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LESSONS IN INNOVATION AND SUSTAINABILITY DURING THE PANDEMIC

Research on the Christian School Sector

TODD R. MARRAH AND MATTHEW H. LEE

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges during a global pandemic is learning to trust God's providence. His providence can be difficult to understand while we remain in the midst of trials. But if we truly confess that all things fall under His dominion (Daniel 4:34-35; Psalm 135:6), we must accept that "all things" includes the coronavirus.

What are some of the lessons God, in His providence, is teaching Christian schools through the coronavirus? To answer this question, we turn to the past three years of the Association of Christian Schools International's Tuition & Salary Survey data. Between March and July 2021, roughly 700 schools participated in the Tuition & Salary Survey, a 24% response rate. Since 2018-19, school leaders responded to questions about school finances, enrollment, and staffing, giving us the ability to track trends in ACSI schools over a three-year period. Notably, the span includes the 2019-20 school year, the most severely affected by the pandemic.

School Sustainability

For ACSI schools generally, revenues from school choice programs—including education savings accounts, vouchers, and tax-credit scholarships—greatly increased during the 2020-21 school year. The median school in 2020-21 reported over 47% more revenue from these programs. There was even more growth at the seventy-fifth percentile, up 63% in 2020-21 (see Figure 1). With 18 states creating new or expanding existing scholarship programs and greatly increasing the number of students eligible to receive such scholarships, it was truly a "breakthrough year" for school choice (Bedrick and Tarnowski 2021; Greenblatt 2021).

RESEARCH IN BRIEF

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ACSI Mission Statement

ACSI exists to strengthen Christian schools and equip Christian educators worldwide as they prepare students academically and inspire students to become devoted followers of Jesus Christ.

ACSI Vision Statement

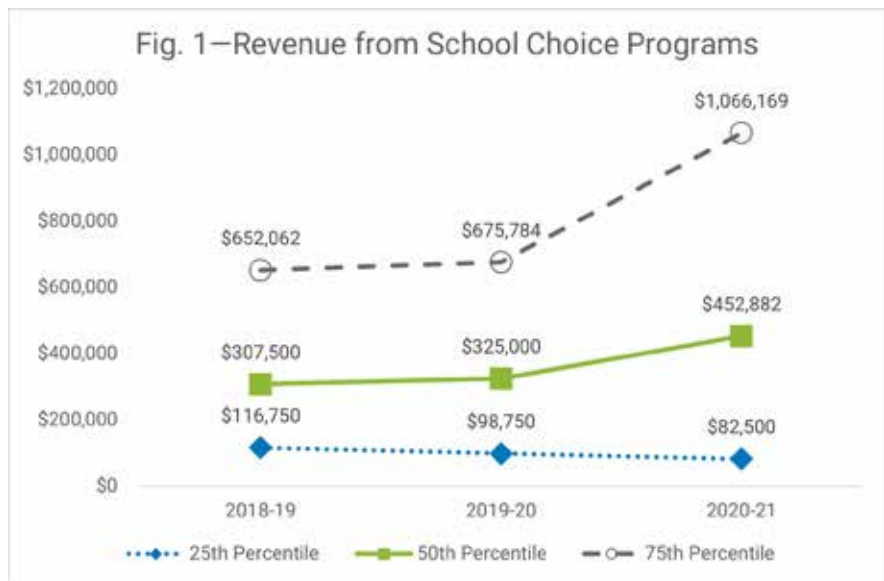
ACSI will become a leading international organization that promotes Christian education and provides training and resources to Christian schools and Christian educators, resulting in:

- schools that contribute to the public good through effective teaching and learning and that are biblically sound, academically rigorous, socially engaged, and culturally relevant and
- educators who embody a biblical worldview, engage in transformational teaching and discipling, and embrace personal and professional growth.

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The challenge of leading schools in the midst of a pandemic can easily take center stage, but we would be wise to consider the incredible opportunities it has provided. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in *Ethics* (1949), “Not in the flight of ideas but only in action is freedom. Make up your mind and come out into the tempest of living” (19).

