
Pro Rege

Volume 24 | Number 4

Article 1

June 1996

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Recommended Citation

Stronks, Gloria Goris (1996) "Promising Practices in Christian Schools: Mission to Practice,"

Pro Rege: Vol. 24: No. 4, 1 - 6.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol24/iss4/1

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Editor's Note: The articles of G. Stronks and R. Koole were originally presented at the 1996 B.J. Haan Education Conference at Dordt College.

Promising Practices In Christian Schools: Mission to Practice



by Gloria Goris Stronks

One of the most discouraging aspects about being involved with elementary and secondary schooling is the criticism of these schools in the public press. There certainly are reasons to be critical of schooling at any level, but there also are many reasons to celebrate progress. Lee Hollaar (1993) suggested that those involved in a particular Christian school might carefully examine elements or issues of the school, such as curriculum, instruction, and assessment. In doing so, they would determine what should be celebrated because it is in keeping with the mission of the

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school. They would find what should be strengthened, meaning it is important but needs work to make it better; what should be eliminated or discontinued because it is no longer appropriate in light of what they now know about teaching and learning; and what should be initiated in light of our new understandings.

I would like to describe North American Christian schools in which such self-examination has led to very positive changes. This description is not difficult because, after many school visits and conversations with teachers and principals, I know that we have a great many Christian schools with teachers who take their mission statement seriously and who are constantly working to bring practices in curriculum, instruction, and assessment into line with that statement.

The most difficult part of this assignment is determining which school happenings to report. Mentioning specific schools is not meant to imply that these are the only schools where exciting changes are taking place or even that these are the only schools I know of that have instituted such changes. Also, the fact that many of my examples will come from the upper elementary or middle school levels is not to imply that at other levels changes are not occurring. I have deliberately selected examples from upper elementary and middle schools because in the past they were so strongly influenced by a very traditional high-school model but now the influence of that model is weakening. Schools are changing in keeping with what is developmentally appropriate for students at the upper elementary and middle school

Timothy Christian Middle School in Elmhurst, Illinois, has a full exploratory program in place with classes such as Photography, Why Am I A Christian?, The History and Culture of Chicago, Middle School M.I.T., and German Language and Culture. These exploratory courses are becoming increasingly common in Christian middle schools and successfully serve the purpose of helping students understand the varied career paths available to them.

4. *A Vision With A Task* recommends that student service projects become a regular and coherent part of the school curriculum (307). The number of elementary and middle schools that have adopted such projects as part of the curriculum is growing rapidly. Many schools have students in upper elementary grades form partnerships with students in the early grades. The older students read to the younger ones and help them with their projects. Sylvan Christian sixth graders have "Kindergarten Buddies." There is a Head Start Program close to Timothy Christian Middle School and students regularly go to play with the pre-schoolers in the program.

Many Christian high schools already require or recommend that their students serve on some project. In a very few high schools that service requirement is integrated into some of the other courses by means of papers and presentations.

Valley Christian Middle School has a yearly "Starve-a-thon," with the students getting pledges for their not eating for 24 hours. One year, these students stayed at school all night for appropriate activities and raised approximately \$5,000 for World Vision. Another time they cleaned graffiti off the walls around town. Many schools have a food pantry, and at some middle schools the different home rooms take turns delivering the food monthly.

Many schools are moving away from events such as "skate-a-thons" or "rock-a-thons" for raising money towards productive activities that provide service for someone in need. Activities such as cleaning graffiti or helping older people paint or repair mean more than seeing how long one can rollerskate or rock in a rocking chair.

5. *A Vision With A Task* recommends that integral units be planned which focus on areas that have creational integrity and are rich in meaning.

Such units include considering God's intention for the area being studied, exploring how this purpose has been distorted by sin, and discovering avenues by which we may hope to bring healing and reconciliation. It is recommended that the curriculum rely less on one-per-student textbooks and more on a variety of resources (307). An example of such a unit is the one concerning the enormous Horicon Marsh located near Waupun, Wisconsin. The eighth grade teacher team of Waupun planned a unit in which their students will study many aspects of that marsh. That kind of unit planning can be found in a great many Christian elementary and middle schools, and teachers need a forum for sharing these units that take a considerable amount of planning time.

These are some examples of the many, many practices that demonstrate that Christian schools today are working hard to make certain that what happens in the classroom reflects the mission statement and recent research concerning learning and teaching. The interesting thing to me is that in every case, change has occurred because of the leadership of an exemplary principal or of a leader designated by the principal.

A Story About the Process of Change

Now I would like to tell you a story about the process of change in Christian schools. The story begins at Unity Christian High School in Hudsonville, Michigan, but recently has begun to include the surrounding Christian elementary and middle schools of eastern Ottawa County. In the past, Unity Christian High School's principal has been responsible for curriculum. Five years ago the board and administration, through its strategic planning processes, identified curriculum and staff development as priorities for providing a quality Christian education. They allocated the needed resources, which included appointing an Assistant Principal for Curriculum and Instruction and selected Bruce Hulst for that position.

