

Does Your Christian School

Have a FUTURE?

By Gene Frost

Bob Graham slowly lowered the receiver of the phone and stared out the window of his office at West End Christian School. Bob's board president had just told him that tomorrow's graduation would be the last one for West End Christian School and that Bob needed to get out the appropriate communications that West End would be closing after 63 years of serving the westside community.

Bob just kept repeating the questions to himself, "How did it come to this? What could I have done differently? Where did I miss God's directions?" He began to replay the past few years in his mind ...

Bob had come to West End with such a clear call from the Lord. He was the one God had called to turn things around, or so he thought. He was full of energy, and he put that energy into all of the things West End was doing. He rolled up his sleeves and worked tirelessly to fill in the gaps for faculty and staff that were already stretched thin. He realized that with limited resources he needed to make some tough choices to save money. This would mean cutting some programs, both athletics and extra-curricular. As the school continued to decline he resisted those who wanted to challenge "West End's way" and its history of traditional education and practice. Finally,

he even led the bold initiative to lower tuition to spur enrollment.

Now as Bob looked back he realized that each of the well-intentioned steps that he took only seemed to hasten the decline of West End.

Unfortunately the above story, while fictitious, has played out in a similar form in literally hundreds of our ACSI schools that have closed over the past decade. Where did Bob go wrong? What could he and the leaders of West End have done differently to ensure that their Christian school would be one that had a bright future? Perhaps most importantly, what can we learn from West End's story for our own schools?

I believe that Jim Collins and Jerry Porras in their book *Built to Last* give some good answers to these questions (1997). Their best seller was a research study of the principles that were at work in great enterprises that had endured over a long period of time. In my recent book, *Learning from the Best Volume Two: Growing Greatness that Endures in the Christian School* (Colorado Springs, CO: ACSI, 2014), I looked to see if their principles were applicable in Christian schools around the country. As you might expect, these principles were absolutely a part of the fabric of the enduring schools I studied.

Let's take a brief look at three of those principles and see how West End (and ultimately you and I) might have applied them.

Collins and Porras would first ask educational leaders this question: Are you a clock builder or a time teller? They distinguish between the time teller, the gifted leader who can do it best alone and does, and the clock builder, the leader who working with his or her entire team builds an enduring culture of success. The clock builder sets up repeatable systems in which everyone is working in his or her area of giftedness and knows his or her role. In this way the school's positive culture will endure beyond the departure of the current leader.

Collins and Porras go on to point out that many leaders are time tellers. They can always tell you figuratively what time it is. With them around you don't need a clock; the time tellers will always accurately give you the time. As long as they are on the job you'll always know the time. However, when they aren't present no one knows what time it is and resultantly no one knows what to do!

The clock builder, on the other hand, is building the institutional clock. This is a clock that everyone can reference and that will be there long after the leader is gone. By looking to the clock everyone always knows what time it is and what to do.

Unfortunately, Bob wasn't a clock builder. So too, I fear, many of our Christian school leaders act more like time tellers than clock builders. They work tirelessly to tell everyone what time it is. They work long hours doing it themselves. They sincerely believe that their dedication and devotion to accomplish the school's mission is their calling from God. In reality, what Bob was doing was taking away the opportunity of others in his school building to demonstrate leadership and carry the load. He was unable to distinguish between the employees who with training and the right opportunities could help build the future of West End and the employees who were perpetuating the status quo. Instead of inspiring and "leading" a team to

build the future for West End, he was merely "managing" those who were willing to hold on during West End's long and painful decline.

A second principle that could have helped Bob was to discover the "genius of the AND." Collins and Porras found that in order to create value for one's customers one needs to embrace the "genius of the AND" (1997, 43). For example, the best-selling cars are the ones that are able to combine economy *and* performance. People don't want cheap cars (remember Yugos?); neither can they afford all the bells and whistles of the fanciest cars (remember the DeLorean?). The car company that can combine economy *and* performance will sell more cars! In the United States our current-day families are looking for value in our schools, and this value will only be created by the *and*. Instead of cutting programs—deciding either football or soccer, choir or band, AP math or science—Bob should have been trying to find out how to do both! This takes a huge amount of ingenuity and creativity, and it doesn't need to be the most expensive option. It might mean playing seven-man football, having vocal ensembles rather than a choir, and offering online AP courses. All of these creative options create value for your Christian families. In our own school, when faced with an either-or choice we immediately ask how can we do both by

using the "genius of the AND." This kind of thinking has led to some of our most creative programs.

Collins and Porras explain that the most important *and* that any enterprise needs to implement is preserving the core *and* stimulating progress (1997, 80). As a Christian school we all know the absolute imperative of holding on to our core beliefs. This should never change. However, so many schools are caught up in preserving the core that they merely end up preserving the past. When Bob was resisting educational innovation in the name of preserving West End's values, he was making the age-old mistake of trying to put old wine into new wineskins. Bob's failure to embrace new educational practices that would have stimulated progress prevented the growth that is essential in

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serving a new generation of Christian families and their students.

Bob was right to acknowledge that undisciplined application of every new educational practice can lead to a school losing its way. However, the “genius of the AND” means that you only stimulate progress that leads to preserving the core *and* you only preserve the core by stimulating appropriate progress. Bob was so interested in preserving the core that he failed to stimulate progress and in so doing, lost both.

The final step in the death spiral of West End was their dropping of tuition. When you lower tuition you are telling your market that you aren’t worth the tuition you were charging. As you lower tuition you must also, out of necessity, eliminate offerings that create value that attracted families and their students in the first place. As your perceived or real value decreases and you lose students, you must charge less and less, and so the spiral continues until the night you get the call from your board chair that your doors will close.

But there is good news! West End’s story does not need to be your story. Wheaton Academy was faced with a similar circumstance in 1989. We had lost 160 of our 360 students over the previous five years; we were running an operating deficit of 30 percent because of discounting and scholarships. Our 80-year-old buildings were crumbling and we saw no end in sight. It was then that a wise and God-directed board sought to reconstitute the school along the principles of best practices. We hired a head of school who was a clock builder, who understood the “genius of the AND” and led our school

on the long journey of preserving the core *and* stimulating progress.


Today, 25 years later, by God’s grace, we have full enrollment of 650 with a waiting pool, and we have replaced and expanded our old building with 23 million dollars of new construction. We started at the same point Bob did; however, with God’s help we were able to apply proven best practices in leadership, operations, and pedagogy, and as a result our school has a bright future. By God’s grace so can yours.

For a complete look at all of Jim Collins’ research-based principles applied to leading a Christian school, see *Learning from the Best: Growing Greatness in the Christian School* (Colorado Springs, CO: ACSI; Grand Rapids, MI: CSI, 2007) and *Learning from the Best Volume Two: Growing Greatness that Endures in the Christian School* (Colorado Springs, CO: ACSI, 2014). Both are available from Purposeful Design Publications.

Reference

Collins, James C., and Jerry I. Porras. 1997. *Built to last: Successful habits of visionary companies*. New York: HarperCollins.

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