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## Institutional Culture in Christian Schools

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# Institutional Culture in Christian Schools

## Abstract

This action research project investigated the institutional culture of Christian schools and its impact on faith formation. The research was a mixed method study with Sioux Center Christian School serving as a case study for the project. A careful literature review was conducted to identify the characteristics of healthy institutional culture in education, business and religious institutions. This list was vetted and prioritized using a focus group of Sioux Center Christian School teachers as well as interviews with several experts on institutional culture and faith formation. These characteristics were then used to develop a survey using the Four Building Blocks of Faith as the framework for the survey. Completed surveys were received from teachers at SCCS and students from the 8th grade class. The results showed a strong correlation between the scores of the teachers and students, indicating the pervasiveness of institutional culture for the entire school community. The data was also able to identify strengths and weaknesses in the culture of SCCS. The results indicate that the survey tool is an effective instrument that can be used by Christian schools to identify their current institutional culture. Suggestions for improving institutional culture in order to positively impact the faith formation of Christian school students were also included in the research project.

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## Comments

Action Research Report Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Education

Institutional Culture in Christian Schools

By

Jill Friend

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Action Research Report  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Education

Department of Education  
Dordt College  
Sioux Center, Iowa  
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Institutional Culture in Christian Schools

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**Table of Contents**

Title Page .....	i
Approval .....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Table of Contents .....	iv
List of Figures .....	v
List of Tables .....	vi
Abstract .....	vii
Introduction.....	1
Definition of Terms.....	4
Literature Review.....	5
Methods.....	13
Results/Discussion .....	18
References .....	41
Appendices.....	45
Appendix A .....	45
Appendix B .....	47

## List of Figures

Figures	Page
1. Percent favorable responses by item number.....	21
2. Average score by item number .....	22
3. I Belong – Teacher data .....	24
4. I Belong – Student data.....	24
5. I Know – Teacher data.....	25
6. I Know – Student data.....	25
7. I Have Hope – Teacher data.....	26
8. I Have Hope – Student data .....	26
9. I Am Called and Equipped – Teacher data .....	27
10. I Am Called and Equipped – Student data.....	27
11. Comparison of Teacher/Student Favorable Responses.....	28
12. Correlation of teacher average score to student average score .....	29
13. Our school fosters a positive flow of information .....	32
14. My school has a climate in which diverse perspectives are valued.....	32
15. School leaders have communicated a vision of the future that motivates me .....	33
16. I am encouraged to share my personal faith story with my colleagues .....	33
17. Our school encourages peer-to-peer accountability.....	34
18. I am appropriately involved in decisions that affect my work.....	34
19. Others have named my gifts and helped me find places to use them .....	35

**List of Tables**

<b>Tables</b>	<b>Page</b>
1. Demographic information of study participants .....	15
2. Comparison of ranking of average score with percent favorable .....	20



**Abstract**

This action research project investigated the institutional culture of Christian schools and its impact on faith formation. The research was a mixed method study with Sioux Center Christian School serving as a case study for the project. A careful literature review was conducted to identify the characteristics of healthy institutional culture in education, business and religious institutions. This list was vetted and prioritized using a focus group of Sioux Center Christian School teachers as well as interviews with several experts on institutional culture and faith formation. These characteristics were then used to develop a survey using the Four Building Blocks of Faith as the framework for the survey. Completed surveys were received from teachers at SCCS and students from the 8<sup>th</sup> grade class. The results showed a strong correlation between the scores of the teachers and students, indicating the pervasiveness of institutional culture for the entire school community. The data was also able to identify strengths and weaknesses in the culture of SCCS. The results indicate that the survey tool is an effective instrument that can be used by Christian schools to identify their current institutional culture. Suggestions for improving institutional culture in order to positively impact the faith formation of Christian school students were also included in the research project.

## INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE IN CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS

Many years ago there was a TV show called Candid Camera that looked for various ways to film people who were reacting unawares to ridiculous scenarios that were set up by the show's writers. One episode was set in a movie theater. The show's creators looked for movie showings where only one or two people were watching the featured movie. Candid Camera's actors entered the theater and sat in the seat right next to a solitary person in the theater even though there were many other empty seats. The episode was funny because of the awkwardness of the situation. Most people have never been taught the rules of how to select a seat in a movie theater, yet instinctively they have caught the unwritten rule that it is polite to leave some space between those watching a movie in a mostly empty theater.

Like the movie theater rules, our society is filled with basic assumptions about what is acceptable and unacceptable, including how to communicate and interact with those around us. Many of these assumptions are taught through direct instruction in our homes and schools, but often these assumptions are hidden; taught non-verbally and modeled through our priorities, what we celebrate, and what we choose to ignore. In his book *Desiring the Kingdom*, Jamie Smith (2009) writes in depth about how our inmost desires shape how we live, often in ways that are not at all obvious to us. Smith (2009) is referring to individuals, but institutions also embody identities and desires that shape those who are part of the institution, often in surprising ways. In his book, *The Fly in the Ointment*, J. Russell Crabtree (2008) uses the example of a church that has displayed in their foyer paintings or photos of every former pastor for the past 150 years. Even though they may not verbalize the sentiment, this is a church that clearly values history, hierarchy and office.

A number of writers have looked at the issue of institutional culture from the perspective of outside influences. Duiker (2010) in his Dordt MA thesis, *Sifting Through the Cultural Dust: A Pre-Transformational Activity*, writes of cultural dust that permeates the school culture. He cites globalization and proliferation of technological media and communication devices (Nicholson, 2007) as two important factors that have profoundly affected school culture. Undoubtedly, outside influences have an enormous impact on the school community, yet there are hidden internal influences that can create a culture that either supports or isolates the staff and students.

Christian schools in the twenty-first century are regularly being asked to defend the mission and vision of their schools. Unlike years ago where many church communities could be counted on to unquestioningly support the local Christian school, administrators frequently need to make the case for why parents should send their children to Christian schools, given the overwhelming financial obligation. Movements such as “Teaching for Transformation” based out of The Prairie Center for Christian Education are an example of organizations whose goal is to help Christian schools understand more clearly the mission and purpose of Christian schools. Many schools also develop mission statements and strategic plans to make sure they are providing a quality faith based education for parents.

Nevertheless, without a careful examination of a school’s culture, transformation will only be superficial at best, and mission statements and restructuring will do little to change the ethos of the institution. Crabtree (2008) likens a mission statement or strategic plan to the head of the body and the culture of an institution to the reflexes. He observes that, “The reflexive nature of culture explains why denominations develop and articulate strategic plans that never bear fruit: the unchallenged mono-optional cultures have a whole set of reflexes that override the

plan and render it ineffective.” What is true for church denominations is true for educational institutions as well.

Ultimately a school’s culture will not only affect the functioning of the organization, but impact student learning and faith formation as well. Christian schools often assume that student learning flows primarily from the curriculum and instruction in the classrooms. Obviously teaching every subject matter from a Christian perspective is important, but what if the faith development of students had less to do with the content of the materials, but rather was being “caught” through the culture and environment of the school community? A speaker at the Calvin Symposium on Worship a number of years ago called this the “null curriculum.” What if in fact, the school’s unspoken curriculum has a much greater impact than the overt curriculum? If students are to grow in their faith, schools need to examine the culture of their institutions to make sure that they are providing the healthy soil in which students can grow and flourish in their walk with the Lord (Hielema, 2011).

### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to identify the components of healthy institutional culture within a Christian school, and develop a process whereby schools can assess and begin to develop a culture where the faith formation of students can grow and thrive.

### **Research Questions**

1. What is meant by institutional culture?
2. Why is identifying institutional culture important?
3. How can Christian schools assess their current institutional culture?

**Definitions**

For the purpose of this work, the following definitions will be used:

*Institution* – The dictionary definition of this term is, “a society or organization founded for a religious, educational, social, or similar purpose.”

*Culture* – “the shared patterns of behaviors and interactions, cognitive constructs, and affective understanding that are learned through a process of socialization. These shared patterns identify the members of a culture group while also distinguishing those of another group.” This definition is from the University of Minnesota’s Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA).

*Faith Formation:* – A lifelong process of discipleship whereby we are being “formed, transformed, and conformed” to the image of Christ. This definition was stated by Holly Allen (2012) in the introduction to her book, *Intergenerational Christian Formation*.

*Building Blocks of Faith* – These four building blocks were developed by Bob and Laura Keeley and are currently being used by the Faith Formation Ministries of the Christian Reformed Church in North America in a one-year pilot project with fifteen CRCNA congregations. The four building blocks are: I Belong, I Know (Understand), I Have Hope, and I Am Equipped.

## **Summary**

Not only is an understanding of the role of institutional culture important for Christian schools to examine in an abstract sense, ultimately this understanding must be examined in light of its impact on student learning, and in particular, on the faith formation of our students. Bob and Laura Keeley have developed a Building Blocks tool that is currently being used by churches to identify four key areas in the discipleship of their members: I Belong, I Understand, I am Equipped, and I have Hope. The goal in this research is to adapt this tool as a way of examining and assessing the impact of the institutional culture in a school. Syd Hielema (2015) has used the term “communities of grace” to describe institutions that live out their Biblical calling to lead lives that are shaped by the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. This is the calling of the Christian school as it seeks to see their students flourishing in God’s world.

## **Literature Review**

### **Institutional Culture**

For this thesis the terms institutional culture and organizational culture will be used interchangeably. As stated by the Business Dictionary, “Organizational culture includes an organization’s expectations, experiences, philosophy, and values that hold it together, and is expressed in its self-image, inner workings, interactions with the outside world, and future expectations. It is based on shared attitudes, beliefs, customs, and written and unwritten rules that have been developed over time and are considered valid” (Organization Culture, 2015). Barth (2002) writes of school culture in the *Educational Leadership* journal and uses this definition; “A school's culture is a complex pattern of norms, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, values, ceremonies, traditions, and myths that are deeply ingrained in the very core of the organization.

It is the historically transmitted pattern of meaning that wields astonishing power in shaping what people think and how they act.” Hekman (2007) offers a similar definition, “Culture is a set of (often) unarticulated “rules” about the way things are done; values, assumptions. Culture is expressed in artifacts (ceremonies, rituals, the physical appearance of hallways, classrooms, the curriculum); espoused values; underlying assumptions (about students, about relationships among teachers how discipline and conflict are handled).”

There has been a healthy emphasis over the last few decades for schools and organizations to craft mission statements that summarize their institution’s purpose. In fact, “vision casting” has become a term that is frequently heard in school and church communities. Although writing a mission statement is important, without an examination of a school’s cultural climate, a mission statement can easily become nothing more than a slogan on a newsletter or a poster on a wall. School culture goes far deeper than just a mission statement, yet is often unspoken. This culture is evident in the language used, the norms that are accepted, and what is rewarded or penalized in a given organization (Crabtree, 2008). The culture of a school helps define how teachers interact with students, how students interact with each other, as well as how teachers, administrators, board member and school constituents communicate and support each other.

In this thesis both school culture and classroom culture will be examined since both are closely intertwined. Several areas of classroom environment have been examined in research studies in the last decade; the impact of classroom environment on student class participation and engagement, the emphasis on performance and grades versus learning and improvement, and the way in which teachers cultivate a classroom culture that is conducive to learning (Anderman &

Anderman, 2009). Research by Patrick, Ryan and Kaplan (2007) found that a student's social environment is very important for student engagement in the classroom.

The roots of institutional culture are varied and often difficult to identify, yet a careful examination of an organization's culture is crucial for healthy growth and effectiveness. As Hielema states in *Together All God's People*, "Most organizations have unintentional grace-squelchers. Often things we have always done become normal for us- so we don't question them. Certain habits continue for years and years" (Wilk, 2005). In *School Culture Rewired* (2015), Gruenert and Whitaker state that, "A culture is built around values, which are manifested in behaviors. The stories we tell and the symbols we use let those inside and outside of the culture know what we value most."

Identifying and measuring organizational culture has been found to be challenging. Ghosh and Srivastava (2014) carefully reviewed many of the methods that have been used in the past to measure organizational culture. They note that many of the methods are unreliable and "have been found to either have insufficient theoretical basis or result in a narrow depiction of the multidimensional construct of organizational culture." In analyzing many of the assessment tools currently available they were able to group the factors into seven broad categories; participation, respect for the individual, attitude to risk, action orientation, trust, openness, and power distance.

Another study conducted by Cameron, Mora, Leutscher, and Calarco (2011), found that "positive" practices improve employee and organizational performance. In their study the biggest predictors of improved effectiveness were: compassionate support for employees, emphasizing positive and inspiring messages to employees, forgiving mistakes, expressing



gratitude to and confidence in employees, articulating the meaningfulness of the work being done, and reinforcing an environment characterized by respect and integrity.