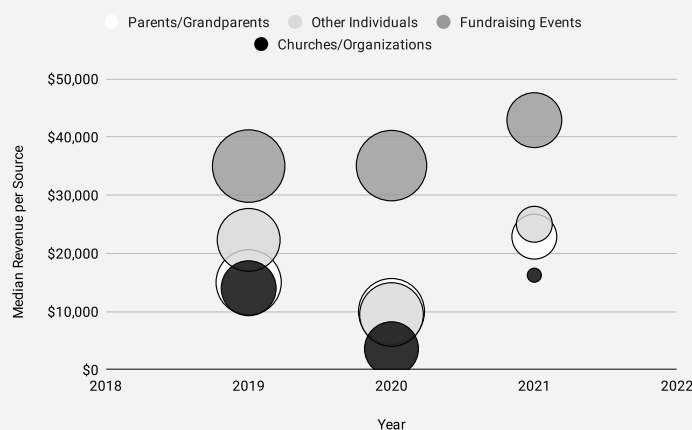
Our current moment may be the greatest opportunity for Christian schooling in our lifetime. But Christian schools can only make the most of this moment by seizing upon this opportunity with action, which may include advocating for and participating in school choice programs. God’s metanarrative continues and the centrality of Christ informs our eternal perspective of Kingdom education.

Of course, scholarship programs can directly benefit private schools through tuition dollars. For some schools, these programs may provide new students with access to Christian schools for the first time. Others, like many schools in the state of Ohio, have already participated in private school choice programs for years before the pandemic. Whether schools are new participants or seasoned veterans, scholarship programs can also indirectly benefit schools by creating opportunities for new donors with hearts for making Kingdom education more accessible. Such an opportunity is key because, for many ACSI schools, charitable giving decreased in 2019-20. Median revenue from parents/grandparents (\$10,000 per source), churches (\$3,600), and other individuals (\$9,477) all declined in 2019-20.

In Figure 2, we plot median revenue per donation source and the percentage of schools reporting each donation source for the past three years. The size of the circle represents the proportion of respondents reporting each donation source (larger schools indicate a greater proportion of schools reporting that source). In 2018-19, 93% of schools indicated that they received revenue through fundraising events and

“Our current moment may be the greatest opportunity for Christian schooling in our lifetime. But Christian schools can only make the most of this moment by seizing upon this opportunity with action, which may include advocating for and participating in school choice programs.”

Fig. 2—Donation Sources, 2018-19 through 2020-21



the median school reported \$35,000 per event. This past year, giving amounts have returned generously, but the circles remained small, revealing that many schools have not recovered some donors lost during COVID.

Motivated by a desire to keep their school family together, Christian schools across the nation have created funds to support families who may be facing financial difficulties during the pandemic. Schools in Ohio, for example, have created “Stay Together” funds through which those who were financially able gave tens of thousands of dollars to support families for whom the pandemic was financially challenging. Schools are increasingly giving donors avenues to “support a scholar” to keep children in Christian schools or provide them a chance to attend one. With the stock market and other financial measures at all-time highs, the problem may not be a lack of financial means around Christian schools. What tends to be lacking is the inspiring stories that open the eyes and move the hearts of generous people to see the need and meet the need. Donors are increasingly aware of what is happening in the culture and are looking at Christian schools as part of the answer. They want their giving to make an impact, and our schools’ missions align with their stewardship.

Innovations in Learning

As the pandemic set in over a year ago, ACSI schools responded nimbly to the challenge. The vast majority of schools indicated that they incorporated technology into teaching (96%) or that their teachers developed innovative solutions (98%). But one innovation—distance learning—may fade away with the coronavirus. Most respondent schools indicated that they do not plan to continue to offer distance learning beyond the COVID-19 disruption (Swaner and Lee 2020).

At the same time, merely continuing to offer distance learning options is no substitute for further innovations that need to take place for remote learning as a high-quality

alternative. One nationally representative survey documented suggestive evidence that learning loss is greater for remote and hybrid modes of instruction (Henderson et al. 2021). A key challenge for Christian schools will be providing schooling options demanded by a diverse student population while ensuring access to high-quality education.

