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## Between Memory and Vision: The Case for Faith-Based Schooling (Book Review)

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# Book Review

*Between Memory and Vision: The Case for Faith-Based Schooling*, by Steven C. Vryhof (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 181 pp. Reviewed by Lloyd Den Boer, Instructor of Education, Dordt College.

Over the past two decades, bold initiatives and vigorous controversy have dominated the world of educational policy making in the United States. The 1983 publication of *A Nation At Risk* by the federal government's National Commission on Educational Excellence is one mark of the current struggle's beginnings. *A Nation At Risk* claimed that United States schools were so ineffective that the nation's security had been compromised. While these dire conclusions have been questioned by studies such as Berliner and Biddle's (1995) *The Manufactured Crisis*, a deep sense of disappointment in public education is still widely shared by many Americans. Responding to that sense of disappointment, the United States Congress passed No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001 with wide bipartisan support. NCLB is a reauthorization and a fundamental recasting of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965), the primary vehicle by which federal K-12 education dollars are distributed to states. Through NCLB, federal legislators intended to hold the nation's schools to rising standards of performance, including rising standards of performance for disadvantaged groups.

A complex and multifaceted law, NCLB might be summarized by reference to two principles that appear to undergird its approach to school improvement. The first is an intensified role of behavioral science in the field of education. By stepping up the systematic redesign of prescribed learning outcomes, increasing the role of standardized testing, prioritizing instructional methods that have "scientific" backing, and amplifying bureaucratic oversight of the state systems, NCLB signals that it intends to leverage change through a more consistent application of the very behavioral science and efficiency management perspectives that have dominated United States education for at least a century. The second principle is dismantling the monopoly that public schools are said to hold over United States education by exposing public schools to the competition of quasi-market forces. Two sets of regulations provide that exposure. In brief, schools are first required to publish standardized test scores and indicate whether they have been identified as failing schools. Second, students in persistently failing schools will become eligible for enrollment in better schools, including non-governmental schools, at their local public school's expense. The drafters of NCLB

apparently believed that once parents were provided with facts and means to act on them, they would cast votes against inadequate education with their feet.

NCLB understandably has thrown the educational world into turmoil. On the whole, the disagreements that arise from intensifying the role of behavioral science in education are quarrels among friends. While educators and politicians may be bitterly divided on its implications, most share a more basic agreement about the foundational role of behavioral science in education. Exposing public schools to quasi-market forces is another matter. By importing into education the neoliberal principle that governments must intervene to protect the operation of markets, the drafters of NCLB disturbed assumptions about the relationship between common education and democracy that have gone largely unquestioned since the late nineteenth century. To put the best face on the arguments offered by both sides of the debates, the law's supporters argue that the needs of students and the interests of the state can be served best by placing schools under pressure either to improve or face the loss of their students to other schools. They trust that such pressure will produce education that is rigorous in a narrower academic sense. Rigorous education, they are convinced, will prepare students for successful life. The law's promoters also assume that the successful lives of many individual students will translate fairly directly into national good. Those who oppose the law fear that its quasi-market features are a prelude to the privatization of education. They believe that democratic educational principles will collapse as students become increasingly sequestered in privileged enclaves where they will contact only other students most like themselves and ideas most like their own. The law's opponents believe that genuinely democratic culture cannot flourish unless students from many backgrounds are exposed to common experiences and ideas—including experiences and ideas that challenge students' homegrown assumptions. They warn that without direct educational nurture, the common good will be drowned in a cacophony of marginal, undemocratic voices and interests.

The entire brouhaha puts the promoters of Christian education in an awkward place. On the one hand, Christian schools might stand to gain from any measure that tends to dismantle the privileged role of gov-

ernment schools. On the other hand, any recognition, or even tax dollars, that Christian schools might eventually secure through NCLB unfortunately will emerge directly from the law's market-based strategy. Recognition that is predicated on standardized test scores that are higher than those of a public school down the street will provide little more than a precarious existence—especially for schools that claim their places on the basis of their faith commitments. This is all the more to be feared because the tight engineering of expanded learning outcomes and aligned testing that NCLB mandates is driving difference out of American education. Those of us who view the implementation of NCLB from the trenches, as it were, see how teachers feel pressured to abandon everything except those learning experiences likely to improve test scores. Depending on their state's regulatory structures, some Christian schools are already experiencing this pressure directly while expectations that surround the law are having similar indirect effects on many others. Sacrificing the time needed to prepare students for standardized tests in order to address a learning goal that is singularly tied to the Christian vision of a school is becoming an act of courage these days. Accordingly, while NCLB tantalizes Christian-school promoters with the possibility that the privileged position of government schools may at long last be at least partly withdrawn, the law also withdraws much of the curricular flexibility that Christian schools need to offer a faith-based education. To paraphrase Dickens, today United States Christian schools are precariously placed at the best and the worst of times, and much depends on what happens next.

If Christian-school promoters are to have any influence on what happens next, their best strategies would be to clarify a sense of Christian educational mission that runs far deeper than better test scores and to proclaim that mission vigorously in the public square. Christian-school promoters are indebted to Steven Vryhof for *Between Memory and Vision: The Case for Faith-Based Schooling*, a book that addresses both of those needs. Vryhof's argument invigorates the discussion of Christian school purpose by employing well-established bases for Reformed Christian education, such as "covenant" and "kingdom," within a framework that addresses contemporary needs. In addition, his argument speaks directly to the public square by maintaining that public education's malaise runs far deeper than anything that intensified behavioral science or quasi-market strategies could solve. The right steps toward a solution, he argues, lie in a plurality of school systems, an approach by which people from all backgrounds and commitments could "win" (12).