Hulst adapted the strategic planning process to curriculum planning with small faculty groups. That planning coincided with the state of Michigan's move toward greater specificity in standards, benchmark skills, and planning for assessment. Under Hulst's direction, the faculty at

Unity worked toward developing a biblically-based education with specific goals. They were pleased with their work but realized that the high school could not stand on its own; all grades would need to be included. The resources of the entire system must be focused on producing the needed student learning.

While the curriculum work was in progress at Unity, the Christian schools of eastern Ottawa County met to develop a common strategic plan. With that plan, they committed themselves to developing fully aligned curricula that were in keeping with the purpose statements of the schools. The continuing challenge is to translate that vision into classroom reality, an undertaking that happens neither easily nor quickly.

The overall strategy for curriculum alignment recognized that teachers are the key element in any substantive curriculum change. Therefore, the schools provided for a "Curriculum Day" in which all of the teachers from the different schools would meet together. The first Curriculum Day addressed the need to ensure a common understanding of key concepts and focused on a biblically-based, outcomes-focused curriculum and included a process to development of outcome statements. Throughout the following months, the faculty in each of the schools worked at developing and stating specific goals.

The Curriculum Day of the second year focused on the concept of curriculum alignment to outcomes and to benchmark standards. Michigan's benchmarks were used as a handy reference and starting point. Prior to the third year meeting, the teachers said that if alignment to standards and to other Christian schools doesn't mean that all must use the same resources, it is still too abstract to make informed decisions on classroom practice. Therefore, this year's meeting was used for more specific work on what alignment meant in each subject area.

Hulst also introduced the concept of action research to the elementary, middle, and high school teachers. Groups of teachers at different grade levels and subject areas were asked, "What questions do you have about your area?" Then they were shown how they could collect the data necessary to get the answers to their questions. For example, a whole language approach to the teach-

ing of reading has been used for some time at the elementary level and the teachers wondered whether that approach has been as successful in fostering student learning as originally claimed. The teachers developed an action research project that allowed them to assess teacher perception as well as student learning and attitude outcomes.

At the middle school and high school levels the teachers' question was, "Although we say and believe that everything we teach is from a Christian perspective, do the tests that we give really reflect the importance we say we place on that perspective? To what extent are the students catching the perspective we claim?" To answer

*Teachers who work creatively
at curriculum planning need
time and leadership.*

those questions, the teachers are developing an action research project in which they collect and evaluate tests used in different courses. They examine those tests to see whether the test questions ask for the Christian perspective that the teacher claimed as her goal. They also examine whether the students' answers reflect Christian perspective. If teachers say they will develop a Christian perspective, one should not only be able to recognize that kind of teaching but one should be able to see it in examinations.

Most of the Christian schools in that area have adopted *The Chicago Math Series*, and through the discussion concerning alignment, the teachers in the different schools have been providing significant help to each other in adjusting to the new ways of teaching math. The quality and quantity of teacher dialogue concerning math instruction at the elementary, middle school, and high school has improved significantly as a result of this process of addressing outcomes, instruction, and assessment. The same thing has been true in science.

Hulst believes that curriculum must be designed for the setting, and that it is developed most successfully if it is true to the school's mission statement, includes a strategic plan for outcomes, and works for alignment recognized standards. Hardly ever does it happen that every teacher in a school system is eager or even willing to do the kind of work Bruce Hulst has described. His response to

that situation is that a school staff need not wait until everyone is in agreement. When you begin to do the action research to determine what is or is not working in your school, the data itself will be sufficiently interesting to draw all teachers into the dialogue.

Real change in schools is not the result of tinkering with policies and programs (Sarason, 1990). We may put computers into classrooms, schedule longer blocks for instruction, and use library books for reading and English classes, but these are only superficial changes unless each one is connected to the overall vision of what that particular school is. A school has to have a unifying vision and any effort to change must be part of that unifying vision.

The Follow-Through

There are exciting, positive practices in place in many Christian elementary and middle schools. But that may present us with a problem. Recently I read a book titled, *Literacies Lost*, which describes students moving from an excellent middle school to a traditional high school. Despite individual differences in personality, motivation, and interests, the students in middle school had encountered caring teachers, interesting work, a variety of approaches for learning content, and some choice in how they set about learning. They had been taught that community was integral to learning. They had become used to evaluating their own work and understood that not everyone learned in the same way.

So what happened when they entered a traditional high school? The high school they entered wasn't structured for the caring interaction they had known in middle school. Students didn't usu-

ally see their teachers outside the 50-minute instructional blocks, and when they were in class the business of covering material was primary. The habits of planning how learning could best happen, of taking personal responsibility for learning, of helping others learn, changed to doing what the teachers assigned in a competitive venture for getting the highest grades. Are things different in Christian high schools? In some communities the parents of grade 9 students have challenged the Christian high school teachers to arrange instruction in ways that will involve their students in learning as actively as they had been involved in middle school. Christian high schools are beginning to restructure their schedules to include larger blocks of instructional time for using integral units. We want Christian high school teachers to serve as models for our young people, therefore, it is extremely important that students get to know their teachers well enough to see them as models for the way a Christian might live. Christian high school teachers will need a great deal of support and encouragement as they attempt to make necessary changes.

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