Have you noticed the popular use of hyperbole in describing commonplace things? In the past, the word *awesome* applied to that which inspired worshipful fear or wonder. Now, people attach *awesome* to anything from a hamburger to a hairstyle when they really mean “delicious” or “attractive” or simply “acceptable.”

Exaggeration isn’t limited just to superficial things. In the last few years, the hyperbolic buzzword in education has been *excellence*. Promotional literature in schools of every kind claims, “This is a school of excellence.” That claim concerns me for several reasons. First, it sounds a lot like boasting, and the Word of God indicates that boasting is not a Christian virtue (1 Corinthians 1:31, 13:4). It is one thing to say that a school is striving for excellence but quite another to claim that the school has already achieved it.

Furthermore, the word *Christian* in a school’s name does not guarantee academic quality. A few decades ago, some people assumed that a Christian school would naturally have a strong academic program as well as an outstanding spiritual emphasis. After years of observation, I have concluded that “it ain’t necessarily so”!

If a Christian school can’t supply objective empirical evidence for claims of excellence, it is no more credible than a restaurateur who says that his meatloaf is “exquisite” or a car salesman who says that a secondhand vehicle is “like new” because it is on Born-Again Billie Bob’s Used Car Lot.

So once we escape from the fantasy world of hyperboles of *awesome* and *excellence*, we need to look carefully at what student achievement test results can tell us about the quality of Christian school academics. Every fall, ACSI publishes Stanford Achievement Test results in the convention programs. The results show that students in ACSI member schools perform better in language and mathematics than their public school counterparts. At first glance, that comparison seems to affirm our teaching effectiveness. But are we making a fair comparison? Consider the following:

- Many of our schools do not enrol students who have serious academic problems or who have socioeconomic handicaps. Public schools have little choice in these matters.
- A high percentage of ACSI school parents are actively involved in their children’s education, and it is well-known that parental involvement has a major positive influence on the academic success of students.

ACSI students had these two advantages when they first enrolled. Stanford results do not show that we are doing a better job of teaching or that our students are doing a better job of learning. The results show that our students are ahead of public school students, but not why our students are ahead. And that is hardly the point anyway. The most valuable use of Stanford results is not to provide ammunition for any misguided battle against the public school system. The best use of any standardized testing is to show schools their academic weaknesses and strengths so that they can make necessary improvements and so that later they can evaluate the effectiveness of those improvements.

A more telling comparison appeared in *Comparing Private Schools and Public Schools Using Hierarchical Linear Modeling* (http://nces.ed.gov). This U.S. Department of Education report compared 2003 public and private school student achievement in grades 4, 8, and 12. It included 700 public and 530 private schools. In an attempt to make a fair comparison, the study’s authors tried to factor socioeconomic considerations into their scoring—an unfortunately subjective and flawed approach that favoured the public schools.

The results for “conservative Christian schools” (such as ACSI member schools) were alarming. In the critical subjects of language and mathematics, Lutheran, Catholic, and other private school students outperformed both public and conservative Christian school students. The authors reported, “For Conservative Christian schools, the average adjusted school mean in reading was not significantly different from that of public schools. In mathematics, the average adjusted school mean for Conservative Christian schools was significantly lower than that of public schools” (p. v). Even if we ignore the public school results, our students generally scored lower than students...
in other private school groups. And that comparison is just in the United States. Although international academic tests do not isolate conservative Christian schools, those tests consistently rank students from the United States in the bottom half of industrialized nations academically. So from a global perspective, American students are barely mediocre academically, and Christian school students are far from being the best of that mediocre group.

So what? Why should we care? Isn’t it enough to give our students a solid grounding in the faith and, as a distant second benefit, to prepare graduates for good jobs and comfortable lives? No, it is nowhere near enough!

We in Christian schools are not called to help students conform to a culture of “personal peace and affluence,” as Francis Schaeffer put it. We are called to help shape the future of individual students and consequently to transform the future of the Church, of society, and of the world. And the world, society, and the Church desperately need our graduates to be thoroughly and skilfully equipped in all aspects of educational experience including academics.

To achieve this equipping of students, at least four changes need to take place:

• Academic improvement must become a much-higher priority for Christian schools. Being complacent in this matter—as well as making excuses for weak results on national and international standardized tests—will do a gross disservice to our students and to the future.

• When we select curriculum materials, we must be guided by both a concern for moral content and an intentional plan to develop higher-level thinking and learning skills. In the past, Christian schools have been prone to use learning materials that encouraged memorization and fact recall. According to Benjamin Bloom’s taxonomy, memorization and fact recall are on the lowest of the six levels of planned educational outcomes, the lowest rung on the ladder of thinking-skills development. We must seek something better.

• We need to transform our teaching methods. When students in other countries are outperforming our kids, shouldn’t we find out what Asian and European teachers are doing right and learn to use their techniques? To that end I recommend two books:


• Christian schools must be actively involved in programs that emphasize academic improvement and accountability. For that purpose, ACSI offers the STAR and school accreditation programs (visit www.acsi.org). Schools can even incorporate the International Baccalaureate program, which requires schools to meet international academic standards from kindergarten through grade 12 (visit www.ibo.org).

  Frankly, it is a lot easier to ignore reality and return to the fantasy world of hyperbolic boasting, where our schools are always the best of the best. But in the final analysis, Christian schooling is about truth, even if the truth reveals our shortcomings. That truth should humble and challenge us to genuinely pursue excellence both in our spiritual programs and in our academic programs—and that is no hyperbole!

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