Every week, as part of my role as campus pastor, I wander the halls of Calvary Christian High School engaging with students. There are many opportunities to do so—contributing to discussions in Bible class, watching the Storytelling through Movement class nail an interpretive dance—but I always try to stop by the art class. The studio is an exciting scene to take in, because what happens in this room mirrors what happens in the life of each young artist. Portraits morph and mature throughout the painting process; every brushstroke will impact the final work. Just as each portrait takes time, love, and a careful eye, so does the development of our students. I believe most educators would agree that the metaphorical portrait of a student is not completed by the time he or she walks across the graduation stage; the “portrait” is moving to another phase of maturity. Therefore, it is worth investing time to understand how we can best contribute to shaping this priceless work of art.

Students spend somewhere between 35 and 40 hours at school out of each 168-hour week. As educators, we have less than one quarter of each week to shape the portrait of our students. Who or what contributes to their portrait throughout the rest of the week? It has been my experience that Christian education has incredible influence in the lives of teenagers. However, their home life, the media they consume, and the friends they surround themselves with also have great influence on the outcome of their portrait.

At the end of a school day, in the best-case scenario, we send our students home to a supportive family with parents who do their best to model the love, grace, and authority of God our Father. Even so, we know the biblical model for the family has long been forgotten by our culture, and many students return to well-meaning parents who love them but provide little biblical influence. Meanwhile, other students witness some of the world’s deepest depravity within the walls of their own homes. They know a depth of brokenness that few can fathom. Is it any wonder that teenagers search for value, affection, and attention in any place it can be found?

As Christian educators, we feel the weight of the burden we gladly carry: adding value to the beautiful portrait that God began in our students while the world strives to mar and devalue them. We lead weekly chapel services and our teachers faithfully find ways to integrate Scripture into lesson plans, but how else can we contribute to these portraits? Here are several different “brushes” that any Christian school may need to reach for from time to time:
Small Groups: Many churches have adopted a small-group ministry model. At CCHS, we call them Mentor Groups. Eight to twelve students of the same grade and gender, led by a faculty or staff member, meet on the first Friday of every month for 40 minutes. I provide the mentors with a themed lesson for each meeting. This assures that the entire school walks through the same Scriptures together; when a world history teacher ties a principle from Mentor Groups into his lesson, all his students are on the same page and can relate it back to their groups’ discussion on the topic.

Other Christian schools’ small groups meet after each chapel. Their groups, lasting 20–25 minutes, typically discuss the sermon from chapel and how it applies to life. The strength of groups like these is the personal impact a teacher or coach can have on a small group of students. By implementing these groups, we ensure that every student is noticed, poured into, and prayed for. I recommend that groups take time to meet outside of the scheduled monthly meeting. Every minute spent with your group outside the school day astronomically enhances your impact during the school day. It’s not easy to make room in an already full calendar for initiatives like small groups, but the long-term reward is worth every initial inconvenience.

Peer-to-Peer Discipleship: For years church and organizational strategists have told us that if the people buy into your vision, your potential is limitless. Those of us in Christian education can glean something from this. What if a few of our upperclassmen decided to pour into the lives of the underclassmen? With the help of Susan Dyer-Layer, founder of Christian Peace Keepers (www.christianpeacekeepers.com), we have developed a one-on-one peer discipleship team that is helping to shape the culture of our school. There is inconceivable power in a small group of student leaders who take the gospel seriously and disciple their peers to do the same.

Axis: There are multitudes of student ministry resource groups in the world today. However, very few compare to Axis (axis.org). This organization began in the late 2000s as a response to the great number of students who fall away from their faith after leaving high school. Axis’s goal is to “empower the next generation to think clearly and critically about what they believe and to take ownership of their faith.” They do this by providing online videos and material for churches, schools, and families. Additionally, they travel across the U.S. to speak at Christian schools and provide a highly insightful e-newsletter, The Culture Translator. We at CCHS have taken advantage of each of these resources and would recommend them to other schools. They strive to equip parents, teachers, and leaders “to disciple and transfer legacy to their children as they face life’s questions and challenges.” Axis has helped us deal with the tough issues of this generation (gender, gossip, pornography, media, evangelism, etc.) and thus have helped add value to God’s precious portraits.

While we may only interact with our students for a quarter of their week, Christian education can make a lasting impact in their lives. Through the body of Christ, the church, God set out to restore the portrait of humanity. As Christian educators partnering in the mission of the church, we have the opportunity to join God in redeeming the portraits of our beloved students.

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