Calvin College professor Dr. Bruce Hekman has written specifically of institutional culture in the Christian School environment. He lists three important reasons for intentionally working on building a healthy school culture: first, “good relationships are the basis for learning and growth and strong communities,” second, “anything that affects relationships (such as inappropriate behaviors) impacts the community and its growth,” and finally, “confronting inappropriate behavior needs to be experienced as an opportunity for learning.” Hekman’s quote focuses primarily on student relationships, but these reasons are also important for faculty and school leadership relationships as well. Hekman goes on to list factors that he believes characterize healthy Christian school culture, “belonging, caring relationships, sense of “we” instead of “I”, grateful, mission-driven, inviting, accepting, loving, and practices the Biblical model of admonition, confession, repentance and restoration.” Hekman sums up his viewpoint by stating, “The *context* of schooling is an important part of the *content* of schooling. We need to be as intentional about the *context* as we are about the curriculum.”

Additionally, Barth (2002) states,

The nature of relationships among the adults within a school has a greater influence on the character and quality of that school and on student accomplishment than anything else. If the relationships between administrators and teachers are trusting, generous, helpful, and cooperative, than the relationships between teachers and students, between students and students, and between teachers and parents are likely to be trusting, generous helpful, and cooperative. If, on the other hand, relationships between

administrators and teachers are fearful, competitive, suspicious, and corrosive, then *these* qualities will disseminate throughout the school community.

Lencioni (2012) in his book *The Advantage* states, “I’ve become absolutely convinced that the seminal difference between successful companies and mediocre or unsuccessful ones has little, if anything, to do with what they know or how smart they are; it has everything to do with how healthy they are.” He is fairly critical of company mission statements, and says, “most mission statements have neither inspired people to change the world nor provided them with an accurate description of what an organization actually does for a living.” Lencioni considers these five factors as key indicators of healthy institutional culture: “1) Building trust, 2) Mastering conflict, 3) Achieving commitment, 4) Embracing accountability (in particular peer-to-peer accountability), 5) Focusing on results.”

Finally, in *The Shaping School Culture Fieldbook*, Peterson, Deal & Deal, (2002) list the following characteristics of healthy school culture:

- 1) A mission focused on student and teacher learning.
- 2) A rich sense of history and purpose.
- 3) Core values of collegiality, performance and improvement.
- 4) Positive beliefs and assumptions about the potential of students and staff to learn and grow.
- 5) A strong professional community that uses knowledge, experience and research to improve practice.
- 6) A shared sense of responsibility for student outcomes.
- 7) A cultural network that fosters positive communication flows.

- 8) Leadership among staff and administrators that blends continuity with improvement.
- 9) Rituals and ceremonies that reinforce core cultural values.
- 10) Stories that celebrate successes and recognize heroines and heroes.
- 11) An overall sense of interpersonal connection, meaningful purpose, and belief in the future.
- 12) A physical environment that symbolizes joy and pride.
- 13) A widely shared sense of respect and caring for everyone.

### **Faith Formation**

Smith in his book *Desiring the Kingdom* (2009) states,

Every Christian school classroom must have an articulate and inspiring student profile that invites every student to imagine how to play their part in God's story. The primary goal of Christian education is the formation of a peculiar people – a people who desire the kingdom of God and thus undertake their life's expression of that desire.

Whether or not we should be attempting to assess the faith formation of our students is a topic on which not all Christian educators agree. Some suggest that since faith is the work of the Holy Spirit, that attempting to identify and assess faith formation is trying to quantify something that by its very nature is mysterious. Marrah (2009) in his dissertation on the assessment of spiritual formation states,

There is a passage, however, in 2 Peter 1:5-9 that seems to suggest that there is a quantifiable component to the virtues that comprise spiritual formation...*For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge;*

*and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Several authors have created spiritual assessment tools that attempt to quantify the spiritual development of students. Zigarelli (2005) in his book *Cultivating Christian Character* explains the Christian Character Index that he developed for measuring Christian character. Another widely used assessment tool is the Spiritual Transformation Inventory developed by Dr. Todd Hall.

For this thesis the Building Blocks of Faith developed by Bob and Laura Keeley (2014) will be used as a framework for evaluating school culture that positively shapes faith formation. The four building blocks are; I Belong, I Know (Understand), I Am Equipped and I Have Hope. In an article in the Lifelong Faith Journal Keeley and Keeley describe the importance of nurturing the faith of students.

Faith is mysterious and only God gives us faith. At the same time we also believe that faith formation happens every day. The Israelites' faith was being formed as they saw the 10 plagues, as they packed up and left Egypt, as they walked through the Red Sea and as they heard the law at Mt. Sinai. The question isn't "Are we being formed?" The question is "How are we being formed?" In the New Testament, Paul writes to Timothy "I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also" (2 Timothy 1:5). Timothy learned about faith from the people around him. In the same way, we, too, are being formed by the things we see, do and hear and by important people in our lives.

Laura and Bob Keeley modeled their four Building Blocks on the work by Kenda Creasy Dean. In *Almost Christian* (2010), Dean points to four theological accents that teens who belong to faith communities have: a creed to believe (God's story), a community to belong to, a call to live out, and a hope to hold onto. This Building Blocks of Faith framework has been successfully used in churches as part of a pilot project of Faith Formation Ministries of the CRCNA.

### **Connecting Institutional Culture and Faith Formation**

There have been numerous books written on cultivating healthy school culture, business organizational culture and church culture, but little has been done to connect institutional culture with faith formation, especially at the grade school level. Hall (2011) in his work with faith formation asked college students across the United States to rate how various aspects of the school environment and programs impacted their spiritual development. The top three growth facilitators were peer relationships, working through suffering, and Bible/theology classes. All three of these areas thrive when the institutional culture is healthy and in particular, is able to support students as they walk through suffering. Todd Hall calls this idea "authoritative communities"; communities that are necessary for human development. He states that, "these are communities that provide structure (e.g. morality is embedded in the community) and love and warmth."

This research action project identified through the literature review the most important components of healthy institutional culture in a Christian school. In particular, the components of institutional culture of highest importance for this study were the aspects that led to a spiritually conducive environment. Once these components were identified, an assessment tool was developed that can be used by Christian schools to identify their school culture.

In conclusion, Goyak in his article *Crafting a Classroom Climate* (2013) quotes Maryellen Weimer.

Climates conducive to learning are created by action, not by announcement. For example, the presence of colder temperatures motivates me to grab warmer clothing for my body. In a like manner, there are certain conditions in a classroom that create a climate where learning just happens because all of the right “ingredients” are present (Weimer 2002, 101). So it is also with discipleship. And by discipleship, I mean coming alongside a student and building a relationship so that a teacher is able to overflow the gospel into that student’s life so that he or she has a more accurate view of Jesus Christ and His supremacy in his or her life. Think of the concept of being thirsty. My role is to create an environment that makes my students thirsty. In general, our instructional policies and practices do not make students thirsty. Rather, we tell students that they are thirsty—that they should be drinking. They remain unconvinced and so (mostly out of concern for them), we force the issue. We use rules, requirements, and sticks to try to hold their heads in the watering trough. Most do end up drinking, but a lot of them never figure out why water is so important. A few drown in the process (2002, p.103).

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

The participants in this case study were the teachers and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students of Sioux Center Christian School in Sioux Center, Iowa. Sioux Center Christian School is a TK-8 CSI accredited school in Northwest Iowa. The population of Sioux Center is approximately 7000, and the number of students attending SCCS during the 2016-17 school year was 508. The religious

background of the majority of the students are Reformed, and the majority of the students come from middle or upper class families. The school is predominantly Caucasian. SCCS has been in existence since 1905 and enjoys strong support from area churches and the community. Many students at the school are third or even fourth generation students at SCCS.

To begin the research process, SCCS teachers from differing teaching levels and years of experience were invited to participate in a focus group that would help evaluate and prioritize the essential criteria of healthy institutional culture in a Christian school. In this qualitative portion of the research project, ten teachers volunteered to participate in the focus group. The group included teachers from every age bracket and grade level. The quantitative portion of the study included 42 eighth grade students and 37 teachers. The students were from the entire eighth grade class at SCCS who were present on February 9, 2016. No demographic information was collected on the students. Demographic information was collected on the participating teachers as listed in Table 1:

Table 1

*Demographic information of study participants.*

<b>Category</b>	<b>Number of participants</b>
<i>Age Group</i>	
20-29	9
30-39	9
40-49	7
50-59	6
60-69	6
<i>Years of Experience</i>	
1-5	9
6-10	5
11-15	5
16-20	4
21-25	5
26-30	5
31-35	2
36 +	2
<i>Years teaching at SCCS</i>	
1-5	14
6-10	9
11-15	4
16-20	2
21-25	3
29-30	4
31-35	1
<i>Teaching experience:</i>	
Christian schools only	27
Christian and public schools	10
<i>Received education:</i>	
Christian schools only	14
Christian and public schools	23
<i>Master's degree:</i>	
Yes	20
No	17



## **Materials**

The instruments used for this research were two institutional culture surveys that were developed by the researcher. The surveys are found in Appendix A and B. Initially the researcher used the literature review to identify key characteristics of healthy institutional culture that was identified in research papers, books and articles. Using this list of characteristics, the focus group of SCCS teachers identified items that they felt were key in creating a healthy culture in a Christian school. The items from the literature review and the responses from the teachers were then separated into categories using the Building Blocks of Faith as the four general groupings. Each category contained ten qualities of healthy culture that were listed as a positive statement. The Likert-type scale using “strongly agree”, “agree”, “neutral”, “disagree”, and “strongly disagree” were listed as the five choices. The researcher used the same questions for the 8<sup>th</sup> grade students, although the questions in some cases were slightly adjusted to make them applicable for the student audience.

## **Research Design**

This research project is a mixed method study using Sioux Center Christian School as a case study. The literature review answered the first two research questions, and then provided the basis for the items included in the survey that was created by the researcher. The survey attempted to answer the third research question, “How can Christian schools assess their current institutional culture?” In order to be able to recommend disciplines, practices and strategies, a formative assessment tool was needed to evaluate the current institutional culture of the school. Since a tool that attempted to evaluate institutional culture at a Christian school was not available, the survey was created to fill this need. A shorter version of this Building Blocks

assessment tool was developed by Laura and Bob Keeley, and is being used in Christian Reformed Churches to evaluate the culture of churches. Although the Keeley survey is useful for churches, the tool did not address many of the concerns that were unique to an education institution. In order to test the usefulness of the tool both in terms of administering the survey and using the results, the researcher used Sioux Center Christian School as a case study. From the emerging data the researcher was able to analyze the data and present it to the administrators, as well as determine the usability of the tool for other Christian Schools. In using SCCS as a pilot project, the intent was that other Christian schools would be able to use the methods and processes developed in the study to evaluate and implement changes in the school culture in their own particular context.

## **Procedure**

The project began with an investigation of qualities of healthy institutional culture. As listed in the bibliography, many books and articles were used in this process, but just as important, a number of individuals with expertise in this area were consulted as well. Todd Marrah, Syd Hielema, Dan Beerens and Justin Cook were interviewed in order to gain insight into the topic of culture in the Christian school setting. Todd Marrah is a superintendent at a Christian School in Ohio who wrote his Ph.D. thesis on the topic of faith formation in Christian schools. Syd Hielema is the Director of Faith Formation Ministries of the CRCNA, and has taught courses on discipleship and faith formation for teachers. Dan Beerens is an Educational Consultant who has written extensively about faith development, and Justin Cook is the learning director of the Ontario Alliance of Christian Schools. All four experts recommended resources as well as gave suggestions for identifying a healthy school climate in a Christian school. Their

help was invaluable in suggesting healthy culture characteristics to include in the formative assessment tool.

Following the gathering of information from the interviews and written resources, the items on the list were vetted by ten SCCS teachers who volunteered to participate in a focus group on January 28, 2016. Using this information, the survey was developed using the Building Blocks of Faith as the organizing structure for the survey. Both a teacher and student version were developed. All the questions were virtually the same in both versions, with slight adaptations to the student version to make it more applicable for the students.

The teacher survey was distributed on February 10, 2016 and the teachers were given a week to submit their responses. Of the 44 surveys distributed, 37 were returned. The 8<sup>th</sup> grade students completed the surveys on February 16, 2016.

Although the results were shared with the administrators, the overall purpose of the case study was to pilot a process so that other schools could replicate it in their own contexts.

