



# What Is the **Future** of Christian School Education?

By Lynn E. Swaner and JuLee Mecham

In developmental terms, the Christian school movement is maturing. The majority of Christian schools in the United States were founded in the last quarter of the twentieth century, when best practices, research, and services specifically for Christian schools were yet to be developed. Today the majority of those schools have been in existence for several decades, with many having grown to positions of strength and influence. Christian education resources—including curricula and textbooks, board training and financial management resources, and administrator and teacher preparation programs—are widely available.

As the movement ages, schools are facing a host of fresh challenges. New research conducted by Barna and ACSI (2017) points to two macro trends that are impacting Christian education: the changing faith profile of parents, in which the number of self-identified Christians is shrinking (particularly among Millennials); and the proliferation of school options, such as public charter schools and online academies. Thus the overall number of Christian parents who would consider Christian schooling is currently on the decline, and those who are left are savvy consumers with many viable educational options, and who require evidence of the return on investment (ROI) of Christian education. These trends—amplified by a challenging economy—help to explain the declining Christian school enrollment in the United States. Whereas Christian schools were opening at a frenetic pace a few decades ago, there is a reverse trend of schools closing in the United States. This is despite exponential

growth in Christian schools across the globe, particularly in developing nations.

These trends are occurring against a much larger backdrop of societal transformation. For example, a confluence of changes—such as rapid technological innovation, shifts in family structure, and diversification of schools—have impacted schools of all types. There is widespread consensus among educators that today's students have vastly different learning needs, likely due to many of these societal changes. For these reasons, regarding the centuries-old industrial model of education, Miller, Latham, and Cahill (2017) assert, "Everyone knows the current system is failing to graduate students who are prepared for the demands of the twenty-first century ... the 'Gutenberg to Google' revolution has generated a perfect storm of discontent, dysfunction, and disengagement in our traditional system of education" (4). Overall, Christian schools have been slow to identify and implement innovative and research-based practices, which would better engage today's generation of students in learning and prepare them for an increasingly complex world.

In addition to an educational revolution, Christian schools are also faced with an increasingly secular culture that is hostile to Christianity and a biblical worldview. Cultural shifts have resulted not only in changes in values and behaviors in areas like morality, the family, and gender identity and sexuality, but also in systemic questioning of the existence of truth and how reality is defined. Christian schools are struggling with how to

educate students within the context of what many have called a “post-Christian” culture. While contemporary Christian thinkers and writers thoughtfully consider the optimal response to culture—ranging anywhere from isolationism to engagement—Christian school educators feel a tremendous time pressure and responsibility as they seek to prepare today’s students while it is still called “today” (Hebrews 3:13).

This larger landscape, in sum, has left Christian school educators asking questions such as these, for which there are no simple or readily available answers:

- What should teaching and learning look like in contemporary society, as today’s educators and students serve God’s purpose in their own generation (Acts 13:36)?
- What knowledge and skills do today’s students need in order to be salt and light in an increasingly secular, globally interdependent, and rapidly changing society and workplace?
- What should a Christian school look like (both programmatically and physically) given the exponential growth of online, on-demand, and customized learning?
- How can Christian schools remain relevant and nimble in a highly competitive educational marketplace, and what actions must the Christian school movement take today to position itself for sustainability and flourishing into the future?

It is clear that these questions—which are interrelated in many ways—must be addressed if there is to be a future at all for Christian schools. But it is essential to realize that, despite what we might wish, “There are no silver bullets ... *Complex problems are never solved but can only be navigated or reframed*” (Miller, Latham, and Cahill 2017, 18; emphasis in original). Navigating or reframing these questions facing the movement will necessitate that Christian educators come together to avail themselves of the full riches of understanding, wisdom, and knowledge available in Christ (Colossians 2:2–3).

There are positive signs that this is beginning to take place. For example, the inaugural Global Christian School Leadership Summit, held in Orlando in February 2017, brought together over 700 educators from 23 countries, eight Christian school associations, and multiple colleges and universities to consider future directions for Christian education. The dialogue and insights from this event have been captured in a new book entitled *Pivot: New Directions for Christian Education* (Swaner et al. 2017), with the purpose of continuing the conversation around key challenges and opportunities facing the movement. In addition, we are seeing new partnerships forged between Christian K–12 schools, postsecondary institutions, Christian school organizations and associations, and other education and business-related entities. And educators from all sectors and from all corners of the globe are calling for thought leadership: efforts to develop, test, and share the best approaches for addressing the challenges facing Christian schools.

To this end, *CSE* is devoting this year to examining three such challenges. Beginning with this issue, Christian educators,

leaders, and thinkers consider how Christian education can be strengthened through collaboration and partnerships. Given the economic and societal pressures that have constricted individual Christian schools, the writers in this issue make the case—through practical examples and illustrations—that we are “stronger together” than apart. Ralph Enlow, President of the Association of Biblical Higher Education (ABHE), provides a biblical framework for this vision. Joel Westa of Christian Schools International (CSI) discusses new partnerships between ACSI and CSI, in accreditation and other efforts. Geoff Brown and Jeremy Smith share stories of Christian schools partnering together in innovative ways to strengthen each other’s work. Each of these pieces is suggestive of the intentional collaboration needed for Christian education to remain viable and vital into the future.

