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Myths and Realities in Christian Education



by Gloria Goris Stronks

In 1972 a friend gave me a book containing two novella. I found the stories intriguing because they were about people who lived their entire lives in ways that were consistent with their beliefs and assumptions. Their assumptions were often false, but since they were unexamined, the people had no idea that they were basing their actions and decisions on nothing more than myths. They lived with those myths to protect themselves, but because they lived with those myths, their entire lives were flawed. The book was *We Never Make Mistakes* by Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

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People in many areas of life are in danger of living with myths. The dreadful thing is that the myths we live with usually contain a grain of truth. Yet when they are stated over and over, they begin to sound compellingly true to those who believe them. And since they believe the myths, they are protected as they go along in their same old ways.

Those of us engaged in Christian grade school and high school education live by our own myths. Some of these myths are held by parents, some by students, some by teachers, and some by principals. There is enough of a grain of truth about each of the myths so that, after saying them over and over, we come to believe in them, thereby allowing us to live in complacency. But these myths about Christian schools are difficult to sift out because no one myth is held by all people in every school.

What do I mean by myths? When I was a child in elementary school, the state in which I lived required that during reading class, every fifth grader must read Greek, Roman, and Norse myths. I attended a one-room country school with seven other students, and being the only fifth grader, I read Greek, Roman, and Norse myths that year. In grades seven and eight we had to take state board examinations which assessed our knowledge of geography, literature, history and knowledge of those myths. This testing process took place because so many schools were small, rural schools and the state office of education wanted to make certain that we were learning.

As a child in fifth grade, I was told that myths arose because people had to have some explanation for the events they saw around them. Unfortunately, the more those myths influenced the thinking of the people, the more dysfunctional the people became. We need to identify the myths held in common by many people engaged in Christian education in order to make certain that beliefs without true foundation do not influence what we do daily with our students, their parents, our colleagues, or the curriculum.

Myth #1: High Schools Have No Long-Term Effect

One myth is that high schools have no long-term effects. I am amazed that so many intelligent parents believe this myth. The attitude of many parents is that high school should be a safe place for young people during those four years of growing up, but it doesn't matter whether they learn a great deal while they are there. College is for real learning on the part of students who want to continue. Many parents expect little from high school: popularity, average grades, and safety from drugs, alcohol, and harmful friendships for their children; or assurance that their children will do well enough academically to get to college. These parents think that the high school their children attend has no actual long-term effects, but if the local Christian high school provides a safer environment than the public school, they will likely choose it for their children.

I firmly believe that it is a myth to say high schools have no long-term effects. The effects of a given high school may be positive or negative, but they are always there and they always last far into adulthood. Why do I believe that? On a personal note, my own Christian high school was where, for the first time, I came into contact with adults who thought in new ways. They gave a great deal of their time to just sitting and talking with those of us students who wanted to do so. I do not remember exemplary instruction and I doubt that it would have been exemplary at that time. But three teachers who gave their time to talk with me on many occasions profoundly changed my life by helping me think in terms larger than the narrow vision of my background. David Kolb (1984) reports that many people select their careers or areas of major interest because of what happened to them

in high school in a particular discipline with a particular teacher.

Chicago magazine reported that in August 1994 eleven city and suburban educators, people known as distinguished teachers, administrators, and counselors, came together to answer the questions, "What makes a high school great?" After lengthy discussion they listed the keys for creating top high schools, among which were the following (Rodkin, 1995, 78-85):

1. The best schools challenge students with demanding assignments. Teachers in these schools do not succumb to the false notion that schoolwork has to be easy and fun to interest students. By "demanding assignments" they do not mean that students must answer more questions at the end of chapters and must do more of the same math homework. Rather, they cite the example of a public high school classroom where juniors are engaged in debating where and how one scholar's thesis on the American Revolution fits into another writer's framework of American History. And another high school where four times each school year, the entire student body and faculty participate in an all-school seminar where a senior must successfully defend his or her ideas about a set of readings by a writer such as Henry David Thoreau, Mahatma Gandhi, or the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. and discuss it with nine other students and three teachers.

