

# Integrating Learning and Faith ... and Best Practice



By Karen Ophoff

What really makes a Christian school distinctively Christian? Beyond the immediately visible elements such as chapel, Bible classes, and prayer, our students' academic experience must be purposefully different. When parents enroll their child in a Christian school, they expect and deserve their tuition dollars to deliver a top-notch, academically superb education. They also expect and deserve the entire learning experience to be framed in a Christian worldview, integrated with the child's growing faith. They need to see evidence of a biblical worldview on the papers and tests their child brings home, and hear it in their child's talk about school. Christian schools must pursue academic excellence while establishing and sustaining a curriculum with a true and authentic biblical focus that students and their parents can't miss.

This dual mandate is far from simple to achieve. Today's educators must discern between the movements that genuinely support solid Christian educational principles and those that are simply innovative or trendy. Staying current with the "best practices" requires keeping up with sheaves of professional reading and attending numerous professional events. Administrators are challenged, as well, in leading a school to be progressive while standing firm with biblical values. School boards and staff must pray for discernment in determining which trends and practices will enhance the Christ-centered culture of the school.

There is hope. Sometimes the best practices in public education lend themselves well to a biblical application or perspective. As Christian educators, we need to be savvy about integrating faith, learning, and best practice.

Three current, widespread, and highly regarded practices and developments in education can pave the way for teachers to incorporate a Christian worldview into all of the content areas in a way that makes an impact on the spiritual growth of students.

Backward design—brought to prominence in curriculum work by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe (2001), and now recognized internationally as a best practice—promotes curriculum development based on setting goals in the form of Enduring Understandings, Essential Questions, and an Assessment Plan for each curriculum unit. (See <http://www.authenticeducation.org/ubd/ubd.lasso>.) Backward design prompts teachers to start developing a unit with questions such as these: What is understanding, and how does it differ from knowing? What enduring knowledge is worth understanding? How will we know that students truly understand and can apply knowledge in a meaningful way?

Teachers who have studied and adopted the practice of backward design start with these inquiries, and then move on to specific queries pertinent to the content. This strategy is eminently adaptable to the Christian perspective on learning. It promotes instructional focus; but also, for the Christian teacher, it allows for the incorporation of Christian understandings and principles. Teachers who brainstorm together using this approach in curriculum development mutually affirm their calling as well.

Another trend the educational world has witnessed is movement away from textbooks and emphasis on site-developed curriculum using Internet resources and those available from professional organizations. This can work in our favor if we view it as an opportunity for our schools to put their own biblical stamp on the curriculum. While Christian textbooks may be the ultimately desirable resource for our schools, many Christian schools choose to use secular resources for various reasons. Some settle for secular textbooks because of government funding issues. Some Christian schools choose secular materials from commercial publishing houses because of competitive quality, or even the philosophy that we need to train students to filter everything they read through a biblical lens. Furthermore, quality Christian textbooks

and materials are simply not available for several subject areas. In the face of increased costs and eroding enrollment, many of us simply need to make do with what is on hand. We need to recognize that site-based curriculum development is the best choice in many situations. Additionally, we need to consider that modern parents are consumers who are astute about educational quality. They demand and deserve the best instructional content, pedagogy, and faith integration for their children. Staff development in our schools must foster excellence—in the curriculum and in faith nurture.

Finally, the Common Core State Standards, currently adopted by 48 states, need to be considered in this discussion. The Common Core provides a standardization of curriculum content for all grade levels nationally. With this development, Christian schools now have common curriculum standards for their network of schools. Educational conventions, both Christian and secular, now feature the Common Core, and this promises to be a unifying experience for Christian schools. Together with the trend toward site-developed curriculum, the Common Core can promote professional dialog and interaction among our Christian schools as we work together on school improvement.

It is becoming progressively more challenging for many Christian schools, in the face of declining enrollment and increasing costs, to maintain a quality curriculum that is powerfully and authentically Christian. Whether we use Christian textbooks, secular textbooks, or site-developed materials, a biblical focus needs to be established and documented in the curriculum. Many teachers struggle to write curriculum that has an authentic, age-appropriate, biblical focus. It is hard, time-consuming work to write good, thoughtful test questions that allow students to express how their faith affects their learning. Teachers need time and professional development experiences that equip them to build in a perspective that will make a spiritual impact on their students. Our school boards and administrators need to support teachers so that faith, learning, and best practices can work together.

Imagine a team of Christian schoolteachers who must implement a new unit to align with the Common Core. Let's say a team of 4th-grade teachers needs to develop an economics unit for social studies. Working from a new textbook, or a list of standards and benchmarks, or resources downloaded from the Internet, they scan the content to get a gist of the material to cover. Together they begin by brainstorming questions and concepts that will guide them in forming a curriculum that is imbued with a Christian worldview:

What do we want students to understand and be able to do as God's people? What enduring knowledge is worth understanding? What is God's intent for this area of human existence? What biblical principles support a healthy economy? What does the Bible say about the responsibilities that prosperous people have? What is a biblical view of money? Are wealth and money evil? What is at the root of our economy being in such bad shape? What has to happen from a biblical point of view to make the economy better? What can I/we do to help? How can I show I'm a Christian by the way I handle my money?

The products of this brainstorming session are formulated into Enduring Understandings and Essential Questions. Then a common test or assessment is written that will keep instruction focused and will give students the opportunity to demonstrate that they truly understand and can apply knowledge in a meaningful way. A critical component of this assessment is a question or prompt that will allow students to express their faith as it applies to what was learned. These documents (Enduring Understandings, Essential Questions, and Assessment Plan) are turned in to the administrator and they become part of the school's documented curriculum. After all of that, work can begin on individual lessons and resources.

These fictional teachers have used a secular best practice (backward design) to keep pace with current educational methodology, to strengthen their school's Christ-centered curriculum, and to integrate faith and learning. The part of this vignette that has not been detailed is the professional development and support their school provided that enabled them to make efficient strides forward in academic and faith-full excellence. As our schools progress in transitioning to the Common Core, we can best acknowledge God and serve our families by closely following the literature and research for ways to equip our Christian school staff to integrate faith, learning, and best practices.

## Reference

Wiggins, Grant and Jay McTighe. 2001. *Understanding by design*, 1st ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall.

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