

PRELIMINARY SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Recurring themes of discussion at Renaissance Adventist Education

Riverside, California / Chattanooga, Tennessee / Orlando, Florida / Washington, D.C.

This document summarizes more than 55 focus group discussions held at four *Renaissance Adventist Education* summits. All focus groups were guided through the same set of questions, and their discussions were carefully documented. Note that this report is *not* comprehensive; it captures *only* those issues and solutions that were identified most frequently by focus groups.

What obstacles or barriers prevent Adventist schools from thriving?

Nearly every focus group identified the following as primary challenges to Adventist K-12 schools:

1. Absence of visionary, transformational leadership

- Adventist schools offer poor compensation and incentives to recruit and retain skilled leaders.
- Principals are not offered adequate training, and professional development opportunities are lacking.
- Education leaders appear disconnected from financial realities.

2. Lack of financial resources

- The demographics of the Adventist Church in North America have shifted; church membership is growing the fastest among populations that cannot afford tuition at an Adventist school.
- Local conferences do not provide adequate subsidy to cover the gap between tuition and operating costs.
- Schools have difficulty creating an affordable product based on current resources and expenses.
- The Church's commitment to excellence in its education system wavers.

3. Shortage of qualified, talented educators

- The poor reputation of Adventist education, low pay and unstable employment discourage talented people from entering education.
- Teachers are retained based on seniority or convenience rather than performance.
- Due to financial constraints, teachers are often asked to teach outside of their subject matter.
- Adventist schools are slow to promote and adopt proven, cutting-edge teaching practices.
- Staff receive inadequate professional development and training.

4. Poor accountability structures / Inconsistent Quality

- Adventist schools are not evaluated/audited by an independent, politically unbiased entity.
- Principals and staff are not held accountable to measurable objectives.
- Low standards in some schools create the perception of poor quality across the board.
- Consequences are ill-defined, and expectations of schools are unclear and inconsistent.

5. Dysfunction in the denomination's organizational structure for operating schools

- Political pressures associated with rank and position keep church leaders from doing what is in the best interest of the education system.
- Financial and strategic decisions are made by pastors rather than professionals in education and finance.
- The decentralized and constituent-run nature of the school system make it hard to implement transformative strategies from the top down.
- The North American Division has not set forth a master plan or operational model for the school system.
- Conferences and Unions prove to be a cumbersome way of making change happen.

Issues that were identified at every summit (but not every focus group) include:

6. Ineffective school boards

- School boards are not provided with adequate training to do their jobs effectively.
- Boards tend to micromanage rather than focus on "big picture" issues.

- Composition of board membership is not carefully monitored.
- Conference personnel have too much “veto power” on school boards.

7. Turf wars between local churches and schools / Lack of support from pastors

8. Lack of ownership and community vision / Disagreement about the value and mission of Adventist schools

9. Poor marketing

10. Feelings of inferiority / Misconceptions about quality

11. Outdated teaching methods and text books

What solutions are needed to overcome the challenges?

Focus groups from all four summits identified the following as solutions to the challenges listed above:

- **Offer competitive compensation and professional development opportunities.**
- **Reinvest in a new education model:** Rethink the organizational structure of the church as it relates to education. Consolidate unions and/or conferences. Some have suggested pulling education out of the denominational structure.
- **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.
- **Improve school board selection and training:** 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 visioning process that produces a realistic strategic plan.
- **Aggressively pursue talented educators:** Create professional development opportunities that allow for performance-based pay and incentives. Be willing to make tough decisions about incompetent personnel.
- **Market more effectively.**
- **Set up model schools or “demonstration sites”:** Establish successful model schools that develop best practices and operational templates that can be replicated in other Adventist schools. Model schools could help identify measurable standards and objectives for the entire Adventist school system.
- **Nurture community action:** Raise awareness for issues in Adventist education and nurture community action organizations. Facilitate a grassroots movement for progress in Adventist education.
- **Develop a leadership program that provides internships, mentoring and administrative residencies.**
- **Identify and reward best practices.**

Free-for-all Discussions: The Most Popular Topics

Each Renaissance summit includes a town hall discussion. During these “free-for-all” discussions, guests could present concerns before the entire group for discussion. Below is a list of the most popular points of discussion:

1. The church hierarchy is cumbersome and lacks accountability. (Riverside, Chattanooga, Orlando, Washington, D.C.)
2. Race issues divide Adventist school communities and stifle growth. (Orlando, Washington D.C.)
3. Adventist schools have an atmosphere of exclusivity and need to open doors to non-Adventists. (Riverside, Orlando, Washington, D.C.)
4. Adventist education needs community vision, strategic thinking and standards. There has been a loss of solidarity.. (Riverside, Chattanooga, Orlando, Washington D.C.)
5. There is a shortage of qualified leadership, especially as it relates to financial planning. (Riverside, Chattanooga, Orlando, Washington, D.C.)
6. Talented educators are not attracted to the system as a result of low pay for teachers and principals. (Riverside, Chattanooga, Orlando, Washington, D.C.)