In Sullivan High School all students get at least one weekly experience with the Socratic method, in which they analyze readings in various subject areas, supporting their arguments with direct references to the text, replacing the old "read the chapter and answer the questions at the end" approach. Rodkin quotes Sullivan Principal Patricia Anderson: "You can see students who get a 4.0 average and graduate, and in four years they have said very little and exhibited very little of the knowledge they gained. But our students need to be able to show that they have mastered the process of reading, thinking critically, and speaking about what they have learned. There's less rote paper-and-pencil work and more time to develop their ability to wrestle with ideas" (80).

2. The best schools expect more of all students, rather than of just the top third. These schools are in various stages of dismantling their old tracking systems and encouraging students to set their own

level for learning within a class, encouraging them to aim high rather than low. Highland Park High school reports that after moving in that direction ACT and SAT scores went way up and they have more National Merit semifinalists than ever before.

3. The best high schools insist on a high degree of parent participation, in attending not only public musical, dramatic, and athletic performances but also day-long introductory programs and periodic talks by experts in education. At one school, if students must have special tutoring sessions because of sub-par performance, a parent must go along for at least half the sessions. In spite of the fact that many teachers in this country complain of the busyness of two-income families, this Chicago school reports that parents really want to be involved in doing something substantive in the school rather than simply baking cookies for another fund-raiser.

4. In the best high schools, subjects and classes are coordinated or integrated whenever doing so helps students see how learning comes together. For example, in one high school humanities program Western Civilization is taught in a larger block accompanied by a studio-art component, with students working in the styles of the era they are studying.

5. In the best high schools, although standardized tests such as ACT and SAT are still used because colleges require them for admission, alternative measures of demonstrating competence are used. In Latin School, after students have studied the theme, "The Nazi Mind," they conduct their own version of the Nuremberg trials, taking the roles of prosecutors, defense attorneys, and defendants. They research and prepare their own cases, drawing on readings in international law and actual transcripts of the original proceedings. Students receive one grade for a traditional written summary of research and a second grade for performance at the trial, which is attended by parents.

Some states now require that all students keep a portfolio of their work in high school so that at the end they will have a portrait of what they were as a student. Periodically they must examine their portfolio with a teacher and sometimes with a parent, to help them see and chart their progress. It really does matter what kind of high school education young people have.

Myth #2: Christian High Schools Do Not Have to Change Much

The second myth often held by Christian high school teachers and principals, has been seriously challenged by many parents recently. *This is the myth that Christian high schools really don't have to change much.* Oh, it is nice if high school teachers try to teach in more interactive ways by trying a little cooperative learning here and there. But it really isn't too serious if that kind of teaching doesn't work for them. As far as Christian high schools are concerned, the myth goes, the structure of the school and the way the curriculum is

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set up don't have to change very much. The real thing wrong with high schools is that kids don't value an education and so they just won't work hard enough.

When one visits Christian schools around North America and compares schooling now with schooling 20 years ago, there is evidence that change is occurring. At the K - 5 level, classrooms and teaching are remarkably different, with a great deal of cooperative learning and student research evident. At grades six, seven, and eight many schools are progressing in providing schooling developmentally appropriate. Change is occurring slowly, but school improvement teams are at work, advisor-advisee groups have been established, exploratory units are in place, and a serious attempt is being made to plan and teach integral units. When I talk with middle school teachers in some Christian schools I am astonished to hear what is happening there. Schools where grades six, seven, and eight are exactly the way they were 20 years ago are becoming less common and are significantly out of step with what we know is best for students in those grades.

Well, what about high school? In spite of the examples cited by the Chicago group of educators, when it comes to public high schools, Sarason, one of the foremost writers in this area, argued in 1971 that little change had occurred in high schools in about 50 years and he made the same case in

1990. Think of it. Seventy years without significant change means that most public high schools are using a model that is more than 70 years old. Schools become larger and have more complicated equipment with bigger and fancier gyms and greater use of computers but schooling itself remains the same.