## **Results**

### **Data Analysis**

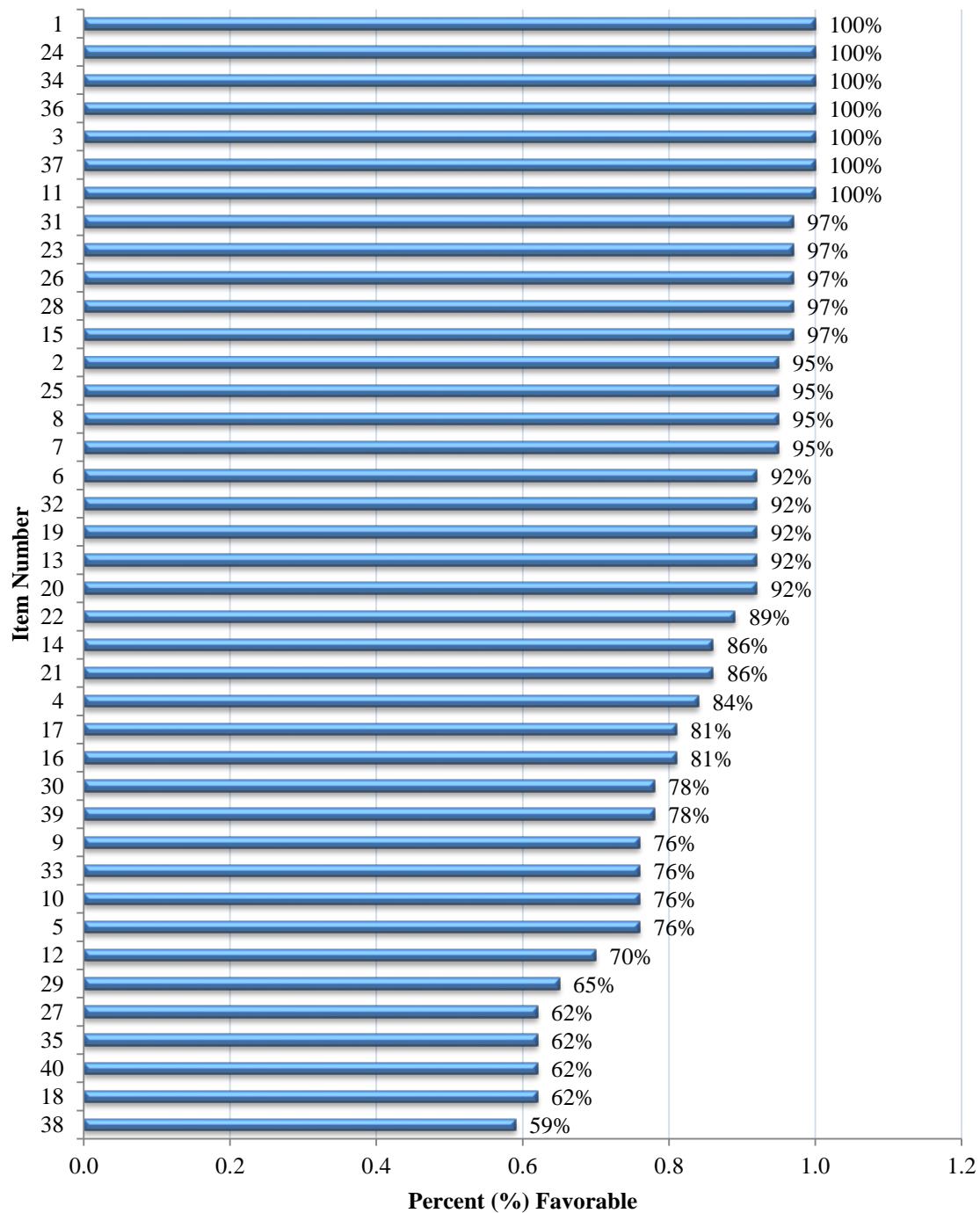
The raw data was analyzed in several ways. First the teacher data was analyzed by finding the mean for each question. “Strongly agree” was assigned the number five, “agree” was four, “neutral” was three, “disagree” was two, and “strongly disagree” was a one. Each question was then ranked from highest to lowest by average score. In order to see more clearly the distribution of the answers along the Likert scale continuum, a favorable, neutral and unfavorable rating was used. The unfavorable rating included both strongly disagree and disagree, although in the SCCS teacher surveys there were no teachers that indicated strongly

disagree with any of the statements on the survey. Table 1 shows the ranking of the items on the teacher survey by average score and percentage favorable responses. (Table 2, Figures 1 and 2)

Table 2

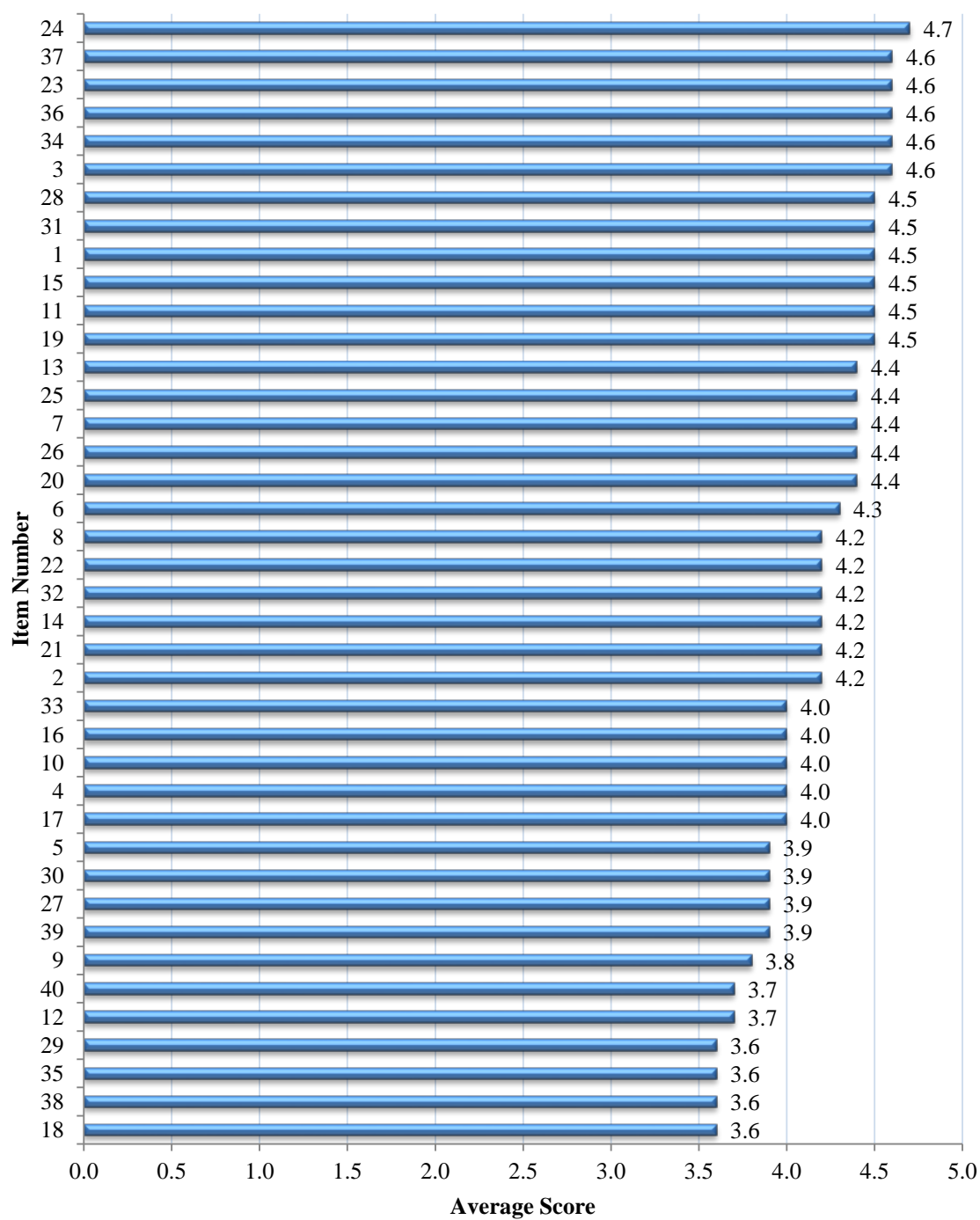
*Comparison of ranking of average score with percent favorable - teacher scores only.*

Item #	Item	Avg Score	Rank -Avg	% Fav	Rank- % Fav
24	I believe my co-workers have/will support me through times of suffering.	4.7	1	100%	1
3	I have positive relationships with other faculty and staff.	4.6	2	100%	2
34	I am given opportunities for learning and development.	4.6	3	100%	3
37	I use knowledge, experience and research to improve my teaching.	4.6	4	100%	4
36	I see myself as a role model for our students in the area of discipleship.	4.6	6	100%	5
11	I regularly encounter God's presence in my daily work.	4.5	7	100%	6
1	My school community is an accepting and inviting place.	4.5	9	100%	7
23	I have a sense of the bigger picture and meaningfulness of my work.	4.6	5	97%	8
28	I daily nurture my walk with the Lord through prayer and Bible reading.	4.5	10	97%	9
31	I have a way to use my unique gifts to contribute to the school community.	4.5	11	97%	10
15	Our faculty has a shared sense of responsibility for student outcomes.	4.5	12	97%	11
26	Our actions as a community demonstrate the hope that we have in Christ.	4.4	16	97%	12
25	I intentionally look for evidence of God's work in the lives of my students.	4.4	13	95%	13
7	Our school has a sense of "we" rather than "I."	4.4	17	95%	14
2	Our school environment is characterized by the fruit of the spirit.	4.2	19	95%	15
8	I know I can count on those around me to forgive me when I make a mistake.	4.2	21	95%	16
19	I feel comfortable asking for help from my colleagues.	4.5	8	92%	17
13	I am aware of my school's history, mission and purpose.	4.4	14	92%	18
20	The Biblical creation-fall-redemption narrative shapes my work in concrete, specific ways.	4.4	15	92%	19
6	My school encourages collaboration rather than competition.	4.3	18	92%	20
32	I encourage others in the use of their God-given gifts.	4.2	20	92%	21
22	We share stories with each other that demonstrate God's faithfulness.	4.2	24	89%	22
21	Our staff sees students from the perspective of God's finished work.	4.2	22	86%	23
14	I am encouraged to experiment and take risks in trying new ideas.	4.2	23	86%	24
4	I feel comfortable being open and vulnerable with those around me.	4	25	84%	25
17	I know my work is appreciated and valued.	4	26	81%	26
16	I am kept accountable for embedding a Biblical worldview into my teaching.	4	29	81%	27
39	I am encouraged to come up with new and better ways of doing things.	3.9	30	78%	28
30	The faculty works in our community through specific projects to show Christ's love in tangible ways.	3.9	32	78%	29
10	Our school is a I Cor. 12 community, of which Christ is the head and we respect each other as unique members of his body.	4	27	76%	30
33	Our community encourages engagement rather than compliance.	4	28	76%	31
5	Building trust is a priority at my school.	3.9	31	76%	32
9	My ideas and suggestions count.	3.8	34	76%	33
12	Our school fosters a positive flow of communication.	3.7	35	70%	34
29	I am encouraged to share my personal faith story with my colleagues.	3.6	39	65%	35
27	School leaders have communicated a vision of the future that motivates me.	3.9	33	62%	36
40	Others have named my gifts and helped me find places to use them.	3.7	36	62%	37
18	My school has a climate in which diverse ideas and perspectives are valued.	3.6	37	62%	38
35	Our school encourages peer-to-peer accountability.	3.6	40	62%	39
38	I am appropriately involved in decisions that affect my work.	3.6	38	59%	40



*Figure 1*

Percent favorable responses by item number. (See Appendix A for the survey questions.)



*Figure 2*

Average score by item number. (See Appendix A for the survey questions.)

This data was then displayed in a bar graph under each of the four Building Block categories for both teacher and student surveys. This same analysis using favorable and unfavorable ratings was used for the student responses. (Figures 3-10)