Conclusion

The coronavirus presented tremendous challenges but also great opportunities for Christian schools. Research on how schools responded to the coronavirus continues to provide strong evidence that Christian schools innovated solutions to meet the educational needs of their students and deliver high levels of parental satisfaction (Graves 2021). Will the momentum continue? Will Christian schools continue to innovate in “the tempest of living”?

Despite its challenges, the coronavirus can help us imagine a path forward to a more sustainable and innovative future for Christian schools. One scholar recently commented, “This will be the legacy of the coronavirus on the American education system. It finally made clear to a critical mass of legislators that families need options, and the one-size-fits-all nature of the contemporary public education system is not fit for purpose in any uncertain and changing world” (McShane 2021).

God in His providence has allowed the coronavirus to affect Christian schools. We pray that the heavy clouds will soon break forth into showers of blessings, giving way to a bright future for Christian education. [RIB](#)

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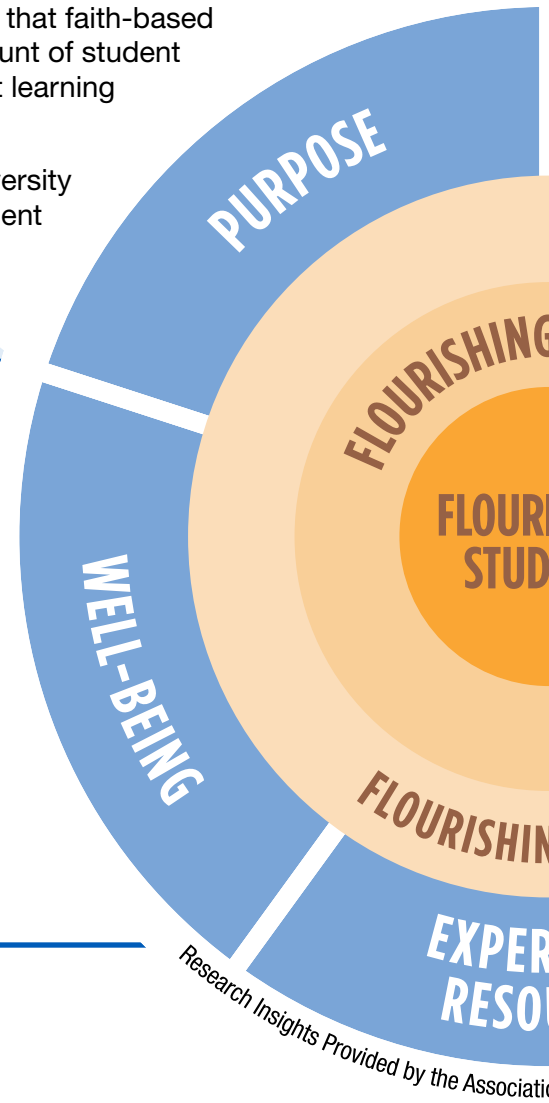
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The Latest in Education

For each issue, we'll survey education research articles from scholars and experts across the country and