Despite much research suggesting that students learn better with fewer subjects, with longer blocks of time, with different classroom atmospheres, the pattern of 45 or 50 minute periods continues. We have used the Carnegie structure in high schools for almost 100 years. The Carnegie structure means that teachers typically teach five classes, each approximately 45 minutes long, dealing with up to 180 students per day. We still use the 45 or 50 minute Carnegie units in spite of the fact that we know that system means the teacher will have to deal with too many students in a given day to know them well, and in spite of the fact that that system means students will take too many separate courses for the teacher to help them make connections.

What do I mean by helping them make connections? In *A Vision With A Task: Educating for Responsive Discipleship* (1993) the authors say the following:

God has created us so that we long to find meaning in the experiences of life, to see how things relate to each other and how things hang together. This is because the meaning-full creation speaks of him and is designed to bring us into and deepen our personal relationship with him. . . . Today, we have supporting research conclusions about this need to see things in relation to one another. This research concerns how students think about what they have read or heard, the process they go through when they relate new experience to prior knowledge, how students break down new information into its constituent parts and then put it back together again into a new pattern, and how they use abstractions and ideas in particular situations. Brain research confirms this need to search for how things make sense. (131-2)

We know from brain research that learners try to make sense of the world around them by looking for patterns and relationships. When knowledge that is supposed to be gained during the high school years is broken apart into many different subjects, far too great a number of students will have difficulty making the connections that allow them to recognize patterns and relationships that actually exist.

High school students from European countries who come here as exchange students often puzzle over the number of subjects our students study. We should not feel complimented about that. Having all those different courses simply means that we have further fragmented the knowledge we want our students to have.

In addition to fragmenting knowledge, many public and Christian high school classrooms also follow an old model. A great deal of research shows that students need to learn actively in a variety of ways, and yet most classrooms still center on textbooks and lectures. Students spend little time in school actually researching, interviewing, discussing, and writing about the information they have gathered. Students still demonstrate only a limited grasp of higher-level thinking skills. High school students still spend much time completing short answer sheets instead of actually reading, researching, discussing, and writing in response to the new understandings that are gained.

High school students learn things in a rough proportion to the amount of time they spend studying. There is research to support that statement, but it also is a matter of common sense. Even though we know this, high school students in the U.S. spend less time in school and less time on homework than their age group does anywhere else in the industrial world. The Juster and Stafford study (1990) concludes that U.S. high-school students are engaged in academic work only half as many hours a week as their counterparts in Japan. Christian high schools imitate public high schools in that they have shorter school years and school days than the rest of the industrialized world. My own survey of college students concerning their high school study experiences convinces me that homework plays as little a part in their lives as it did in mine at that level. Do we wonder, then, why our high school students end up knowing less than their age-mates in other parts of the industrialized world?

What about all the school reform movements going on in high schools across the U.S. and Canada? Most of the reform movements began by believing that change happens individually, school by school. I believe the reformers were right about that being the way change happens. As a result, however, you will find here and there absolutely wonderful, but isolated, high schools,

both public and private. Change happens in one high school and we would expect that change, when it has been shown to be successful, to spread through other high schools in that district. The spread rarely occurs. Often it is the school district itself that limits the spread of positive change.

Some state education offices are prescribing what is to be learned in high school. Michigan, for example, is developing a high school proficiency test that emphasizes problem solving rather than memorizing facts. Next fall, if all goes as planned, 11th graders will be tested on proficiency in each of the following: math, science, reading, and writing. In 1997 a social studies test will be added. Students who pass the separate tests will receive endorsements, or labels, on their high school diplomas to signify their aptitude to employers and colleges. Students aren't required to pass the exam to graduate and may have several chances to try any of the tests again if they fail.

It is fair to say that state agencies expect high school graduates not only to have a certain amount of factual knowledge but to be able to use it for solving problems. It will be very interesting to see what private, Christian colleges do with the high school transcripts that have only one or two areas of endorsement, rather than all of them so labeled. How badly do we want bodies in our colleges? What message will those of us involved in Christian higher education send to high school students?

Well, what about Christian high schools? Some of them were even judged to be exemplary schools by a school commission. They often are exemplary in that they are not troubled with guns being carried to school or with drugs being sold in school. The students are reasonably respectful. They usually do what is asked of them. Many of the parents care very much about what happens in school and believe that what is happening in their high school is appropriate. Many Christian high school teachers really care about their students. When states mandate proficiency tests, many of the Christian high school students will receive endorsements in most areas. In many ways these schools have the best climate for change you will find anywhere.