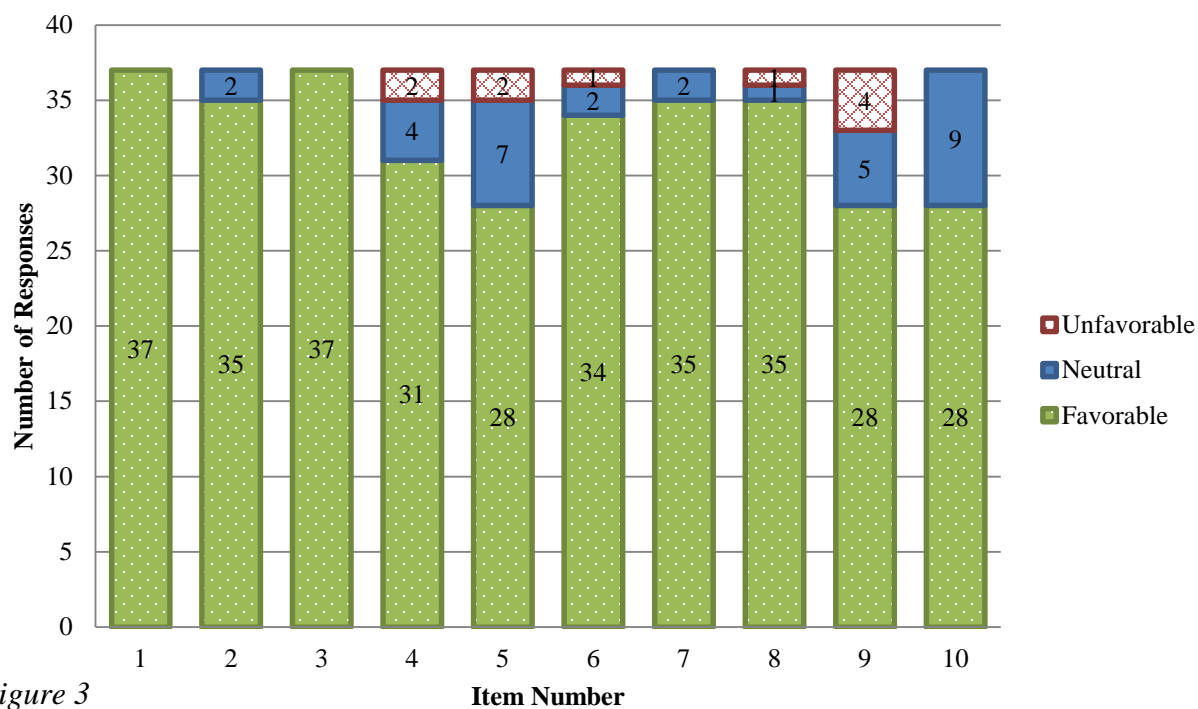


Figure 3

I Belong – Teacher data

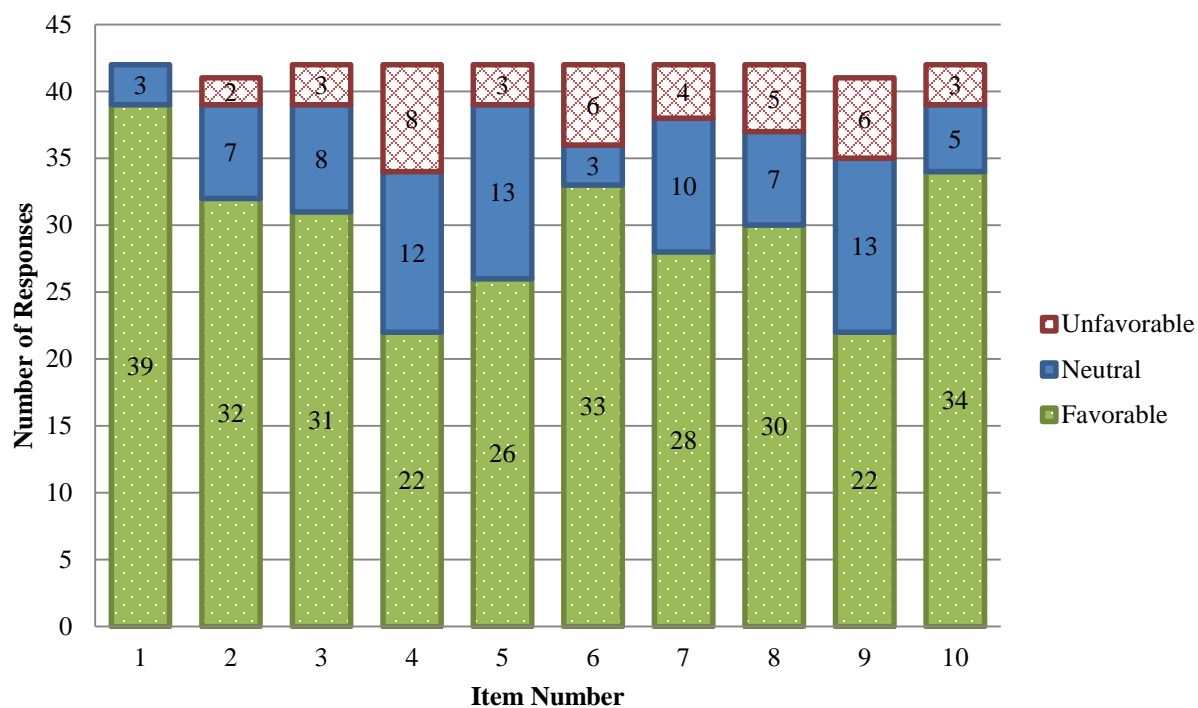


Figure 4

I Belong – Student data

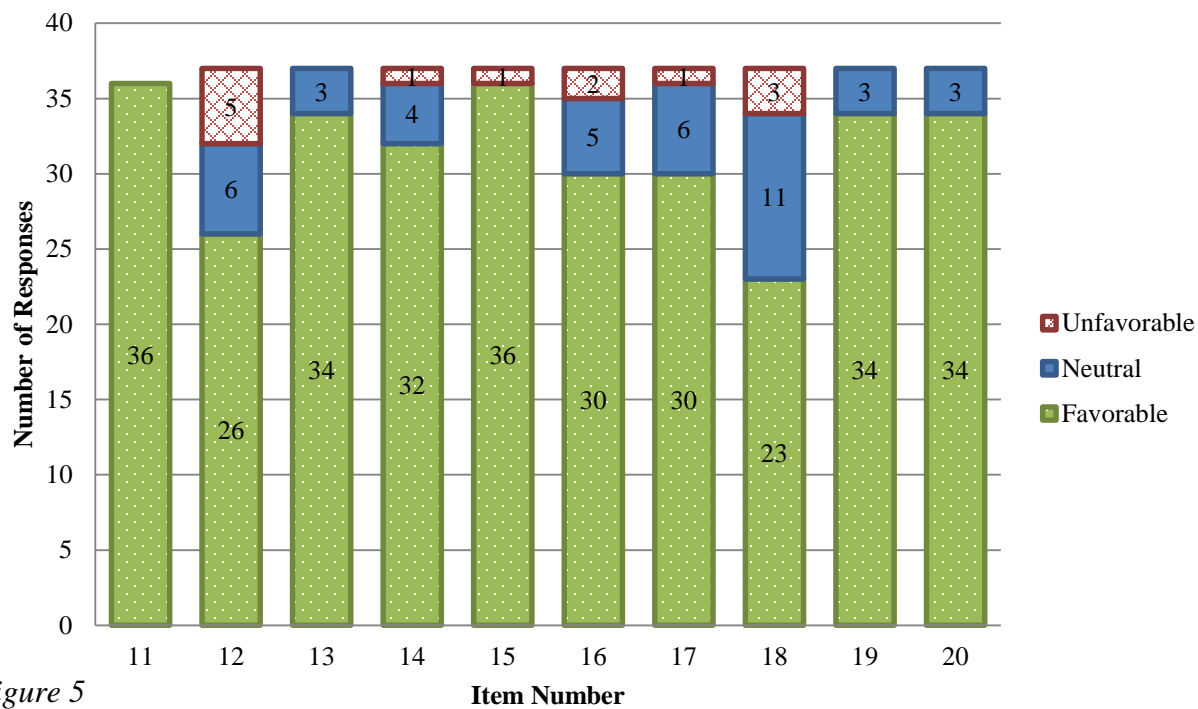


Figure 5

I Know – Teacher data

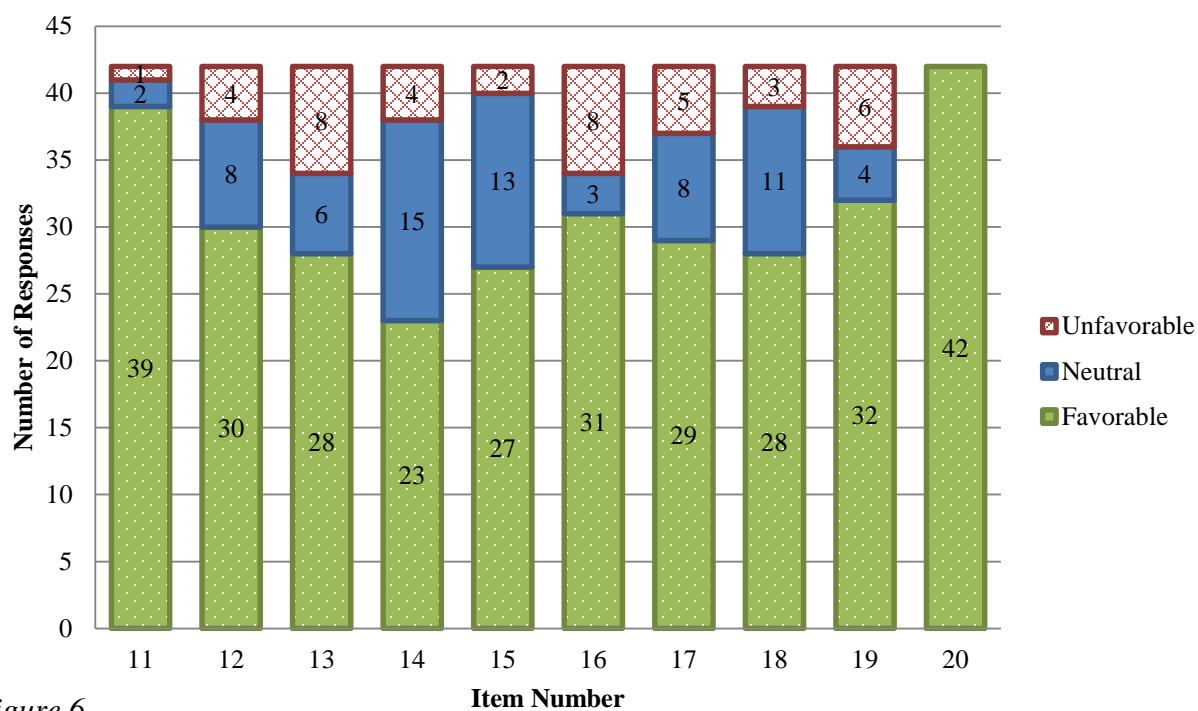


Figure 6

I Know – Student data

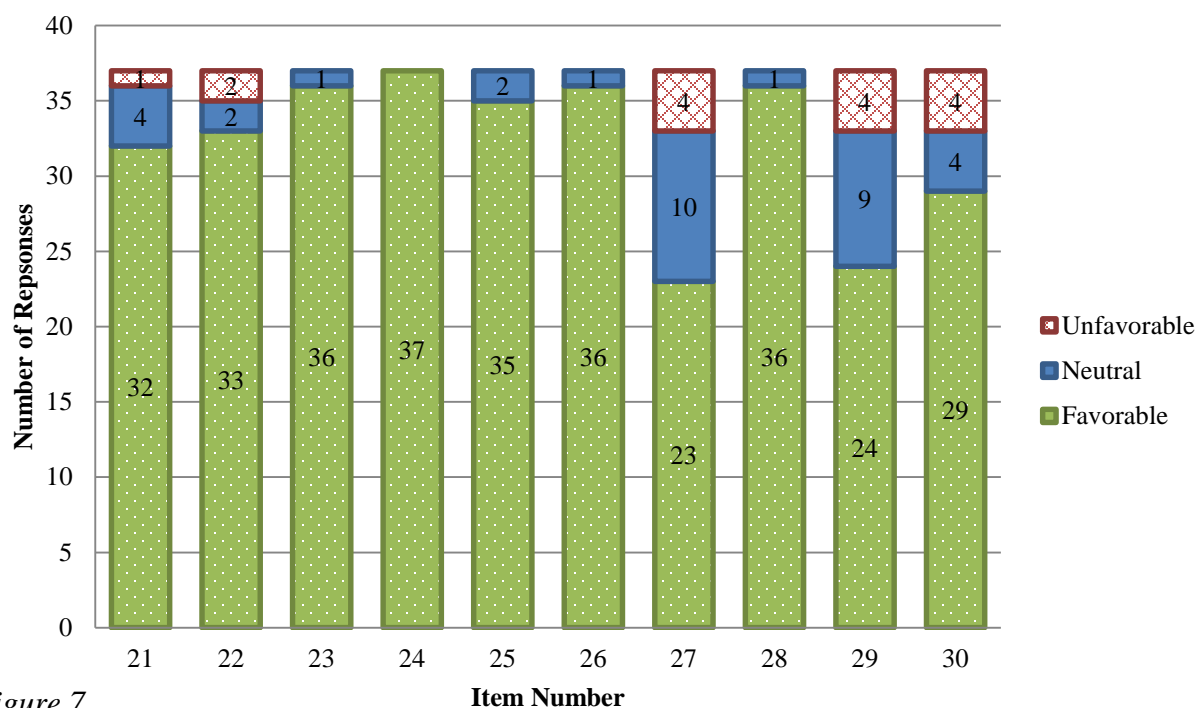


Figure 7

I Have Hope – Teacher data

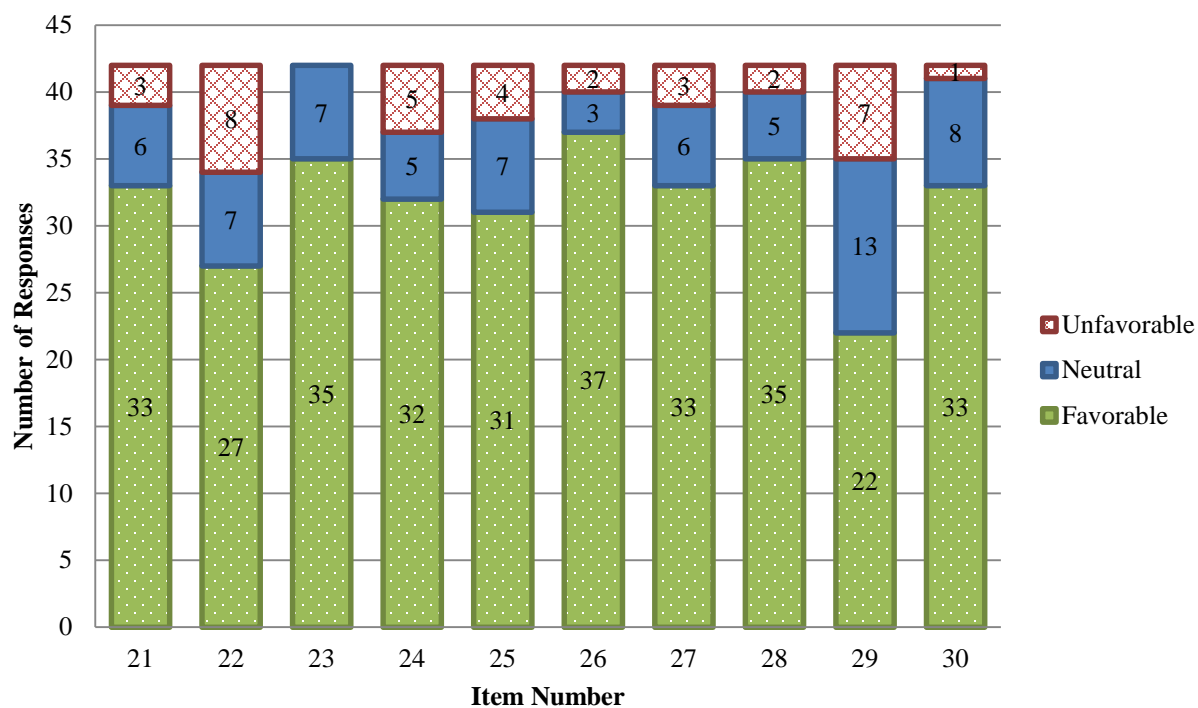


Figure 8

I Have Hope – Student data

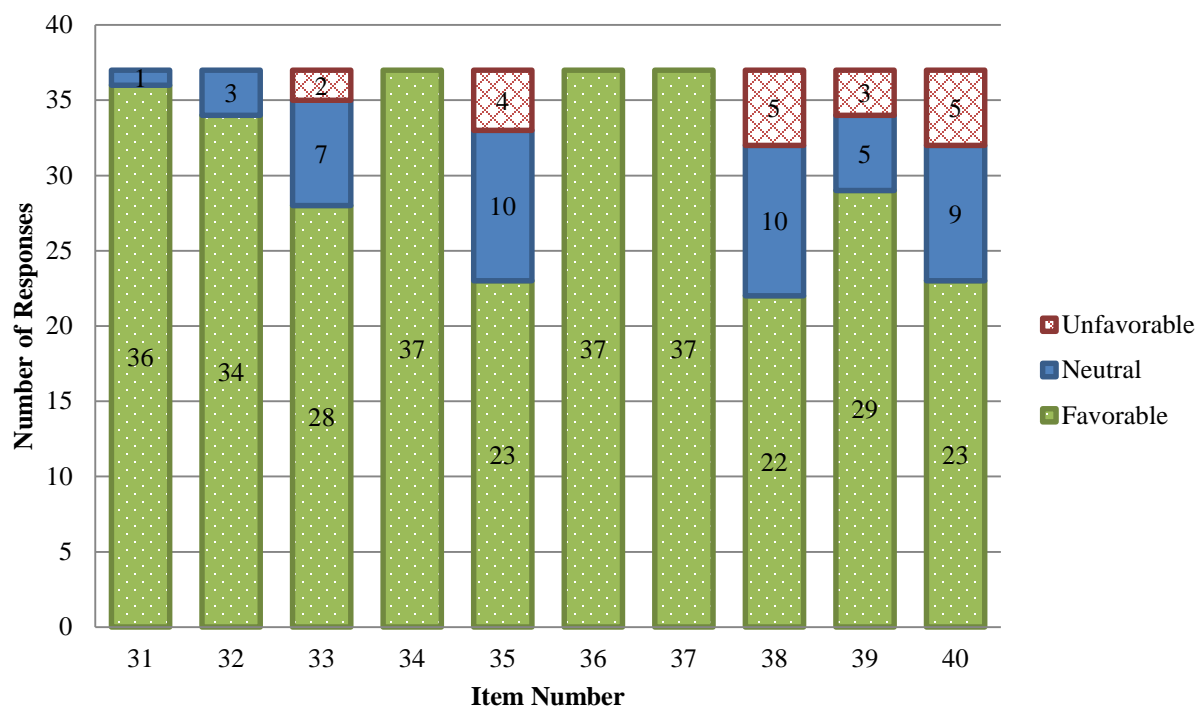


Figure 9

I Am Called and Equipped – Teacher data

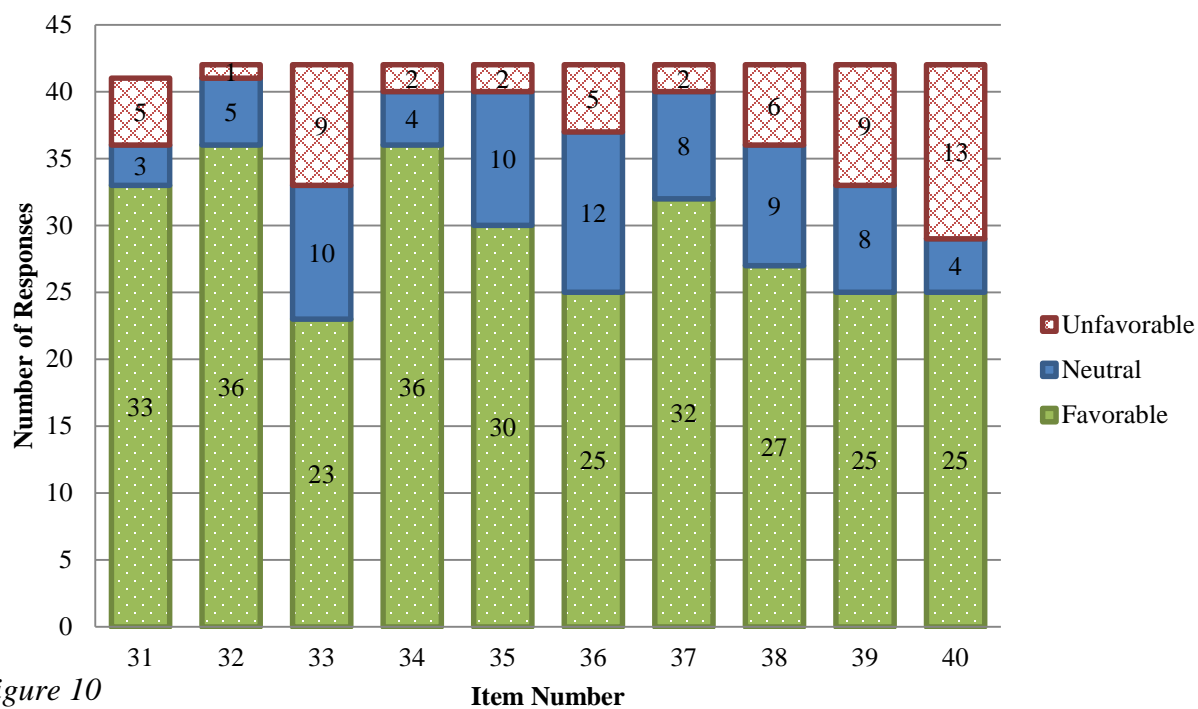
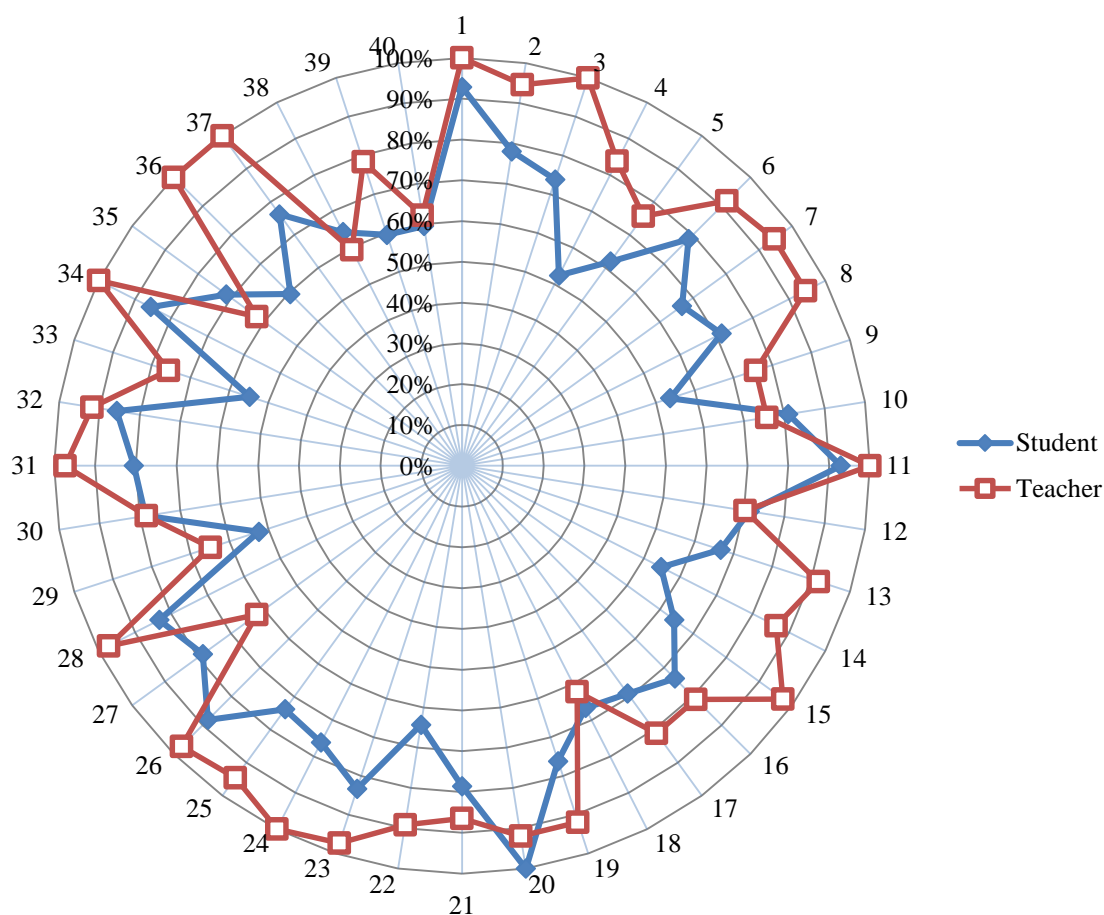


Figure 10

I Am Called and Equipped – Student data

The item averages were also compared between the teachers and students for each item on the survey. (Figure 11)



