

# THREE QUESTIONS Every Twenty- First-Century School Leader MUST ASK

By Steve D. Whitaker

In spite of the passionate exchange that has taken place around the concept of twenty-first-century schools, some would argue that little progress has been made. Derek Bok, former Harvard president, compared the difficulty of reforming education with the difficulty of moving a cemetery.

For the most part, the academic landscape looks much like it did 35 years ago when I was a freshman in high school. The day begins and ends at about the same time. Faculty members are still obligated to meet certification requirements whether or not it makes them better teachers. Schools wouldn't think about operating without accreditation. The Carnegie Unit remains a matter of great obsession, and the students with the highest test scores still get into the most prestigious colleges.

While some wring their hands over the sluggish pace of change, I would suggest that, to some extent, the preservation of great ideas and the transmission of knowledge to the next generation is not a gadget to be tampered with or an experiment to be rushed. There are, no doubt, serious flaws within the system and structural changes that must be addressed. However, for purposes of this article we will focus on leadership.

Specifically, I want to challenge us to think about three questions that measure our preparedness as twenty-first-century school leaders.

## Am I Prepared to Lead in a Post-Christian Culture?

In 1962, the first thread of a soon-to-unravel tapestry was removed. Prayer was banned from schools, and religious freedom came under attack. As a result, parents began enrolling their children in Christian schools. Our schools grew rapidly and had remarkable autonomy in terms of teaching content, educational practices, and faith expression. However, it now appears that the freedoms enjoyed by Christian schools are being weighed in the balance.

Many suggest that what we now see in the public sector will make its way into the private sector. As long as your Christian values don't infringe upon what another believes are his or her civil rights, you will be fine. However, if you refuse to hire a homosexual teacher or you deny admission to a transgender student, your school may come under attack.

While Christian worldview training is essential, we must also examine the practical implications of leading a Christian school in a post-Christian culture. How will your school finances change if you are no longer allowed to maintain your tax-exempt status? What will you do if public universities no longer accept students from your school because of your Christian convictions? These are not far-fetched notions. The wise twenty-first-century Christian school leader will wrestle with these issues and engage his or her school board in a rigorous planning process.

### **Do I Know How to Thrive in a Competitive Marketplace?**

In addition to the cultural challenges of a post-Christian society, economic realities point to the fact that Christian schooling will face a more competitive marketplace than ever before. Thriving twenty-first-century school leaders will clearly articulate their value proposition, they will skillfully connect with their customers, and they will be effective executives.

Let's begin by thinking about the Christian school value proposition as twofold: there must be a clear focus on building robust academic programs and a contagious commitment to faith formation.

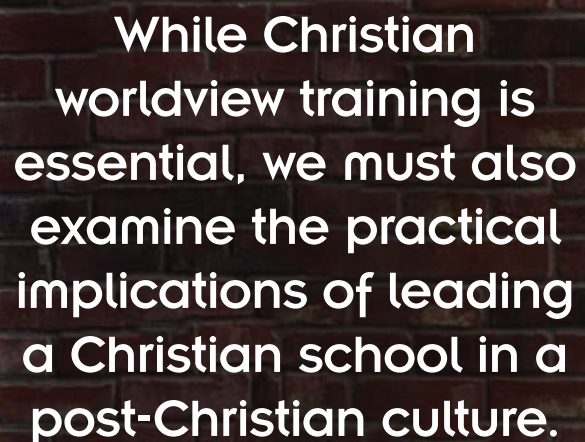
Our "resource engine" is teaching and learning. Therefore it stands to reason that a robust academic program will be built around outstanding teachers. In the past, many believed that great teachers were born that way. In other words, the skill set to command a classroom and inspire greatness in one's students was innate. However, research suggests otherwise. The world's best-trained teachers have the highest-scoring students. A variety of exhaustive studies show that a growth-oriented faculty culture produces superior learning outcomes. The most important element of a robust academic program is investing in the faculty. We must pay our teachers well and resource them with outstanding professional development.