Have they changed? Or are they still very much like the schools we knew 20 and 40 years ago? The truth is that many of them really have not changed. Individual teachers are often very effective in the class as well as on a personal level, and

I appreciated those individual teachers so very much when my children were in Christian high school, just as I appreciated them so much when I was a student. Some individual teachers have even made dramatic changes in the way they teach. But as far as structural changes to increase learning, to ease the making of connections, these are hard to find in Christian high schools.

Such a seemingly small matter as parent-teacher conferences is a case in point. These days one can often find in Christian grade schools and middle schools that the conference is three-way, including student, teacher, and parents. The format is

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work as their U.S.
counterparts.*

that the student first reflects on his or her work and actions over the preceding grading period. Next, the student and teacher evaluate the work and actions together. Finally, at the conference the student, teacher, and parents sit together to discuss areas in which the student has acted responsibly and responsively both in academic matters and in school relationships, and together they determine areas in which the student will want to exert extra effort. Together they pinpoint areas that the student will commit to working on in the future because helping that student learn discipleship is truly a joint venture between the home and the school.

This practice is happening frequently in Christian middle schools, but strangely, not in Christian high schools. Of what value is it for the teacher and parent to discuss the student's academic strengths and weaknesses and to discuss the student's willingness to bear and share joys and burdens without the student present? When we intend high school to help each student learn responsive discipleship, that student should participate in the discussion of how to practice what he or she has learned about responsive discipleship.

Should all Christian high schools be alike in their changes? Not at all. Each Christian high school should reflect its mission in a way that is appropri-

ate for its own community. One hopes the mission statements would share common goals, but the way the goals are met might certainly be different from each other. However, restructuring isn't a hot topic in Christian high schools. Christian high schools have a pretty good academic reputation compared with some public high schools, and teachers and parents tend to overlook the many public high schools that have made tremendous strides in providing excellent education. So you won't find a great many teachers or parents pushing for major change. In fact, you might find many parents who would oppose changes, because the world is filled with so much change already that it is comforting to think that our children can be in schools that are the same as when we were there.

Christian high schools need the same kind of institutional self-examination as public schools because Christian schools bear an unsettling resemblance to their public counterparts. Perhaps Christian high schools have followed the public school model so closely that they have not provided a truly alternative choice for parents. We certainly have followed the model of the public school when we look at our school calendar, both the number of days in school and the length of each day. We have ignored the truism that people learn things in rough proportion to the amount of time they spend studying them. As a result, students in Christian schools spend less time engaged in academic learning than any other students in the industrial world. And that is simply because we have followed the model of the public school. Again I must refer to *A Vision With A Task* and its recommendations for changes in the school calendar, which you will find at the close of the book.

Myth #3: Christian High Schools Cannot Change

The third myth, also directly related to high schools, is that, even if change is needed, Christian high schools won't change because they can't change. This myth might be the most destructive myth of all. For teachers and principals to believe that change can't happen is to ensure that it won't happen. To say that something can happen requires that one provides some guidance concerning how it may happen. However, keep in mind that a decision not to change means that what is occurring right now is the very best alternative.

So what is needed for Christian high schools to change? It would be wonderful if we could find a way to fund and enlist the services of a group of six participants representing different regions of the North American Christian high school scene. These six participants could spend two summers working together. During the academic year between those summers they will be back teaching on their own campuses but still working on the project through e-mail, answering the question: What restructuring and reforming is needed by Christian high schools if students are to learn responsive discipleship there? What guiding questions might Christian high school people use in redesigning curriculum? What are some examples of curricular reforms and models for change appropriate for Christian high schools? Given the easy access many people have to e-mail now, a group like that could provide wonderful direction.

When one thinks of the changes that might lead to better learning, the possibilities are endless. We made several suggestions concerning restructuring at the end of *A Vision With A Task*. The restructuring movements across the country provide other examples that might be productive. What has gone wrong with the high school reform movement is not that we don't have knowledge about what constitutes a good high school. The problem is that it is so very difficult to get high schools to work together to replicate the good things that are happening in any one school.