*Figure 11*

#### Comparison of Teacher/Student Favorable Responses

To determine if the teachers and students responded in a similar manner, a Pearson Correlation Coefficient was calculated for the teacher and student data. The P value was .54, which is statistically significant at an alpha level of .01. The following scatter plot graph shows the correlation between the student and teacher responses (Figure 12). Each dot on the graph

represents the average score of each item for both teacher and student groups. The positive slope of the line indicates that the teachers and the students generally responded in the same manner.

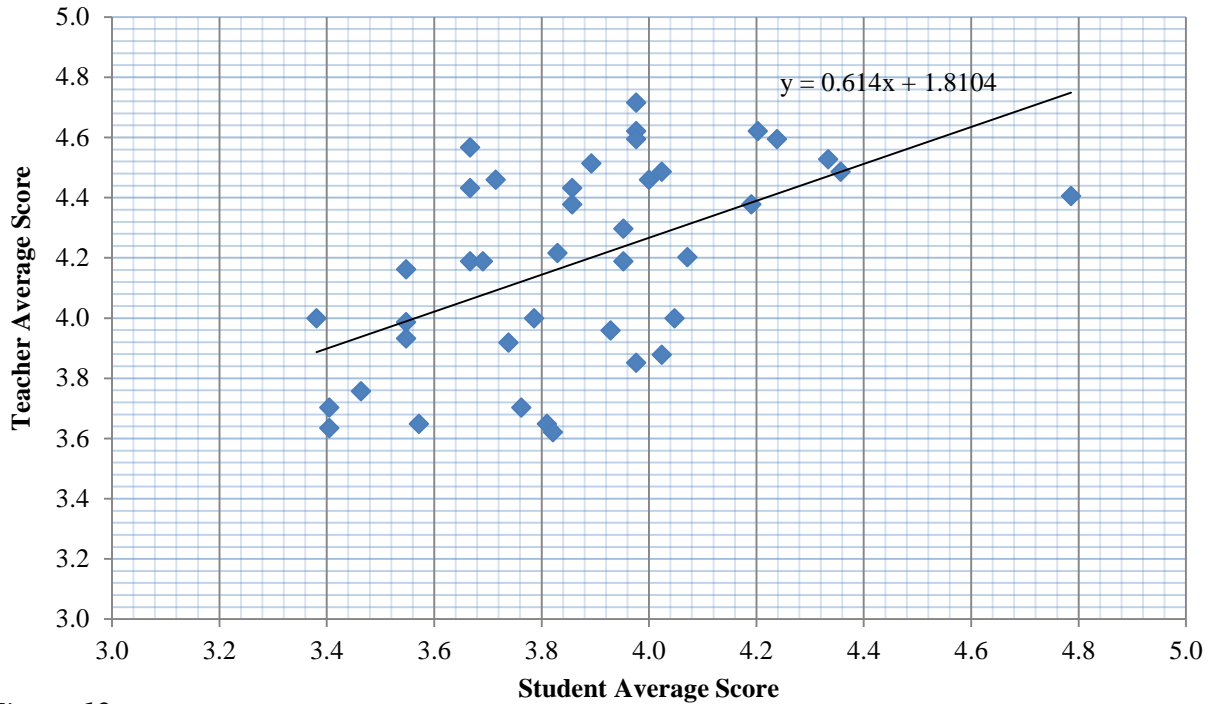


Figure 12

Correlation of teacher average score to student average score.