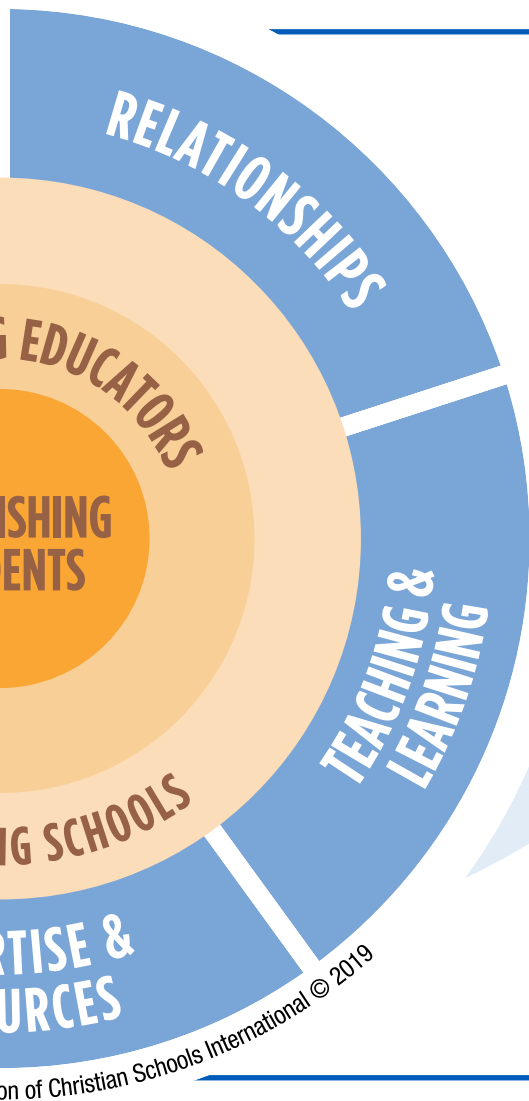
- **Integrated Worldview:** New peer-reviewed research by Catherine R. Pakaluk (The Catholic University of America) published in *Cosmos + Taxis* finds evidence that attending a school that closely matches students' faith improves student learning by +5 and +8 percentile points on standardized tests.
 - **Spiritual Formation:** New peer-reviewed article by David I. Smith (Calvin University), Beth Green (Tyndale University), Mia Kurkechian (Calvin University), and Albert Cheng (University of Arkansas) published in the *International Journal of Christianity & Education* argues that faith-based schools' contribution to faith formation should be assessed "in an account of student vocation framed by Christian practices" rather than considering student learning apart from faith formation.
 - **Holistic Teaching:** New Cardus research report by Johns Hopkins University professor and Cardus Senior Fellow Ashley Berner concludes independent schools "offer substantial benefits to civic formation" and recommends "honouring religious, philosophical, and pedagogical beliefs of families and students while ensuring robust knowledge-building for all."
-
- **Stress:** New RAND Corporation research report by Elizabeth D. Steiner and Ashley Woo finds a higher proportion of teachers reported that they were likely to leave their jobs relative to years prior to the pandemic, and teachers reported higher levels of job-related stress and symptoms of depression than the general population.
 - **Stress:** New peer-reviewed research by Matthew A. Kraft (Brown University), Nicole S. Simon (City University of New York), and Melissa Arnold Lyon (Brown University) published in the *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness* finds "supportive working conditions in schools played a critical role in helping teachers to sustain their sense of success. Teachers were less likely to experience declines in their sense of success when they worked in schools with strong communication, targeted training, meaningful collaboration, fair expectations, and authentic recognition during the pandemic."



Research (ACSI Research)

d around the world. What does the latest in education research say about flourishing in its five domains?

- **Supportive Leadership:** In a new working paper for the Annenberg Institute at Brown University, Andrew C. Johnston (University of California) finds that teachers value supportive leadership similarly to a 17.3% increase in salary.



- **Feedback:** New Annenberg Institute at Brown University working paper by Matthew A. Kraft (Brown University) and Alvin Christian (University of Michigan) documents “the challenges of using evaluation systems as engines for professional growth when administrators lack the time and skill necessary to provide frequent, high-quality feedback.”

- **Responsiveness to Special Needs:** Writing for *Education Next*, RedefinedED Executive Editor Matthew Ladner finds that although NAEP scores have been trending downward for students with disabilities, states with private-school choice programs for these students “resisted the undertow of declining performance.”
- **Qualified Staff:** New peer-reviewed research by John M. Krieg (Western Washington University), Dan Goldhaber (University of Washington), and Roddy Theobald (American Institutes of Research) published in *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* finds first-year teachers are more effective when placed in an environment similar to their student teaching classroom.

Head of School and Board Chairperson Relationships

Finding the Most Important Characteristics

HEIDI A. SMITH

All things in creation belong to God (Psalm 24:1), and all men and women are His stewards. Wilson (2016) defines a steward as “someone who manages resources belonging to another person in order to achieve the owner’s objectives” (36). Christian school leaders, heads of school, and board members are stewards, so it follows that Christian school leaders should model biblical steward leadership. In this role as a steward, Christian school leaders are entrusted with time, treasure, talents, and relationships, with relationships being the most precious gift of all.

