete rather than collaborate on ministry.

OTHER BARRIERS IDENTIFIED:

- Erosion of family values
- Too many Adventist schools exist in one geographic area — schools compete with one another for students and subsidy from local church(es)
- Inability to meet needs of changing multi-cultural demographics of the Adventist Church

- Parochial politics in the Washington D.C. area
- Privilege right of parents for education
- Poor marketing
- Lack of distinctiveness or differentiation from public schools
- Racial prejudices
- Exclusivity: Doors are closed to non-Adventists

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 guests identified as potential solutions, starting with what came up most frequently and ending with what was discussed in just one or two groups:

- **Develop a solid core of education professionals:**
 - a. Develop training programs and build up Adventist colleges' education departments
 - b. Explore non-SDA, nationally recognized programs that support teachers
 - c. Create stronger incentives to attract and retain talent
- **Develop & reward strong leadership:** Develop a strategic plan for recruiting and retaining qualified leaders by offering:
 - a. Competitive compensation
 - b. Residencies, training and mentoring programs
 - c. Continuing education opportunities
- **Create evaluation & accountability structures:** Instill transparency and accountability at all levels using assessments based on measurable outcomes (evaluate test scores, parent involvement, spiritual activities, administrative performance).
- **Reorganize & train school boards:** School board composition needs to be carefully monitored. Members should be "passionate people of means," not just anyone who wants a seat. Members should be strong advocates of the school in their local communities.
- **Consolidate education structure to eliminate waste & redundancy:** Education department should be consolidated at the union or conference level, or education should be pulled out of the existing church structure.
- **Request (some suggest mandate) pastoral support:** Educate ministerial staff on the value of Adventist education; start by promoting it during pastoral education and training. Require that pastors promote their schools alongside principals.
- **Find & market "our niche":** Each Adventist school needs to discover what makes it unique in its own community. Being Adventist is not enough; schools must appeal to a broader market by offering something that other local schools are not.
- **Develop a unified vision & business model:** Commission business professionals to work with the North American Division to create a business plan for Adventist education.
- **Use model schools to identify best practices:** Develop pilot schools where new systems and strategies can be tested. Disseminate successful practices to other schools.
- **Make learning relevant:** Incorporate real-world applications into the curriculum; develop career-related work for students.

- **Provide vehicle that enables constituents to voice concerns to church administration:** Create capacity to change as a church; come together on the mission of Adventist schools by hosting forums where stories and ideas can be shared with the North American Division.
- **Tap into existing resources to fill needs Adventist schools are unable to fill:**
 - a. Make Adventist education available to small communities of Adventists through distance learning
 - b. Establish rural area partnerships
 - c. Network with Montessori and public schools to meet needs of gifted or special-needs students
- **Build a stronger partnership between church, home & school:** Get parents involved in making the church/home/school environment congruent so education is more effective.
- **Start a “Teach for America” initiative in Adventist schools:** *Teach for America* is a nonprofit program that recruits top-performing college graduates to serve as teachers for two years in inner city schools. The program has been praised for bringing high-quality education to disadvantaged youth.
- **Reintroduce industry:** Have schools operate campus industries that provide additional funding for the school, while helping families with tuition.
- **Outsource fundraising:** Create a global fundraising organization that raises funds specifically for Adventist education.

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 focus groups said AAF can do to awaken change in Adventist education:

1. Develop an endowment for Adventist education.
2. Fund teacher training programs.
3. Give constituents a voice by acting as a liaison between church leadership and constituents.
4. Fund internships for prospective principals in college to develop leadership skills.
5. Establish an evaluation/audit process that assesses schools and staff in all areas related to delivering world-class education.
6. Conduct parent and teacher surveys to identify problem areas and potential solutions.
7. Develop superior marketing strategies for Adventist education.
8. Facilitate the creation of a master plan for growth and excellence in the Adventist school system.
9. Create incentives for teachers to stay up on the latest teaching techniques and professional practices.
10. Work with conferences to allocate funding for special-needs education.
11. Set up a model school: Study what works at the most successful schools and create a pilot program at a “demo” school that employs those strategies. Share what can be replicated with other schools.
12. Nurture grassroots support and facilitate conversation.
13. Elevate the status and importance of excellence in education as a means to evangelize in North America.
14. Encourage schools to be active in their communities rather than demonstrating exclusivity or isolationism.

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