## Findings

The results of the assessment tool are useful for the SCCS leadership, but more importantly, the process of using the tool and analyzing the results are useful in providing guidance for other schools interested in initiating an assessment of their own institutional culture.

The SCCS survey resulted in several interesting findings. First, there was a statistically significant correlation between the scores on the teacher and student surveys. The teacher responses were consistently higher on any given question than the student responses, but the trends either higher or lower on the continuum were similar. There were several items where the

students differed from the teachers. In item number 36, “I see myself as a role model” the difference between the students’ percent favorable and the teachers’ score differed by 40 percent. Items number 15, 14, 7, 3 and 13 also had a percent favorable difference of 33 to 25 percent between the teacher and student scores. These differences could be attributed to actual differences in how the students and teachers are experiencing institutional culture, or they could be a result in differences in how adults and students are interpreting the questions in the survey, as some of the questions were more applicable to teachers than the students.

Second, the SCCS teacher scores revealed many qualities of the school culture that were exceptional at SCCS. In fact, there were seven items where the entire staff rated these items unanimously as favorable:

3. I have positive relationships with other faculty and staff.
11. I regularly encounter God's presence in my daily work.
23. I have a sense of the bigger picture and meaningfulness of my work.
24. I believe my co-workers have/will support me through times of suffering.
34. I am given opportunities for learning and development.
36. I see myself as a role model for our students in the area of discipleship.
37. I use knowledge, experience and research to improve my teaching.

Most of these items centered on staff interactions with other staff members and seeing God’s presence in their work.

Third, the assessment revealed areas where the culture of SCCS could be improved. The assumption was made in the analysis of the teacher data that any question where the favorability score was less than 75% was an area for further study. This cut off was used because it focused the number of problem areas to a limited number of items, which seemed to be a reasonable

number of areas for a school to examine in more depth. In the case of SCCS there were seven items that scored less than 75% favorability. These seven items were then analyzed in more detail using the demographic information provided. Using age, these seven items were compared to see if these items were answered the same or differently by teachers of differing levels of experience and differing age categories. The student surveys did not include any demographic information; therefore, this additional analysis did not apply in this case. These seven items in order from lowest to highest score were:

35. Our school encourages peer-to-peer accountability.
38. I am appropriately involved in decisions that affect my work.
29. I am encouraged to share my personal faith story with my colleagues.
18. My school has a climate in which diverse ideas and perspectives are valued
40. Others have named my gifts and helped me find places to use them.
12. Our school fosters a positive flow of communication.
9. My ideas and suggestions count.

Most of these items dealt with communication, appreciating diverse perspectives, and using the gifts of teachers in ways that make them feel valued and can contribute to the entire school community. Another area for improvement was the area of sharing faith stories with our students and colleagues.

By providing demographic information with the survey, administrators could also identify whether or not the problem areas were specific to a particular demographic. At SCCS the seven items that scored the lowest generally became less favorable as teachers became older and more experienced. (Figures 13-19)