Leaders in Christian organizations are often most subject to spiritual attacks (1 Timothy 1:18-20), so it comes as no surprise that head of school and board chairperson relationships are often easily derailed, impacting the school culture, effectiveness of governance, and overall success of the school (Brock and Fraser 2001; Fitzpatrick 2002; Carver 2006; Moody 2007, 2011). Previous studies demonstrate the importance and complexities of relationships between the head of school and the board, citing the need for further examination of these relationships (Fitzpatrick 2002; Durvarics and O’Brien 2011; Moody 2011; Selby 2011; Adams 2018).

Unfortunately, little research exists that has examined head of school and board chairperson relationships in Christian education. This study aims to identify the most important characteristics in this relationship, which can help develop stronger leader relationships, inform board practices and policies, and increase organizational stability (Adams 2018; Selby 2011).

Summary of Literature

Leaders shape the culture of the organizations they lead by the ways in which they interact with stakeholders and the decision-making processes they embrace. The relationship between the head of school and board chairperson reveals the various approaches and philosophies in use, perspectives on roles, and complexities within the relationships (Biehl and Engstrom 1998; Daggett 2016). Taking time to understand and invest in the head of school and board chairperson relationship is essential because all relationships (to self, others, and God) are the foundation of every aspect of leadership and governance (Rodin 2013; Wilson 2016).

The way a school leader influences others and shapes the school’s culture is reflected in the use of various leadership theories such as transformational leadership (Burns 1978; Bass 1985), servant leadership (Greenleaf and Spears 2002; Sipe and Frick 2015), and steward leadership (Rodin 2013; Wilson 2016). In this study, themes from the theoretical framework of leadership, governance, and relationships of school leaders discussed in the literature review led to the identification of eighteen characteristics in the head of school and board chairperson relationship (see Table 1). These eighteen characteristics formed the underlying framework for this mixed methods study.

Table 1: Head of School-Board Chairperson Relationship Characteristics: Support from Literature

Relationship Characteristic	Literature Support
Accountability	Carver (2006); Durvarics and O’Brien (2011); Sipe and Frick (2015)
Clearly Defined Roles	Carver (2006); Chait et al. (2005)
Collaborative Partnership	Hendrickson et al. (2013)
Communication	Durvarics and O’Brien (2011)
Constructive Conflict	Moody (2011)
Emotional Intelligence	Hendrickson et al. (2013)
Feedback	Sipe and Frick (2015)
Longevity	Carver (2006)
Mutual Respect	Daggett (2016)
Ongoing Training	Clegg (2013); Durvarics and O’Brien (2011)
Professional Expertise	Kilmister and Nahkies (2004)
Shared Values	Durvarics and O’Brien (2011)
Shared Vision	Fitzpatrick (2002); Durvarics and O’Brien (2011)
Strategic Planning	Eadie and Houston (2003)
Supportive	Brock and Fraser (2001)
Time Spent Together	Zonnefeld (2009)
Trust	Hendricks (2013)
Understands Constituents	Durvarics and O’Brien (2011)

Methodology

But which characteristics do heads of school and board chairpersons consider most important? To answer this question, I collected data for this mixed methods study over four weeks in the fall of 2020. A web-based survey tool, the *Head of School-Board Chairperson Relationship Assessment* (HSBCRA), was created for this study and validated using planning, research-based construction, evaluation, and a pilot study.

Participants answered three types of questions, which were used to identify the most important characteristics. First, data from Likert scale questions were analyzed using regression analysis with stepwise and backward deletion. Second, the results from a rank order question identified the top five characteristics in the head of school and board chairperson relationship. Finally, the responses to qualitative, open-ended question were coded to match the characteristics. Triangulation was used to compare results from the three types of questions to substantiate the results. The most important characteristics in the head of school and board chairperson relationship were compiled overall, as well as for the two subgroups separately.