Education Week reports that some of the most promising results have come from networks of like-minded educators banding together to transform their schools. The article cites groups like the Coalition of Essential Schools, the Center for Educational Renewal, and the College Board Equity 2000 Program. In each of these groups, like-minded high school educators have supported each other in changing teachers' and parents' conception of what constitutes good teaching and learning.

Some very positive instances of change have occurred. For example, in 1989, in Boxford, Massachusetts, a program was begun that was named the Renaissance Program or "RenPro" (Carroll, 1994). The plan was begun in grade nine with a grade added each year, depending on positive evaluations. Under the RenPro schedule the year was divided into three trimesters of 60 days each. In each trimester students took two 100-minute classes each

morning and in the afternoon they took traditionally scheduled electives and participated in a seminar program. This schedule allowed for the large blocks needed for teaching with interdisciplinary units and also for the small blocks for electives and for subject areas that require more traditional blocks.

It seems to me that any plan a school works out ought to allow for those two ways of providing for learning. In fact, the Christian high schools of British Columbia, with their coordinator Bob Koole, are working toward specifying which themes and topics will be taught in an integral manner using larger blocks of time, and which will be taught as specialized subjects. This is explained in their Core Statement as follows:

Integral studies are based on themes/topics/issues that focus on some of the "big" questions of life, understandings that are fundamental to who we are as human beings; they are "close to life," e.g., service, stewardship, community, vocation, growth, love, justice, freedom/responsibility. The source and basis for integral unit topics will vary for different grades. (12)

...Specialized studies examine particular aspects of human life in a Christian worldview. They provide an in-depth focus through subject areas/disciplines. Course content is designed to develop the gifts of those who enrol providing a wide range of learning activities to account for differences in learning styles and developmental levels. Specialized studies incorporate depth and breadth and develop both within-grade and cross-grade connections. (13)

The Core Statement then describes how they will do this. The point is that we have to create a climate for change and a plan for changing.

A good way of starting might be for a task force made up of board members, teachers, principals, parents, and students to attempt to seek an answer to this question. "Suppose we had no Christian high school and were discussing whether or not we should have one. What would we want to happen to the students while they attended our school? What would we want them to be like when they leave our school? How would we assess whether or not we were accomplishing these purposes?" After they had arrived at answers to those questions, they might turn to the mission statement with its set of goals and compare their own list with the goals already set forth. The point is that

we must be very clear concerning what we expect to happen to students in our high schools and we must know a great deal about the progress we are making toward achieving our goals.

In looking for a plan for change, perhaps we could be helped by examining the pattern of change in Christian middle schools. The most productive pattern has been for all teachers and principals working in the grade six-eight levels in several different schools to come together for planning sessions in the form of a series of up to ten workshops. The three-hour sessions, every aspect of which is planned by the college and representa-

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school.*

tives from the schools working together, may receive a full or half-course graduate credit, because it certainly is graduate-level work.

Each workshop session begins with a presentation of new information concerning learning and teaching at the middle level. Then when it is time for planning how those ideas are to be implemented, the teachers and principal of each school work together. Each session closes with a sharing time so that principals and teachers from one school hear the ideas of those from other schools. By the time the workshop sessions have been completed, each school will have an extensive plan for change, along with a time-line for when each phase of the change will occur.

But that is not all. Approximately two or three years after the changes have begun, some schools have invited an evaluation team in to evaluate the school in light of its mission statement. The team consisted of one college faculty member who has expertise in the area of middle school, one Christian middle school principal, one middle school teacher in a Christian school, and one middle school teacher in a public school. This team surveyed parents, teachers, and students . . . examined curriculum outlines . . . sat in classes . . . interviewed many different people of the school community, including students. When the school initiating the

evaluation receives the report from the team, the faculty, principal, and education committee discuss together the implications of the report. That kind of outside examination is imperative for Christian schools.

Myth #4: Colleges Adequately Prepare Teachers to Teach

The fourth myth, often held by school boards and administrators, is that students who go to a good Christian college are well prepared to be teachers. Any other knowledge they need in order to teach well, they can get in a practical way, by learning from those around them as they go through their years of teaching. The reason boards and administrators need this myth is that if they say that more education is needed, they will have to find ways to fund that additional education for their teachers.