In the next issue, *CSE* will highlight challenges and opportunities related to teaching and learning in Christian schools. Because of the myriad of societal and education changes described earlier, many teachers are opening their instructional toolboxes (obtained some time ago, during their formal education and professional development experiences) only to find they lack the tools needed to engage today’s students successfully. Likewise, school leaders are searching for more adequate approaches in a range of areas, such as how to focus instruction more deeply on student outcomes, how to create school cultures conducive to spiritual formation, how to adapt programs and campuses in light of instructional technologies, and, overall, how to do far more with less—while still accomplishing the school’s mission—in a new market reality.

For both teachers and leaders, simply adding more tools to their existing toolbox may not be the answer to the challenges facing their schools, as those tools are either inadequate or become outdated almost as soon as they are acquired. What is needed is an entirely new toolbox—in other words, a new way of thinking about teaching and learning in Christian schools. The current educational moment—as disorienting and disequilibrating as it is—may provide a ripe opportunity to reshape Christian education. Now is the time to ask how Christian schools can develop into academic institutions of the first order, and simultaneously nurture in creative ways the faith commitments they were created for in the first place. Christian schools need to find ways to weave first-class programs from the very fabric of their faith commitments (Hughes and Adrian 1997, 1).

But what might this look like? How can we articulate a cohesive vision of “Christian education” for today, one that is effective for forming students’ passions, thinking, and habits toward Christ (Smith 2016)? Such a vision must break down the false dichotomy between teaching and formation—and by doing so, prepare students who do not just learn about God, but actively experience the love of God and practice loving Him in response. It must be focused on student learning and employ the best pedagogical methods, with its foundation

in the Bible and the person of Christ. This holistic vision of Christian education beckons our schools to make and enact significant commitments, including these:

- Moving from any shallow focus on mastery of academic content and the development of workforce skills to cultivating in students a Proverbs 1 delight in learning, knowledge, and wisdom, in acknowledgement that all things were created through Christ and for Him (Colossians 1:16);
- Expanding an educational focus on college and career preparation to students' exploring and discovering God's unique calling on their lives—within the larger context of their identity as His image-bearers (Genesis 1:26), creation stewards and cultivators (Genesis 1:28–30), ambassadors of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18–20), and pursuers of shalom (Hebrews 12:14); and
- Revising existing and primarily cognitive understandings of biblical worldview by viewing students as social beings—and the school as a learning community where students can practice living and serving others in redemptive ways. This reshaping vision of Christian education holds promise for not only meeting the challenges inherent in teaching and learning in contemporary society, but also preparing this specific generation of students to “live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way; bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God” (Colossians 1:10). Undoubtedly, this vision will require new ways of teaching and learning; ultimately, it may transform what we understand as the fundamental look and feel of classrooms and schools.

Finally, the third issue of *CSE* will focus on Christian education's responses in engaging with culture. Scripture is clear that while it is true we are not of this world, we are sent here for a purpose (John 17:13–16). God has always called His people to something different—not to be defensive against, isolated from, or absorbed into the dominant culture. He calls us to be “faithfully present within it” (Hunter 2010, 277) by learning to live with these tensions in whatever culture we find ourselves, as the example of Jesus shows us (John 1:14). The question, therefore, becomes what faithful presence in today's culture looks like—at this precise cultural moment. Christian educators need to deliberately seek to perceive what God is doing in this present generation (Isaiah 43:18–19), so they may find ways for deeper engagement and responsibility to this work to which God has called them.

In fact, because we are by grace in relationship with the One who is Truth, and have received His revelation and have the mind of Christ, Christian schools and their graduates should be the source of the most robust answers to the challenges of our day. We can see this in action in the biblical stories of Joseph and Daniel, who both engaged with the pressing issues of the society in which the people of God found themselves. Both these leaders developed the best answers to the most critical questions in their unique cultural moments. In doing so, they provided leadership not only to the people of God,

but also to the entire societies in which they were situated—indeed to which they were sent by God's design and plan. Ultimately, their actions to solve the pressing needs of their time had eternal effect, by pointing entire societies to the eminence of God and the coming salvation of Christ.

These thought leaders of their day are role models for us in our time. Christian schools, educators, and students need to look to their example to emulate their dependence on God and their leadership through problem solving. While these leaders were fully aware of the societal challenges around them, they were engaged—paying attention to what mattered, and connecting what they believed with how they lived (Garber 2014, 38). And while there are no easy answers to the challenges of today's cultural moment, nor to the many complex questions facing Christian education, that is not an excuse for disengaging. In fact, Scripture makes clear that in such challenging times, the proper response is to “call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding ... for the LORD gives wisdom” (Proverbs 2:3, 6). Over the next year, and to this end, *CSE* will bring Christian school leaders and thinkers together to seek God's wisdom for the future of Christian education—in humble expectation of Him, who Scripture promises “gives generously to all” who so ask (James 1:5).

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