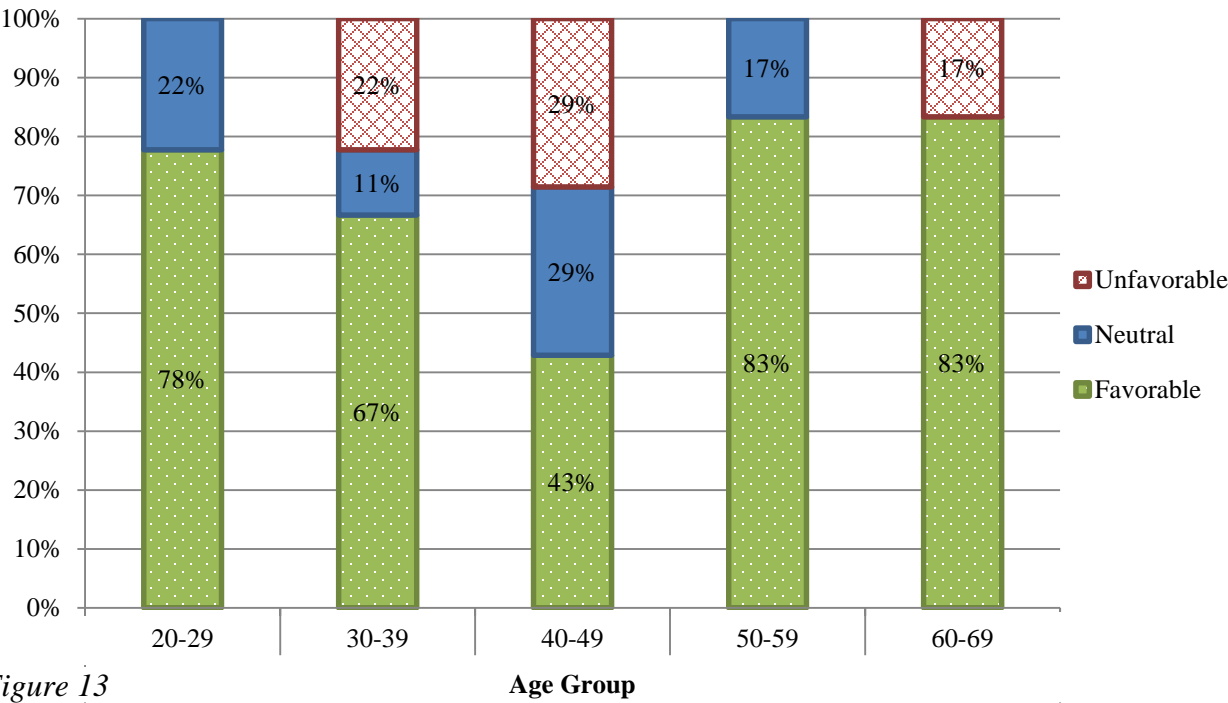


Figure 13

Our school fosters a positive flow of information

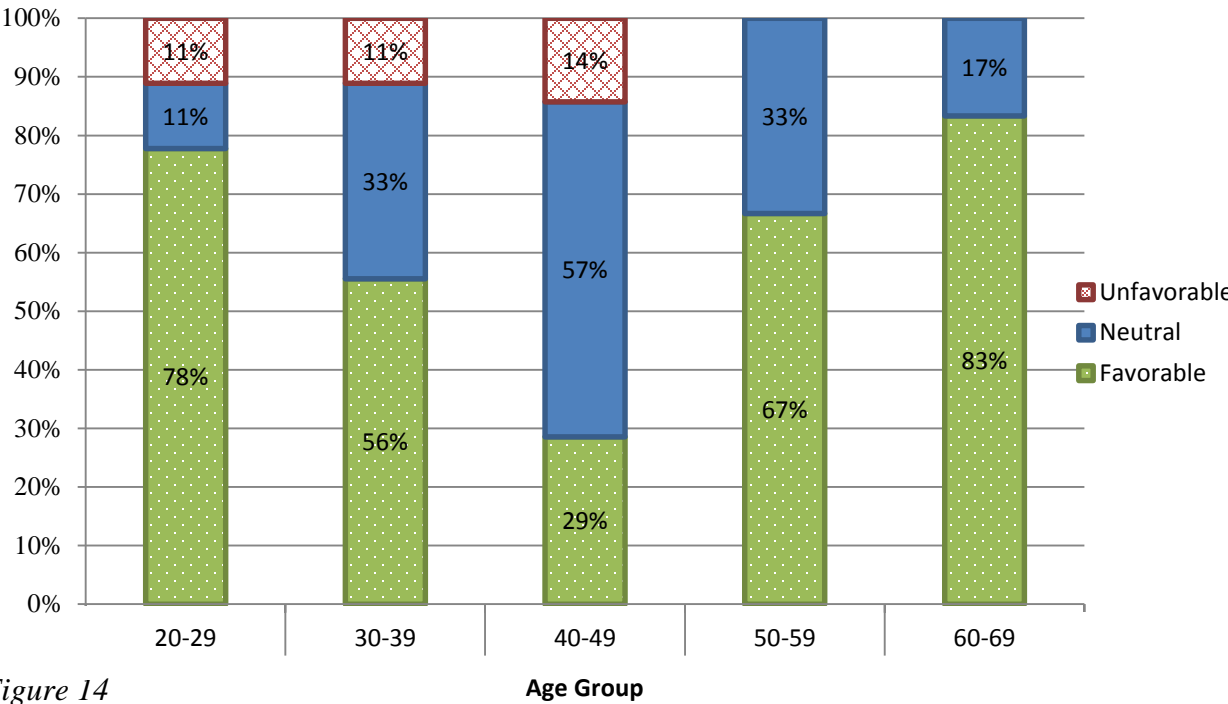


Figure 14

My School has a climate in which diverse perspectives are valued

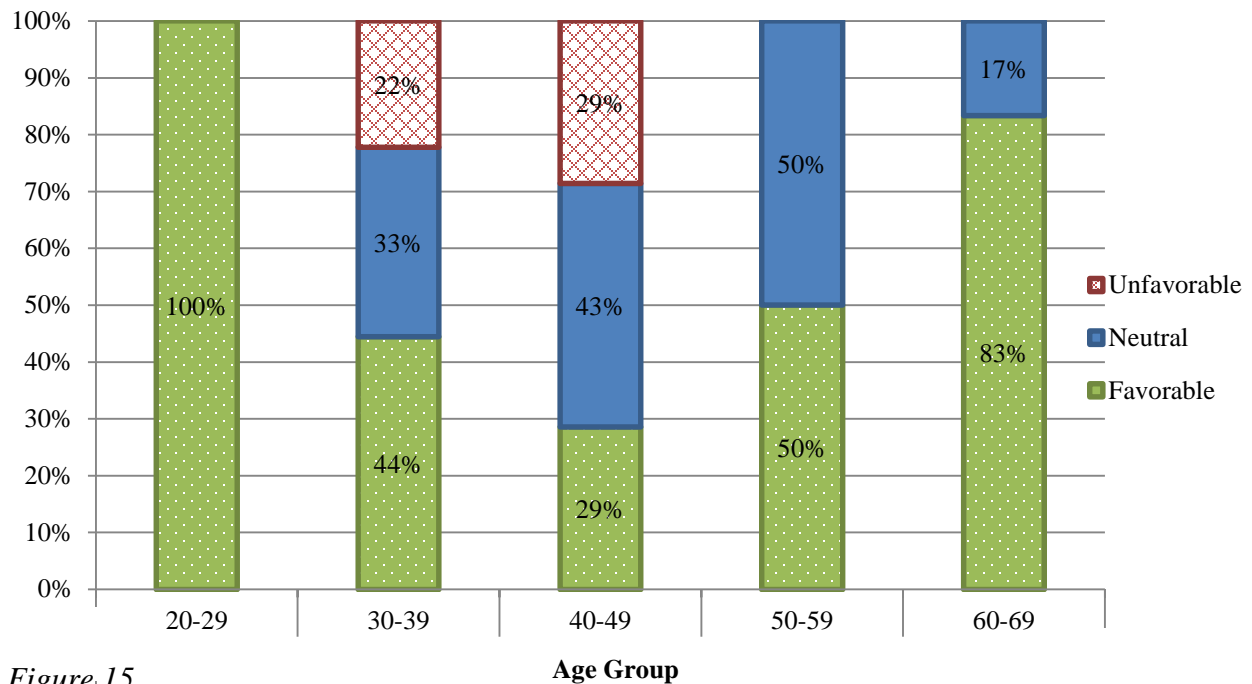


Figure 15

School leaders have communicated a vision of the future that motivates me

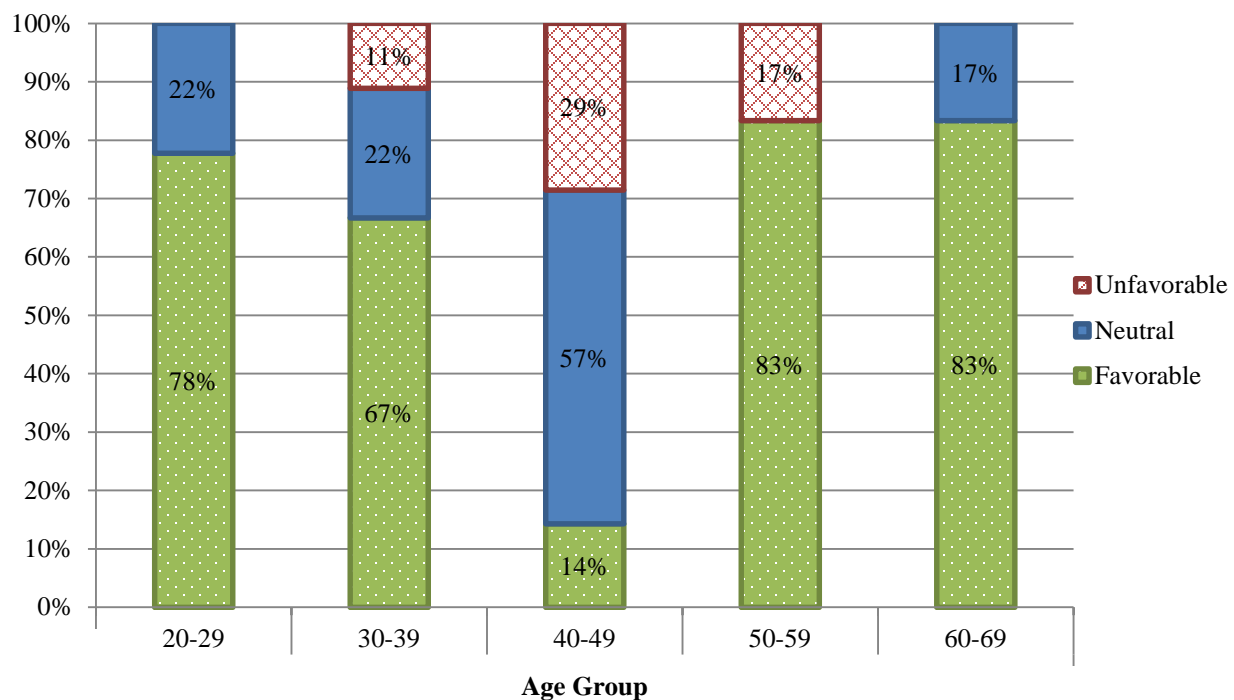


Figure 16

I am encouraged to share my personal faith story with my colleagues

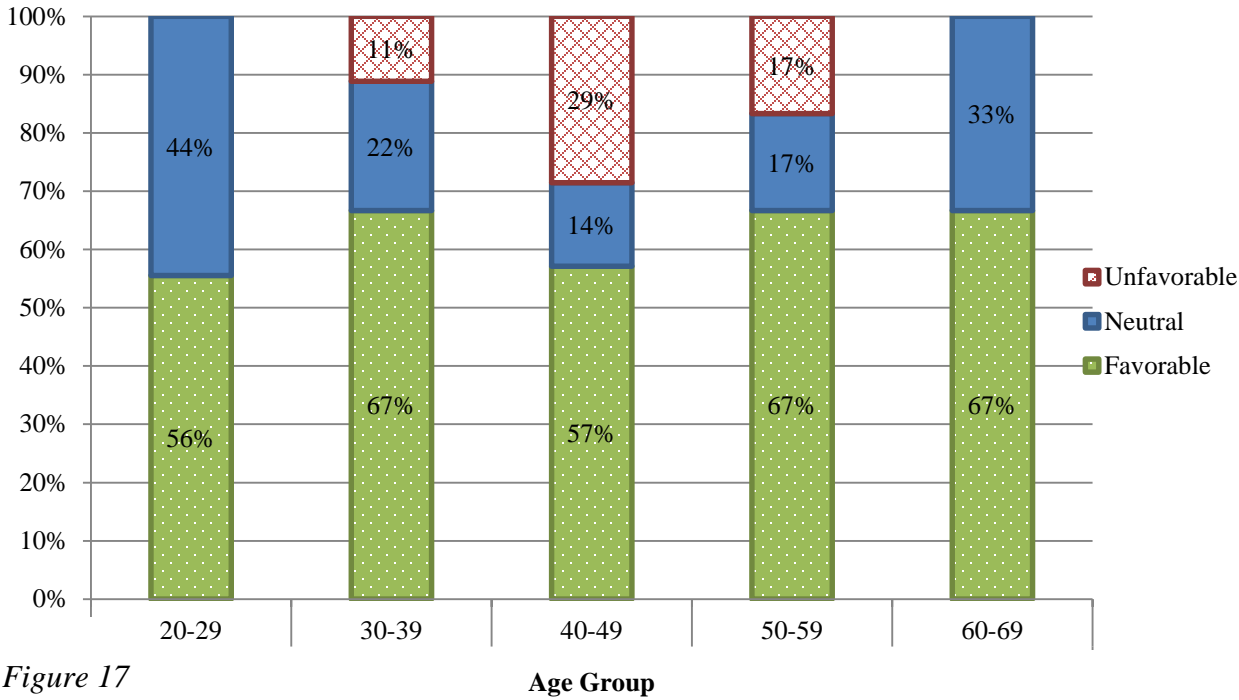


Figure 17

Our school encourages peer-to-peer accountability

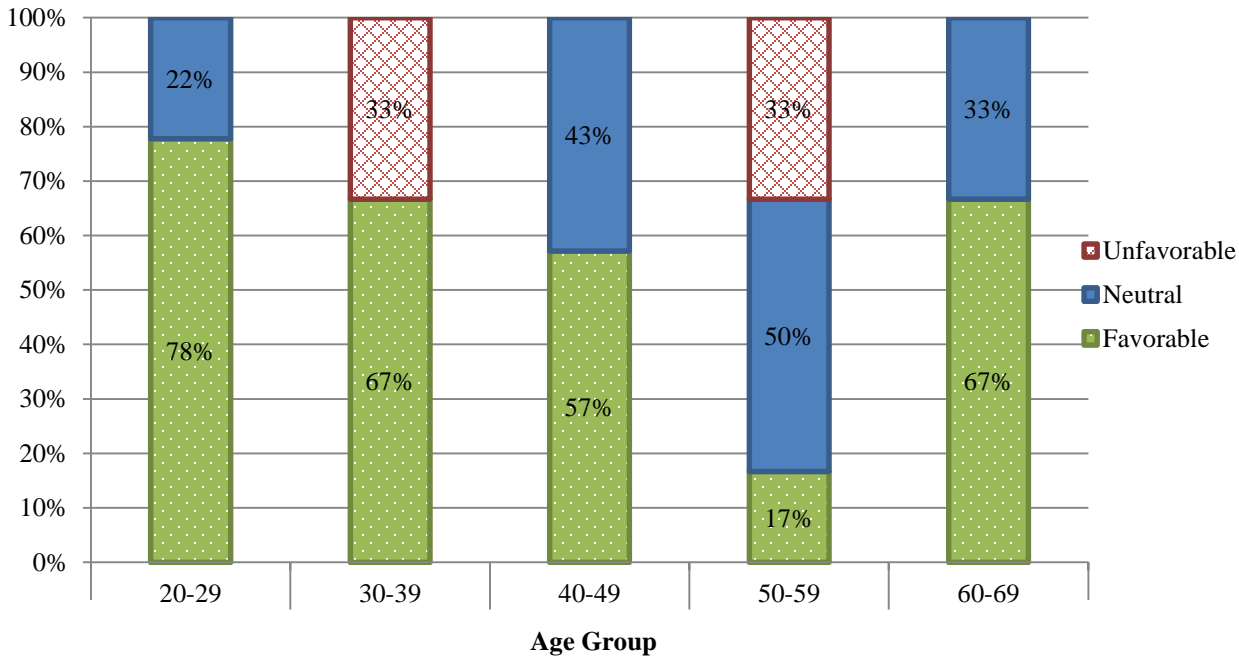


Figure 18

I am appropriately involved in decisions that affect my work

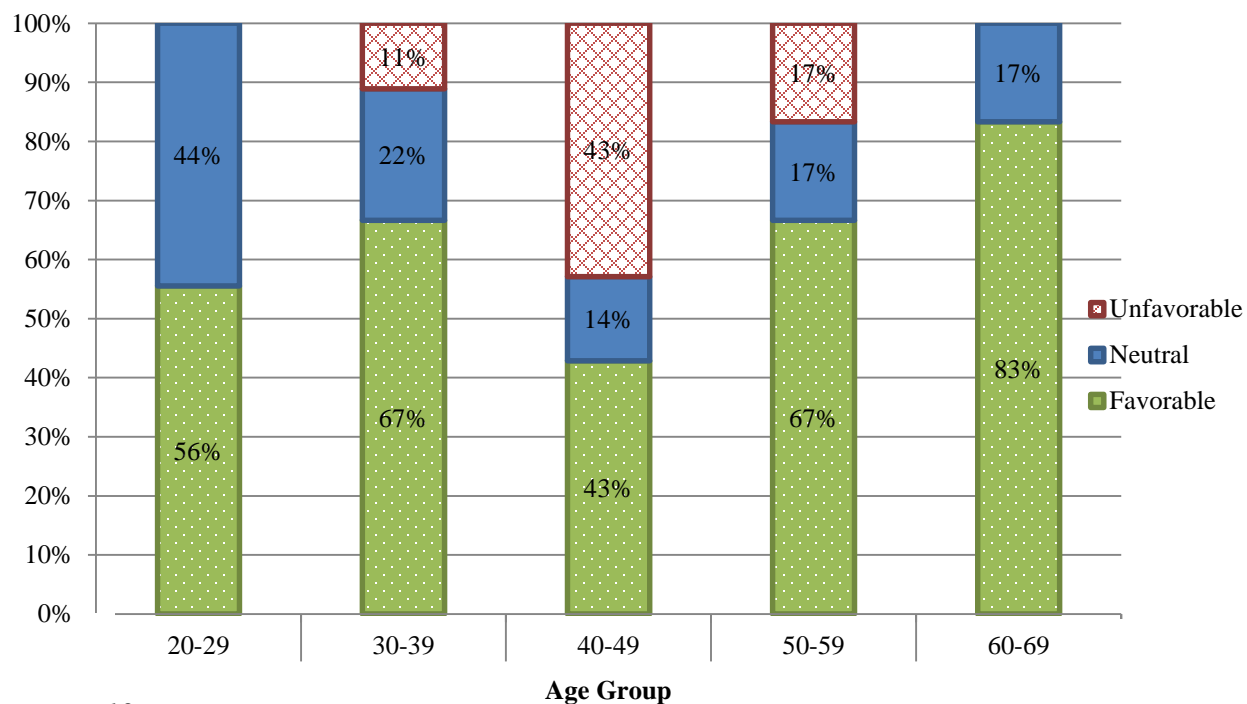


Figure 19

Others have named my gifts and helped me find places to use them

Fourth, the assessment provides a baseline wherein the school can continue to monitor its growth and improvement. Ideally a school would use this assessment tool annually in order to note trends as well as to monitor improvement.

Fifth, in the case of SCCS, each one of the four Building Block categories were fairly equal in terms of the highest and lowest ranked items. This may not be the case in other schools, and administrators could use the broader categories, i.e. I Belong, I Know, etc. as a springboard for professional development targeted towards those specific categories.

Finally, another finding that came about in a rather unanticipated way was the response of the teachers to the survey. Many of the teachers specifically thanked me for giving them the opportunity to participate in the survey. Many expressed that they had never been asked

questions like these before, so they appreciated the chance to share their own thoughts and opinions through the survey questions. The fact that 37 out of 44 surveys were returned considering it was a completely voluntary task, speaks to the importance of these questions and statements.

## **Discussion**

### **Summary**

This research project attempted to answer three questions. The first two, “What is meant by institutional culture?” and “Why is identifying institutional culture important?” were answered in the literature review. Overall, the authors mentioned in the literature review were in strong agreement that although culture is often overlooked when examining the functioning of an organization, its influence has a powerful impact on the effectiveness and success of a business, school or church. Although it is often challenging to identify or quantify, organizations ignore institutional culture at their own peril.

The third research question, “How can Christian schools assess their current institutional culture?” became the primary focus for this research. In order for a school to begin to delve into the area of institutional culture in their own context, an assessment tool was needed that would be aligned with the mission and goals of Christian education. In the literature, a number of assessments were available for churches and businesses, but none were specifically targeting Christian schools. The assessment tool in this research paper was developed after gathering the important characteristics of healthy institutional culture from the literature, from experts in the field of education, and by vetting the statements in a focus group of ten Christian school teachers. These characteristics were summarized into a survey using the Building Blocks of

Faith as the framework for the assessment. A modified survey was also developed for the 8<sup>th</sup> grade students at SCCS. Both the teachers and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students participated in the survey.

