

The Twenty-First-Century School Looks Radically Different (and Yet the Same!)

By R. Mark Beadle

There are things about the successful Christian school that should never change: a commitment to Christ and a biblical worldview, outstanding teachers and leaders, families that invest in their child, and rigorous curriculum.

However, there are some things that must change if we are to be relevant and successful in the way God defines it. These changes will make an impact on students, teachers, leaders, curriculum, and even physical facilities. Independent School Management (ISM) says, “The ‘success-look’ of strong private-independent schools in the new century will become substantially different from that of successful schools in the 20th.” It also says, “In the 21st century, ISM expects successful private-independent schools to make radical changes in both structure and function in order to achieve and sustain stability and excellence” (2012).

Some of us have been waiting and working toward the “radical changes in both structure and function” that are mentioned above. The very idea scares most of us since we are comfortable with the way we were taught and the way things are. All of us recognize that change is going on around us and is accelerating. Some of it can be good, and some of the change must be embraced and used to make Christian schools better for those we serve.

Let’s look at some of the positive changes that are predicted for schools and consider their implications. First, successful schools will be more personal. Thomas Frey says students will be able to move from “mandated courses to hyper-individualized learning” (2007). This

past fall, it was fun to meet some of our online students in Indonesia who were from Australia. They had an interest in the oceans and talked about how they enjoyed their online marine biology class and their teacher (who happened to be in Pennsylvania). Their school was willing to personalize their education around their interests. Too often our schools look like the factory model that Sir Ken Robinson famously illustrates in his Ted Talk (n.d.).

The roles of teachers and leaders in the twenty-first century are also changing. Teachers must willingly change their roles so they can build relationships and engage students with constructive feedback. Content will be ubiquitous, and the teacher will guide and mentor.

Leaders must explain the vision and lead the change. Accepting the status quo may work in isolated places, but most boards and parents want more. Students deserve more. According to Dr. Barrett Mosbacher, “The role of the leader is to do his or her best to peer over the horizon seeking to understand the trends and events that will affect our students, our families, and our schools so that we can position them to serve Christ effectively this century” (2009).

The curriculum will also change in the successful twenty-first-century school. We will deliver new courses from new sources. We will drop certain courses and add others. For example, Briarwood Christian Schools wanted students to have a Latin and a Chinese option. This year Briarwood has over 53 students succeeding with online Latin from a Christian provider.

Another way the curriculum will change mirrors what we are seeing around the United States already. Dual credits are being offered for advanced students. “As online options expand, a three-year high school experience including college credit will be common. Early college pathways to degrees or certifications in emerging industry clusters will be common” (Vander Ark 2010). A caution is that some Christian schools and parents are accepting of courses or teachers that do not support their faith or the school’s mission.

Finally, learning will happen in new places and new spaces. One of the most innovative Christian schools in the world is Northern Beaches Christian Academy in Sydney, Australia. The school leaders and staff first decided on what students graduating in 2025 will need to know and be able to do. Then they redesigned the existing campus and added new buildings, like the one to the right, to build community and propel learning. Some U.S. Christian schools are realizing that international students do not always have to come to the United States. Christian schools can reach them with online courses and mentoring. Homeschoolers are now being given the opportunity to affiliate with the brick-and-mortar Christian school with blended options.

The successful schools this century are not planning for the students of 1990 or even 2015. They are planning for the students that are starting kindergarten in 2015 and that will graduate in 2028. What steps could you take to

help your school be proactive and not reactive? What is the school’s vision of the future? What professional development needs to be offered? What does our God want? The school may look much the same and yet be radically different!

What steps could you take to help your school be proactive and not reactive?



Northern Beaches Christian Academy in Sydney, Australia

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Dr. R. Mark Beadle helped start Cincinnati Hills Christian Academy, and while he was there the school grew to 1,400 students and earned four U.S. Department of Education Blue Ribbons. He left in 2006 to help start Sevenstar, which is an ACSI school that exists only online. In its eight years, Sevenstar has served over 31,000 students; most were in Christian schools.