Participants

Participants in this study included heads of school and board chairpersons from 205 ACSI member schools. To be included in this study, head of school participants were required to work with a governing board led by a chairperson. Further, board chairperson participants were required to serve on the school's governing board as the board's primary leader and responsible for overseeing the process of evaluating the head of school. Additional demographics about participants were collected for analysis in the study and included leadership training, quality of the relationship, frequency of communication, relationship influence on tenure, length of service, age of the school, and school's ACSI regional location.

Of the potential 205 schools, 170 schools qualified for the study determining the population for the sample to be 340 participants: 170 heads of school and 170 board chairpersons. Out of the population of 340 heads of school and board chairpersons, 85 (25%) participated. Participants included 62 heads of school and 23 board chairpersons. The 85 qualifying participants completed the survey; of that number, 31 (36.5%) were from church-based schools with their own governing board, and 54 (63.5%) were from independent schools with their own governing board.

Findings

Six characteristics were identified as most important in the head of school and board chairperson relationship:

“Too often, heads of school are unexpectedly dismissed without receiving feedback for improvement. This unfortunate pattern might be attenuated with improved head-chair relations, yet the responses to some of the characteristics show that Christian school leaders do not prioritize many of the characteristics for improving their relationship.”

accountability; communication; mutual respect; shared vision; time spent together; and trust. Of these six characteristics, mutual respect and trust were identified as the two most important characteristics. Mutual respect was the only characteristic that was in the top responses for all three question types (see Table 2).

These results highlight the importance of head-chair relationships. Five of the top six characteristics are relational (communication, mutual respect, time spent together, shared vision), and the other is the framework for the relationship (accountability). Accountability provides the boundaries and barriers that keep the relationship professional and provides the freedom for the other more relational characteristics to flourish. Although clearly defined roles were not a top characteristic that emerged in the research, the emphasis on accountability points to the need for clearly defined roles, which was referenced in the open-ended questions by many participants as important and which is a necessary aspect of establishing accountability.

One potential area for further examination is in the correlation between time spent together and communication. While both emerged as two of the six most important characteristics in the head-chair relationship, time spent together was a top characteristic in the regression analysis (a predictor of the importance of the relationship), but not in the rank order and open-ended questions. On the other hand, communication was a top characteristic in the rank order and open-ended questions, but not in the regression analysis. These two areas are related because leaders cannot have successful, quality communication without spending time together. Over 90% of the participants shared that they communicate outside board meetings about once a week.

Table 2: Results of the Triangulation: Regression Analysis, Rank Order, and Open-Ended

Characteristic	Regression Analysis			Rank Order Question			Open-Ended Question		
	All	HOS	BC ¹	All	HOS	BC	All	HOS	BC
Accountability	✓*	✓*							✓
Clearly Defined Roles							✓	✓	✓
Collaborative Partnership	✓					✓		✓	✓
Communication				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Constructive Conflict		✓							
Feedback		✓							
Mutual Respect	✓*	✓*		✓		✓		✓	
Shared Values							✓	✓	✓
Shared Vision				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Strategic Planning						✓			
Supportive		✓							
Time Spent Together	✓*	✓							
Trust				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
NOTE: ¹ Insufficient data and results available. * Characteristics found significant (p < .05) in both the stepwise and backward regression analysis									

But in direct contrast, over 30% of heads of school and board chairpersons said that time spent together was only somewhat important. In addition, 23% of heads of school and 30% of board chairpersons said that ongoing training was only somewhat important. If approximately a third of self-identified head of school and board chairperson relationships are not valuing and prioritizing spending time together and ongoing training, these weaknesses need to be addressed.

Recommendations

These findings suggest some potential pathways for improving head-chair relations, which may in turn influence head of school tenure. A total of 84% of respondents stated that the head of school and board chairperson relationship had a direct influence on tenure. Studies and experience show the average head of school tenure as two to three years in private schools (Durov and Brock 2004; Clegg 2013; Lawson 1986; McMillan 2007). If this relationship impacts the longevity of heads of school, then it needs to be investigated, prioritized, and improved.