It is a flawed assumption to think that graduates of very good colleges are completely prepared to be teachers. The undergraduate colleges, Christian or public, no matter how good their teacher education programs may be, cannot adequately prepare teachers to teach. We do the best we know how but teaching is an enormously complicated task. A teacher must know developmental levels of students, have a firm knowledge of facts, and have an understanding of the interconnectedness of creation. A teacher must know the profession and understand parent-child relationships. And teachers must know themselves. Nobody graduating from college knows all of those things.

It is difficult for undergraduates to benefit from taking pre-service professional education courses because, even with all the field experiences required at the pre-professional level, most undergraduates do not have the life experience nor the teaching experience to make the knowledge and insights from these courses become a part of them. People can benefit far more from taking professional education courses after they have taught for a while. But without teacher certification they won't be allowed to teach . . . nor would I want them to teach, and so we have a dilemma.

Most states say that a teacher's certificate is only temporary. In order to get a permanent certificate one must have approximately 18 hours of graduate work (though those hours may often be in any area). I believe it is absolutely essential that teach-

ers continue on a regular basis with graduate work while teaching. By graduate work I do not mean a workshop here or there to maintain certification. The reason a planned program of graduate work is so essential is that there continues to be additional helpful information concerning how people learn and how we can best teach, and teachers are not likely to encounter that research if they simply take the graduate courses and workshops that catch their interest.

Even if Christian schools have a good curriculum coordinator at the elementary and secondary levels it is essential that teachers continue their professional growth. Without that growth, the school is at the mercy of the whims of the provincial and state education office. Teachers must become very knowledgeable concerning what really is meant by whole language and how that relates to phonics instruction. They ought to know a great deal concerning curriculum development so they are not at the mercy of textbooks. They need to know a great deal about teaching, learning, and assessment so that they are not at the mercy of every educational fad that blows across their lives. They need to know a great deal about instructional strategies that really involve learners and those things cannot be learned with any depth by attending workshops provided by either the Christian School Association or public schools. It takes reading and discussion time to examine ideas with any depth, and graduate courses allow for such time.

We need to be very serious about making it possible for teachers in Christian schools to take these courses, taught from a Christian perspective, in areas closer to home. And teachers will need help with the tuition and other costs of studying because often these teachers are paying tuition costs for providing Christian education for their own children.

Myth #5: Christian Teachers Always Teach With a Christian Perspective

A group of parents have said to me that *it is a myth to assume that subjects really are taught with a Christian perspective in all Christian high schools and grade schools*. Some parents are saying that in their Christian grade schools and high schools the teachers mean very well and are kind and caring, but they really don't know how to teach from a Christian perspective. In one large Christian high school, a school with a good reputation

for academic excellence, a group of parents new to the community enrolled their children. As the academic year moved along these parents became increasingly concerned. It seemed to them that the courses were not being taught much differently than they would be in a public high school. So this group of parents went, individually, to their children's teachers and asked, "In what way do you integrate faith with this subject area or this course?" The next time these parents met they compared notes and found that most of the teachers were unable to answer the question.

Most of those teachers are graduates of Christian colleges. Perhaps our Christian college education departments have not done all they could to teach pre-service teachers exactly how, in a variety of ways, one can go about integrating faith with learning . . . or what it means to teach from a Christian perspective. I am convinced it is improving . . . but we still have a way to go because we ourselves are learning.

Some schools are making great strides forward in using returning faculty to lead discussions and demonstrations of ways to integrate faith with teaching and learning so that the mission of the school will be kept alive in the classrooms. Bellevue Christian School in Washington has a strong program in place for using returning faculty to describe for new teachers and parents the mission of the school along with demonstrating ways in which that mission influences teaching and learning in their school.

Principals should not assume that every graduate of a Christian college will automatically know how to integrate the school's mission in day-to-day classroom work. Even in cases where instruction at the college has been carefully directed toward integrating faith and learning, some recent graduates who are beginning teachers will have processed the information insufficiently to know how to use it to guide them in their teaching. So efforts to develop teachers who know how to integrate faith into daily lessons continue to be extremely important.