What is the case for faith-based schooling?

According to Vryhof, it rests on the way in which faith-based schools are well designed to be part of functional communities. Vryhof draws his concept of functional community from James Coleman, who uses that term to describe communities that are characterized by a value consistency among adults that children adopt readily because of the healthy social relationships throughout the community (4-5). In short, "functional community" is a sociological term for what is intended by the aphorism, "It takes a village to raise a child." On the one hand, Vryhof argues that functional community is more often transferred to children implicitly by way of sets of daily practices than explicitly through statements of principle (5). Yet, on the other hand, he believes that community values need to be grounded in worldviews that have depth if they are to have the power that they should have in human lives (8). Throughout the book, the history of Reformed Christian education and ethnographies of three specific Reformed Christian schools serve as examples and test cases to support Vryhof's argument. Vryhof shows that Reformed Christian schools participate in a worldview that suspends their task between memory and vision. By memory, he largely means the Reformed concept of the covenant, the story of how God chooses his people and his people's obligations to respond (65). Memory looks inward toward the history of a community and the significance of its traditions. By vision, Vryhof means the concept of the kingdom, the confession of Christ's lordship over all of life and the impetus that it provides for expressing that lordship in cultural life (66-67). Vision looks outward toward the tasks of the Christian community in the world. Between memory and vision lies the educational task of the Christian school:

[T]hree goals have formed a continuity in Reformed educational thought: *conservation* of the Christian worldview, *inquiry* into all aspects of life and the world, and *reforming* the world through a life of discipleship. (68)

Vryhof provides a short history of the rise of public education in the United States to illustrate how public schools have largely lost their ability to create functional community. That loss originated in the coming together of two factors in the nineteenth century: the Enlightenment's separation of faith from public life and fear of the consequences of granting immigrant Catholics the means to establish their own schools. In response to those factors, common-school promoters crafted a kind of schooling based on common civic religion. On the whole, Vryhof maintains, one goal of public education is to create social harmony by detaching students from their more local communities so that the students' primary sense of meaning will depend on

civic values that serve the needs of the state (49). However, the generalized sense of civic responsibility that this produces cannot supply the kinds of significant memories and weighty visions that functional community requires. Significantly in our NCLB educational world, it has also led, in the words of Patricia Graham, to “a cacophony about practice, silence about purpose” (50).

While it is relatively easy to agree that faith-based schools are more likely to create functional communities than many public schools are, the question remains whether functional community matters in the education of children. Vryhof’s research suggests that it does. *Between Memory and Vision* is laced with testimonials from Christian-school parents affirming the crucial role of various aspects of functional community in the school lives of their children. Furthermore, Vryhof cites evidence from the National Education Longitudinal Study begun in 1988 (NELS:88) that indicates that students in faith-based schools, and students in the Reformed Christian schools belonging to Christian Schools International in particular, perform very well. In fact, Vryhof’s examination of the NELS:88 data leads him to the significant conclusion that the educational setting offered in Reformed Christian schools disrupts what is otherwise a fairly ironclad relationship between socioeconomic status and school performance to the benefit of less wealthy students (136).

Despite such successes, Vryhof’s ethnographic studies of three Reformed Christian schools demonstrate that these schools still struggle with significant issues and especially with the tensions between cultural isolation, accommodation, and transformation that have plagued Reformed Christian schools from their beginnings. While the most interesting of the three schools is Mustard Seed School, which offers Reformed education in a multi-denominational setting with a deliberate focus on addressing the educational needs of the urban poor, most Reformed Christian schools that I know more closely resemble Holland Christian Middle School. Like so many other CSI schools, Holland Christian offers an excellent and broad program but, according to Vryhof, does so in a context where a tendency toward ethnic and denominational isolation paradoxically combines with a tendency toward accommodation to the values of consumer society in ways that restrict the culturally transformative thrust of the school. Appropriately, Vryhof does not let us rest easily in our successes, suggesting instead an agenda for the continuing reform of Reformed Christian schools.

By basing a case for faith-based education in functional community, Vryhof has constructed an attractive argument. However, he is far from being the first to

suggest that education should be linked to community. In fact, great portions of the progressive movement in education can be read as an attempt to use schools to restore or replace the kind of face-to-face, homogenous American community that had been disrupted by industrialization, urbanization, and massive immigration. In certain senses, from the early national period forward, many American educators have believed that the most important role of schools is to forge a unified citizenry, a national community—as Vryhof himself points out. The fact that this theme is so common in the history of American education gives pause. Has Vryhof actually set his plow deep enough to turn up fresh, clean soil in which to grow a vigorous round of renewed discussion about the mission of Christian education?

On the other hand, Vryhof’s very point is to stand much of the previous thinking about schools and community building on its head. Rather than viewing schools as a platform for generating a national community, Vryhof sees them as institutions that participate in particular communities. Furthermore, community is not so much the goal of the Christian school, as it is a spontaneous accompaniment to faithful living as a people of God. These differences are seminal. Were Christian school promoters to explore their implications deeply, the implications could lead toward a rebalancing of the ways in which Christian schools are isolated from and accommodated to American society.

In summary, *Between Memory and Vision* is a book that comes as if pat upon its cue. At a historical moment when so much is at stake in national educational policy, this book is singularly useful because it rejects both sides of the argument about NCLB. To the law’s supporters it argues that merely intensifying what we already do will not address our educational malaise. To the law’s opponents it says that children will not flourish in the distant, generalized national community that their democratic educational ideals envision. To the promoters of Reformed Christian schools, it suggests that now is the time to sharpen our memory and clarify our vision.