When I was assigned this topic, my mind began to swirl with multiple issues that could all be considered valid barriers to effective school leadership: unclear roles at the board or administrator level; failure to make a distinction between governance and management; failure to define and demand excellence from both board and staff leaders; failure to intentionally mentor leaders for the future; failure to define how the desired results of the church, home, and school differ; failure to discipline ourselves to consistently think about preparing our students for the future rather than the present or the past; failure to create a challenging yet supportive environment for learning; failure to consistently practice biblical conflict management; and failure to focus on Jesus and pray without ceasing. I have chosen, however, to invest the emphasis of this article on one topic that touches them all.

Effective leadership always prevents finely executed programs or practices from replacing the noble quest for and assessment of genuine results. On the outside of our Christian school brochures, we often tout that students will gain Christian character and a biblical worldview by attending our Christian schools, yet the inside of the brochures is limited to an enumeration of methods, activities, programs, practices, and services that our schools render. Our assessments of effectiveness tend to be related primarily, if not totally, to best practices rather than actual results.

When I entered the Christian school movement over 30 years ago, I had high hopes for what Christian schools could do to further the kingdom for the glory of God. After all, what better tool is there for making a positive impact on the future than schools that are run in the name of the one “in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Colossians 2:3, KJV). While I actually believe in that potential even more strongly today and happily acknowledge that Christian schools have certainly benefited the lives of thousands, I also hold the uncomfortable position that we have not made nearly the impact that we had hoped.

You might disagree by saying, “You have no authoritative basis to suggest ineffectiveness on the part of Christian schools.” And to a large degree you may be right. But unfortunately, I find an authoritative claim to superlative effectiveness to be equally elusive. As a fellow Christian school leader asked me in hushed tones during a moment of reflective transparency, “How do we really know that Christian schools are getting the job done?”

Allow me to suggest that the greatest barrier to effective school leadership is a failure to maintain an unflinching focus on the desired results. With that premise in mind, I offer the following challenges:

First, we must rethink our statements of vision and mission, with a view toward results. As a consultant to Christian schools for several years, I have noted that the public statements of purpose or existence are frequently more about
what the school will do rather than what the school is for. I believe that this reality is fundamentally reflective of a focus on means (methods, activities, programs, practices, services) rather than a focus on ends (carefully crafted statements of desired results).

In his monograph *Good to Great and the Social Sectors*, Jim Collins offers these insights (2005):

- “This distinction between inputs and outputs is fundamental, yet frequently missed” (p. 4).
- Even if the outputs defy assessment by traditional techniques, you must “separate inputs from outputs, and hold yourself accountable for progress in outputs” (p. 5).
- The critical question is, “How effectively do we deliver on our mission and make a distinctive impact, relative to our resources?” (p. 5).

Rather than merely describing activities (a rigorous academic program with multiple extracurricular opportunities) or stating conditions (in a wholesome Christian environment), more and more schools are boldly stating their intended results. Colorado Springs Christian Schools in Colorado describe their focus as follows: “At a reasonable cost, students are equipped with the spiritual discernment, the moral courage and the academic excellence to impact society through responsible, effective Christian living” (Carver 2006, 92). Another prominent Christian school summarized its picture of the preferred future as “mature students impacting their world through biblical thought and action.”

Please do not be distracted from my point. I readily acknowledge that excellent programs, activities, and conditions are necessary components of a great school, but in and of themselves they do not merit our existence. Boards, administration, and faculty would do well to understand the difference between inputs and outputs and give the majority of their energy and focus to the attainment of desired outputs. The oft-quoted maxim is still true: “A crude measure of the right thing beats a precise measure of the wrong thing, or a lesser thing.”

Second, we must become more adept at assessing what some would describe as immeasurable.

genuinely care about and rather focuses our attention almost exclusively on lesser, more easily measured quantitative outputs. Collins once again comes through with a head-jerking zinger: “To throw our hands up and say, ‘But we cannot measure performance in the social sectors the way you can in a business’ is simply lack of discipline.” He gives direction by saying, “What matters is that you rigorously assemble evidence—quantitative or qualitative—to track your progress” (2005, 7; italics in original). For example, we must develop biblically consistent, Spirit-confirmed ways for the worldwide Christian school community to think about assessing its effectiveness in spiritual formation—in fostering Christlikeness.

As a Desired, Eventual Result …

Christian students enrolled in Christian schools will reflect the character and person of Jesus Christ in developmentally appropriate ways. Christian school associations, boards, administrators, teachers, students, and parents will do whatever it takes to demand and obtain God-defined and God-empowered effectiveness in the life transformation of students. Christians worldwide will have a renewed passion for Christian schooling because of overwhelming and well-documented effectiveness.

References

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