After gathering the data, statistical analysis was used to verify the validity of the data. There was a direct correlation between the scores of the teachers and the students, which not only affirms that institutional culture affects everyone in the organization, but also the importance of a school being proactive in identifying and establishing a healthy culture in order to fulfill the school's calling to help shape the faith journey of the students. This important finding parallels the statement by Barth in the literature review noting how the culture of an institution affects both the teacher and the learner. In other words, by ignoring the culture of a school, the leadership is not only hampering the work of the teachers, but the learning and faith formation of the students as well.

The data at SCCS also revealed the strengths and weaknesses of the culture as well as differences between teachers in varying age groups and years of experience. From the results of the survey the leadership at SCCS would be able to target specific practices that could strengthen the weak areas and also provide a baseline to monitor future growth. The survey proved to be a useful and statistically accurate tool in assessing the culture at SCCS.

## **Discussion**

Throughout the literature review it became apparent that there was a need to develop a statistically sound assessment tool that could determine the institutional climate of a Christian School. Although the faith development of students had been studied extensively, little if any research had been conducted that could help determine whether or not a school was cultivating a spiritually conducive environment where faith could grow and thrive. By using SCCS as a case

study, this project was able to develop and test an assessment tool in an authentic school setting in order to determine if the culture of the school was producing an environment where faith could flourish. This assessment tool proved to be effective in assessing the current cultural climate, as well as identifying strengths and weaknesses of the institutional culture at SCCS.

Principals and school leadership teams could not only use this tool for assessing their own school culture, but use it to identify deeper issues that might be present in their school culture. One interesting finding in the study at SCCS was that the seven lowest scores also fit a pattern in terms of demographics. The younger teachers had much higher scores, and as the teachers got older and had more experience the scores dipped lower, until the last decade where the scores were higher again. In this case the leadership team could use this data to interview teachers in their 40's and 50's to see why these issues were more negative for this age group. Whether or not the lower scores were due to personalities of the teachers in this age bracket, or due to actually negative experiences within the school culture could be identified with further research. Rather than treat the faculty as all the same, strategies to improve these areas could be targeted to a smaller group of teachers.

Another use of the data would be to leverage the strengths of the school community to target the weaknesses. In the case of SCCS there was a strong sense of caring and positive relationships among the faculty. This strength could be used, for example, to address the weakness of a lack of peer-to-peer accountability. A staff that cares for each other will most likely be able to show this caring attitude even when holding each other accountable in providing advice and suggestions for improving instruction.

This tool is not meant to be an end unto itself, but rather a springboard for further study and work. After a school collects and analyzes its data, an action plan should be created to

address the weaknesses in the school culture. Heifetz (1994) in his book *Leadership Without Easy Answers* distinguishes between “technical work” and “adaptive challenge” when deal with changes within institutions.

Technical work is characterized by being able to clearly define a problem and clearly define the solution. For example, the church school classrooms are too crowded; the problem is clear and so is the solution: add space, build a new wing to the education building. Adaptive work, on the other hand, is not so clear. The problem may in some cases be known, but the solution requires learning and change.

The majority of the changes in institutional culture will fall into the second category. This makes change more challenging, but not insurmountable. Each area of concern that the school is addressing will likely have multiple ways of addressing the changes that are needed, and most problems will need to be addressed on many different levels. For instance, a weakness of not valuing diverse ideas and perspectives could be addressed by providing additional avenues for feedback for the faculty, by allowing more teachers in leadership roles, or by implementing an Appreciative Inquiry or DeBono Six Thinking Hats model in the school decision making process. These are just a few of the many approaches that could be used to bring about change in regard to this particular example.

A further project that would be a useful addition to this tool would be to provide a catalog of follow-up questions surrounding each item on the survey as well as a list of suggested best practices that could address each area covered by the survey statement. Schools would be encouraged to add their own questions and best practices to the lists, but the given examples would be an excellent starting point for schools desiring to create an action plan for addressing their weaknesses.



Finally, this tool would be most effective if used annually to determine the progress from year to year, and to identify new issues and changes in the results. Ideally this tool should be tested in many schools and the averaged results could produce a baseline score that could help a school gain a greater understanding of how their school compares with other Christian schools. Additionally, the tool should also be evaluated over time to identify problems, ambiguities and additions that need to be added to the assessment.

Ultimately, the goal for every Christian school is to see their students grow in their walk with the Lord. Our curriculum, textbooks and mission statements should all point to this ultimate goal. But beyond this overt curriculum, it is imperative that a Christian school examine the underlying culture that will either support or detract from reaching the goal of encouraging the faith formation of students. Every effort should be made to identify, address and foster a healthy Christian school climate where the love of Christ is not only taught, but caught through the actions, attitudes and daily interactions with students and fellow staff. As stated by Hauerwas (1989) in *Resident Aliens*, p. 78.

Christian community, life in the colony, is not primarily about togetherness. It is about the way of Jesus Christ with those whom he calls to himself. It is about disciplining our wants and needs in congruence with a true story, which gives us the resources to lead truthful lives. In living out the story together, togetherness happens, but only as a by-product of the main project of trying to be faithful to Jesus.

This research project was conducted with the hope that through this process a healthy school culture where faith formation can flourish will become a priority and a reality for Christian schools that desire to see their students grow in their walk with the Lord Jesus Christ.

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## Appendix A

### Christian School Institutional Culture Survey

Based on your experience as a teacher in the past year, please rate each item below indicating whether you Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), are Undecided (U), Disagree (D), or Strongly Disagree (SD).

#### **I Belong**

- |   |             |
|---|-------------|
| 1. My school community is an accepting and inviting place.  | SA A U D SD |
| 2. Our school environment is characterized by the fruit of the spirit.  | SA A U D SD |
| 3. I have positive relationships with other faculty and staff.  | SA A U D SD |
| 4. I feel comfortable being open and vulnerable with those around me.   | SA A U D SD |
| 5. Building trust is a priority at my school.   | SA A U D SD |
| 6. My school encourages collaboration rather than competition.  | SA A U D SD |
| 7. Our school has a sense of “we” rather than “I.”  | SA A U D SD |
| 8. I know I can count on those around me to forgive me when I make a mistake.   | SA A U D SD |
| 9. My ideas and suggestions count.  | SA A U D SD |
| 10. Our school is a I Cor. 12 community, of which Christ is the head and we respect each other as unique members of his body. | SA A U D SD |

#### **I Know**

- |  |             |
|--|-------------|
| 11. I regularly encounter God's presence in my daily work.                                     | SA A U D SD |
| 12. Our school fosters a positive flow of communication.                                       | SA A U D SD |
| 13. I am aware of my school's history, mission and purpose.                                    | SA A U D SD |
| 14. I am encouraged to experiment and take risks in trying new ideas.                          | SA A U D SD |
| 15. Our faculty has a shared sense of responsibility for student outcomes.                     | SA A U D SD |
| 16. I am kept accountable for embedding a Biblical worldview into my teaching.                 | SA A U D SD |
| 17. I know my work is appreciated and valued.  | SA A U D SD |
| 18. My school has a climate in which diverse ideas and perspectives are valued.                | SA A U D SD |
| 19. I feel comfortable asking for help from my colleagues.                                     | SA A U D SD |
| 20. The Biblical creation-fall-redemption narrative shapes my work in concrete, specific ways. | SA A U D SD |

#### **I Have Hope**

- |  |             |
|--|-------------|
| 21. Our staff sees students from the perspective of God's finished work.                                 | SA A U D SD |
| 22. We share stories with each other that demonstrate God's faithfulness.                                | SA A U D SD |
| 23. I have a sense of the bigger picture and meaningfulness of my work.                                  | SA A U D SD |
| 24. I believe my co-workers have/will support me through times of suffering.                             | SA A U D SD |
| 25. I intentionally look for evidence of God's work in the lives of my students.                         | SA A U D SD |
| 26. Our actions as a community demonstrate the hope that we have in Christ.                              | SA A U D SD |
| 27. School leaders have communicated a vision of the future that motivates me.                           | SA A U D SD |
| 28. I daily nurture my walk with the Lord through prayer and Bible reading.                              | SA A U D SD |
| 29. I am encouraged to share my personal faith story with my colleagues.                                 | SA A U D SD |
| 30. The faculty works in our community through specific projects to show Christ's love in tangible ways. | SA A U D SD |

#### **I am Called and Equipped**

- |  |             |
|--|-------------|
| 31. I have a way to use my unique gifts to contribute to the school community. | SA A U D SD |
| 32. I encourage others in the use of their God-given gifts.                    | SA A U D SD |
| 33. Our community encourages engagement rather than compliance.                | SA A U D SD |
| 34. I am given opportunities for learning and development.                     | SA A U D SD |

35. Our school encourages peer-to-peer accountability.	SA	A	U	D	SD
36. I see myself as a role model for our students in the area of discipleship.	SA	A	U	D	SD
37. I use knowledge, experience and research to improve my teaching.	SA	A	U	D	SD
38. I am appropriately involved in decisions that affect my work.	SA	A	U	D	SD
39. I am encouraged to come up with new and better ways of doing things.	SA	A	U	D	SD
40. Others have named my gifts and helped me find places to use them.	SA	A	U	D	SD

**Demographic Information**

**Age:** 20-29 30-39 40-49 50-59 60-69

**Years of Experience:** 1-5 6-10 11-15 16-20 21-25 26-30 31-35 36+

**Years Teaching at SCCS:** 1-5 6-10 11-15 16-20 21-25 26-30 31-35 36+

**Teaching experience in:** Christian School only Christian School and Public School

**Attended (Grade School, HS, College):** Public School Christian School Both

**MA degree:** Yes No

## Appendix B

### Christian School Institutional Culture Survey – Student Version

Based on your experience as a student at SCCS, please rate each item below indicating whether you Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), are Undecided (U), Disagree (D), or Strongly Disagree (SD).

#### I Belong

- |   |    |   |   |   |    |
|---|----|---|---|---|----|
| 1. The SCCS community is an accepting and inviting place.   | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 2. Our school's environment is characterized by the fruit of the spirit.  | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 3. I have positive relationships with teachers and students.  | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 4. I feel comfortable being open and vulnerable with those around me.   | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 5. Building trust is a priority at SCCS.  | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 6. My school encourages teamwork rather than competition.   | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 7. Our school has a sense of "we" rather than "I."  | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 8. I know I can count on those around me to forgive me when I make a mistake.   | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 9. My ideas and suggestions count.  | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 10. Our school is a I Cor. 12 community, of which Christ is the head and we respect each other as unique members of his body. | SA | A | U | D | SD |

#### I Know

- |  |    |   |   |   |    |
|--|----|---|---|---|----|
| 11. I regularly encounter God's presence in my daily work.                         | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 12. Our school fosters a positive flow of communication.                           | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 13. I am aware of my school's history, mission and purpose.                        | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 14. I am encouraged to experiment and take risks in trying new ideas.              | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 15. I find ways to help other students in their learning.                          | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 16. I have learned about a Biblical worldview in all my subjects.                  | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 17. I know my work is appreciated and valued.                                      | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 18. My school has a climate in which diverse ideas and perspectives are valued.    | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 19. I feel comfortable asking for help from my teachers and fellow students.       | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 20. I know the Biblical creation-fall-redemption story and how it impacts my life. | SA | A | U | D | SD |

#### I Have Hope

- |   |    |   |   |   |    |
|---|----|---|---|---|----|
| 21. We see other students from the perspective of God's finished work.                            | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 22. We share stories with each other that demonstrate God's faithfulness.                         | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 23. I have a sense of the bigger picture and meaningfulness of my purpose in life.                | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 24. I believe my peers and teachers will support me through times of suffering.                   | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 25. I look for evidence of God's work in the lives of my peers.                                   | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 26. Our actions as a community demonstrate the hope that we have in Christ.                       | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 27. My teachers have communicated a vision of the future that motivates me.                       | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 28. I daily nurture my walk with the Lord through prayer and Bible reading.                       | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 29. I am encouraged to share my personal faith story with my peers.                               | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 30. SCCS works in our community through specific projects to show Christ's love in tangible ways. | SA | A | U | D | SD |

#### I am Called and Equipped

- |  |    |   |   |   |    |
|--|----|---|---|---|----|
| 31. I have a way to use my unique gifts to contribute to the school community. | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 32. I encourage others in the use of their God-given gifts.                    | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 33. SCCS encourages engagement rather than just following rules.               | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 34. I have learned and developed in my understanding at SCCS.                  | SA | A | U | D | SD |



- |  |    |   |   |   |    |
|--|----|---|---|---|----|
| 35. Our school encourages peer-to-peer accountability.                           | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 36. I see myself as a role model to those around me in the area of discipleship. | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 37. I use knowledge, experience and research in my learning.                     | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 38. I am appropriately involved in decisions that affect my learning.            | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 39. I am encouraged to come up with new and better ways of doing things.         | SA | A | U | D | SD |
| 40. Others have named my gifts and helped me find places to use them.            | SA | A | U | D | SD |