Although over 95% of participants said they currently felt they had a high quality or very high quality relationship between the head of school and board chairperson, there is still room for improvement. Too often, heads of school are unexpectedly dismissed without receiving feedback for improvement. This unfortunate pattern might be attenuated with improved head-chair relations, yet the responses to some of the characteristics show that Christian school leaders do not prioritize many of the characteristics for improving their relationship (time spent together and ongoing training). The disparity between what is stated as important and whether those characteristics are being correctly valued

and prioritized demonstrates room for improvement in the head of school and board chairperson relationship. A lack of communication and behavior is not reflective of God's loving care or biblical leadership. A thriving working relationship allows for vulnerability and open communication with opportunities to correct areas of weakness or deficiency. If the goal in Christian education is students' success, achieving that goal must begin with the head of school and board chairperson relationship.

Christian school leaders need to be made aware of the most important characteristics in the head of school and board chairperson relationship, given ways to identify areas to improve the relationship, and shown how to improve the relationship. Tools like the HSBCRA or a scorecard for evaluating the head of school and board chairperson can improve head-chair relations by evaluating individual relationship weaknesses and discrepancies. Once heads of school and board chairpersons can identify where perspectives and expectations conflict, they can work together to address the disconnect and strengthen the relationship.

Lockerbie (2005) illustrates the importance of studying the relationship between the head of school and board chairperson, saying that "the greatest threat to a Christian school [is] broken relations between the head of school and the governing board . . ." (158). Changes to improve the head of school and board chairperson relationship have the potential to impact school success and head of school longevity in positive ways. With so much at stake, leaders in Christian education need to be examining these crucial relationships and asking how to strengthen and improve them. [RiB](#)

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Principal Priorities and Preparation in Christian Education

MATTHEW H. LEE

Principal leadership plays a key role in student learning. A recent meta-analysis of principal research concluded that replacing a below-average principal with an above-average principal effectively added three months of student learning in math and reading (Grissom et al. 2021). Some ways in which principals support student learning include reducing teacher turnover (Grissom and Bartanen 2019) and promoting positive school climate (Sebastian and Allensworth 2012; Burkhauser 2017).

While quantitative research has focused on educational leadership and student learning outcomes in public schools,



“Empirical research affirms the encouraging truth many of us know from personal experience: Christian school leaders make faith central to the mission of their schools.”

very little attention has been paid to leaders of Christian schools and the outcomes they may value most—including faith formation.

Principals and Principles

Scholars of faith-based schools argue that these schools should, and often do, prioritize distinct outcomes compared to public or secular schools. In theory, Christian education should not only teach different content, but also apply unique pedagogical practices to communicate that content (Smith and Smith 2011; Smith 2018).

Empirical research affirms the encouraging truth many of us know from personal experience: Christian school leaders make faith central to the mission of their schools. In theory, the work of embodying “faithful presence” falls most heavily to the Christian school head (Beckman et al. 2012). In practice, many Protestant school leaders take this responsibility to heart, for example, by role modeling their faith (Sikkink 2012). Similarly, the 2020 CESA principal survey found over 70% of CESA principals ranked “fostering religious or spiritual development” as one of the top two most important goals for their school (Lee et al. 2021).

Being principled about a distinctively Christian education is certainly not without its challenges. Internally, faith formation may be siloed in chapel or Bible classes rather than integrated holistically into the life of the school (Smith 2018). Externally, Christian schools face homogenizing pressures to follow the unwritten societal rules of what a school must be (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Westwood and Clegg 2003).

Do Protestant school leaders emphasize different educational priorities for their students than leaders in other sectors? And do they prepare differently to lead their schools to accomplish these priorities? These questions remain unanswered in the research literature.

Methodology

Data

To answer this question, Albert Cheng and I used the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 (HSL:09) and first follow-

up survey, a nationally representative sample of students and their parents, principals, teachers, and counselors in traditional public schools, public charter schools, and private schools in the United States. We tested for statistically significant differences between sectors using a common estimation method called Ordinary Least Squares.