When strong academic programs are rooted in an unwavering Christian commitment, we have an exceptional value proposition. Faith formation in the school context begins with an understanding of the power of Christian community. Therefore, while we treasure moments of corporate worship (chapel), it is more important to give attention to a grace-centered discipleship culture that invites students to ask difficult questions and wrestle with controversial ideas alongside outstanding

teachers. Faith formation is also expressed in a profound understanding of how the gospel engages every sphere of life. Students in thriving Christian schools find teachers who invite them to explore the wonders of science, art, mathematics, and history through the eyes of their Creator. These same teachers inspire students to see themselves as leaders in the world of consequential ideas.

Next, once our value proposition is contextualized, we must find innovative ways to connect with our customers. John Maxwell says that while "everyone communicates, few connect." He explains, "Connecting is the ability to identify with people and relate to them.... To be successful ... you must learn to connect" (Maxwell 2010, 3). This is true not only for the leader personally; it is also true for his or her school corporately.

Schools that connect with current and prospective parents have three exceptional characteristics. First, they understand that the school exists to complement, not compete with, the God-ordained work of parenting. They create a culture that is customer-service oriented and pay attention to every detail of the school experience. Also, they do whatever it takes to elevate the teaching-learning experience on campus. One school goes so far as to describe the faculty as the "heroes" and the remainder of the staff (including the head of school) as the "helpers." These creative descriptors underscore the fact that a school is no better than its weakest teacher.



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Finally, even when there is a strong value proposition in place and a school leader is skilled at connecting with customers, there must be a tenacious focus on delivering results. Said differently, schools that thrive are skilled at getting the right things done the right way.



Peter Drucker is one of the most influential thinkers on the topic of productivity in history. In his seminal work *The Effective Executive*, he identifies several qualities that every twenty-first-century Christian school leader should embrace (2002). First, we must carefully manage our time and have a written plan as to how each hour is to be spent before the workweek begins. This is a matter of Christian stewardship. Ephesians 5:15–16 tells us to redeem time (NKJV). The word used here for time is one that relates to a specific portion of time devoted to a specific calling. Second, we must relentlessly focus on results. We must measure what matters. Our test scores, character outcomes, and college placement track record must all be exceptional. Third, we must have a clear focus on our goals and objectives. Our strategic plan, which spans multiple years, must be accompanied by yearly goals (annual administrative agenda), and each member of our leadership team should have quarterly or monthly planners that guide his or her work. These are the core elements of productivity in the school setting. The wise twenty-first-century Christian school leader will master the skills necessary to thrive in a competitive environment.

### Will My Legacy Be Consequential?

James Kouzes and Barry Posner state, “The legacy you leave is the life you lead” (2006, 177). The apostle Paul must have been thinking about his legacy when he said to Timothy, “The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others” (2 Timothy 2:2, NIV). In the life of Jesus we see the most profound legacy in human history. There are three legacy lessons we can learn from His life that should be emulated.

Jesus was the picture of personal humility. His life began in a manger and ended on a cross. Hardly the makings of what you would expect from the most influential

man to ever live, yet Philippians 2:9 tells us that because of His humility “God exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name” (NASB).

Jesus was aware of His divine calling. In John 18:37, Jesus tells Pilate, “For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth” (ESV). Whether healing the sick, raising the dead, debating the religious leaders, or feeding the 5,000, His calling was unambiguous. He was walking the dusty streets of earth to point people to the truth.

Jesus invested in people. Specifically, He called alongside Himself those who would carry on the ministry once He left. They ate together, they laughed together, and they cried together. He simply imparted to them, by the life He led, the power and promise of the gospel. He entrusted His legacy to His 12 disciples.

As twenty-first-century school leaders, we must follow the example of Jesus. He faced opposition from government and religious leaders in His day. Yet He remained undeterred. He operated in a competitive environment—outnumbered, under-resourced, and overextended. Yet He relentlessly pursued His objectives. And finally, He left a legacy that changed the world forever.

#### References

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