Myth #6: Smoothly Running Schools is What Counts

Finally, *there is the myth that a smoothly running school, one without any strife, is therefore a good Christian school.* Indeed, the opposite may

well be true. Change is needed and change is difficult. A school that is going through appropriate changes will face difficulties along the way.

People will ask, "Well, how do you know that the new structures and the new ways of designing curriculum and of teaching will work?" And they are right to ask. The changes we make need to have firm theoretical grounding and a built-in means to assess effectiveness. We now know how people learn and we must use what we know in our planning. We must not waste our limited resources of time and energy in changing simply to be doing something different.

Undergraduate colleges cannot adequately prepare teachers to teach.

But high schools must change because society has changed. Pittsburgh University's Learning Research and Development Center (1986) informs us that the skills and abilities employers require for entry-level positions today are at least the skills and abilities required for college entrance. We can very soon expect that entry-level jobs will require skills equivalent to those of today's college sophomores. If we expect every high school graduate to either enter college or find employment, then we expect all students to have high-order reasoning skills—skills that a generation ago we looked for only in those students who were in the upper half of the college class and attending the best colleges. College faculty are often concerned that many entering college freshmen today lack formal reasoning skills, and they are right to be concerned. However, that has always been true of many high school graduates. It simply wasn't of such grave importance because a generation ago we looked for such skills only in those who were outstanding students or who were attending the best colleges. Now many more high school students attend college, and so we are seeing a larger part of the picture of high school outcomes.

And so we live with myths in Christian education, and as long as we don't recognize our own myths, we won't have to do anything about them. But unrecognized myths will do us great harm and lead us into grave temptations.

Ready to Research

Am I sounding very negative about Christian schools? The truth is that I believe we are at a better place in Christian schools than we ever have been before. Across North America the CSI Christian elementary schools are exciting places—vibrant with life and involvement in learning. Middle schools and grades six, seven and eight are changing and becoming far more appropriate for that age level and in keeping with what we believe to be God's direction for lives of students at that age.

Changes can and do occur. We have many positive examples of changes that have occurred in Christian middle schools. Christian high schools have a way to go, mostly because high schools are such complicated places. When asked what he would do if he were principal of a high school, Gerald Grant, author of *The World We Created at Hamilton High* (1985), replied:

I would try to hire the best anthropologist I could find who could pass for a teenager. I would turn him or her loose in the school for several months with the aim of writing a portrait of the moral life of the community. Then I would use that report to initiate a dialogue with all the members of the polity—students, parents, teachers, and staff. I would ask them: Is this portrait true? Is this the best we can do? . . . The plain truth is, we don't talk about such questions. We don't have a forum for such a dialogue, and nobody is asking these questions in a provocative way. It may be we fear we no longer have the language to address them. (385)

Recently, my scholarly work has been directed toward helping Christian colleges assess the extent to which attendance at that college really has an effect on students' learning, development, and faith, and whether that effect is always a positive one. That assessment is a difficult thing for Christian colleges to do because they have gone along all through their existence making claims about what they do for students without ever having to back up those claims.

Well, we are ready in Christian grade schools and high schools to do some research of our own to find some answers to difficult questions, such as the following:

1. To what extent does going to our Christian school really have an effect on students' learning, development, and faith? Is that effect always a positive one? In what kinds of instances has it had a negative effect?

2. Are we really integrating faith and learning in our classrooms? If we teach from a specific world-and-life view are the students catching it? Is having that world-and-life view changing the way students live after high school?

3. To what extent are we actually preparing our graduates for entry-level positions in jobs and for entry to college? Is their preparation appropriate for the requirements they will face? Are their thinking and reasoning skills equal to the demands of their futures?

4. Are students in our Christian schools learning to serve others in ways that are required of responsive disciples of Jesus Christ?

The point is that we are finally self-confident enough to ask those questions and to attempt to conduct research to find the answers—even when the answers reveal weaknesses. We not only dare to ask questions now but we are also developing skills for finding the answers to our questions. And we will dare to look seriously at the answers we get because we are confident that so much of what is happening in the Christian schools we serve is very, very good.

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