It is important to note some of the inherent limitations of this data for informing Christian school leadership. NCES is a government agency under the United States Department of Education. The HSL:09, a survey administered by NCES, collects data that the Department of Education deems relevant for understanding some differences between public and private schools in the U.S. As researchers, we are limited to their selections—as well as the philosophical assumptions that led to those selections. As I note in the discussion of our findings, one example of such a limitation is the designation of “personal growth and development” as a catchall category for any nonacademic, nonvocational purposes of education. It is at best a poor proxy for spiritual formation, which many Christian school leaders may highly regard as an end of education. Nonetheless, as a large, nationally representative dataset, the HSL:09 can still provide helpful descriptive insights for differences between Christian school leaders and their counterparts in other sectors as it relates to their preparation and priorities.

Sample

Our analytic sample includes roughly 870 school administrators representing the public, Protestant, Catholic, and secular private school sectors. Overall, Protestant school leaders were significantly less likely to pursue a postbaccalaureate degree (attained by roughly three-fifths of sample) than their public and Catholic school counterparts, nearly all of whom attained some graduate education. Protestant school principals were substantially, though not significantly, less likely to study education and more likely to study religion as their primary field of study than their public and Catholic school counterparts.

I’m encouraged—but certainly not surprised—to share that when it comes to educational attainment, ACSI heads of school excel compared to the sample of national Protestant school leaders. In the 2021 ACSI Tuition & Salary Survey, 60% of principal respondents reported a master’s degree as their highest degree, comparable to the public school sample. Furthermore, 18% reported holding a doctorate or professional degree, rivaling Catholic school leaders and exceeding private secular school leaders.

In the NCES data, when it comes to administrator experience, we observe three key differences. First, secular private school leaders have significantly more experience than Protestant school heads, both overall (eighteen years on average versus ten years) and at their current school (sixteen years versus six

Table 1: Principal Education and Experience by Sector

	TSS:21	NCES HSLS:09			
	ACSI	Protestant	Public	Catholic	Secular
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Highest Degree Attained					
Master's	60	54	64	80+	76
Doctoral or Professional	18	7	35*	19+	7
Degree Field of Study					
Education		77	97	86	42+
Religion		19	0	8	23
Business		3	0	1	0
Administrator Experience					
Years at any school		10	7	13	18*
Years at current school		6	5	7	16*
Teaching Experience					
Years of teaching experience		12	15	20*	21
Currently teaches		62	4*	34*	25*
Main subject taught					
ELA		25	19	17	4
Social Studies		28	28	30	48
Science		21	10	13	15
Math		39	14	21	29
N		30	720	90	20

NOTES: Sample sizes rounded to the nearest 10 per data-use agreement with U.S. Department of Education. Weighted percentages (0-100) of each variable are presented. Asterisks indicate difference with Protestant sector was statistically significant, * $p < 0.01$, + $p < 0.10$.

SOURCE: Association of Christian Schools International, 2021 Tuition & Salary Survey (TSS:21); U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 (HSLS:09), Base Year and First Follow-Up.

years). Second, Catholic school principals have significantly more experience in the classroom (twenty years) than Protestant school leaders (twelve years). Finally, 62% of the Protestant school administrator sample reported current teaching responsibilities, significantly more than leaders in the public (4%), Catholic (34%), and secular (25%) school sectors.

Protestant school leaders overall reported lower levels of training in key areas of leadership identified by NCES. Nearly all Protestant school leaders reported receiving some training in “School Law,” “Personnel Management,” and “Instructional Leadership,” but only four-fifths of Protestant school leaders reported training in “Long-Range Planning” (significantly less than public school leaders), and only three-fifths of Protestant school leaders reported training in “Physical Plant Management” (less than public), “Fiscal Management” (less than public and Catholic), and “Data-Driven Decision Making” (less than public, Catholic, and secular). This finding on “Fiscal Management” in particular is consistent with the findings of the 2020 CESA Principal Survey, namely, that “Finance and Budgeting” was one of the areas in which Christian school leaders reported the lowest levels of training (Lee et al. 2021).

Key Findings

What do Protestant school leaders prioritize?

In the 2012 follow-up to HSLS:09, school leaders were asked, “Which one of the following goals does your school’s counseling program emphasize the most?” Respondents could choose one of four responses, prewritten by NCES:

1. Helping students plan and prepare for their work roles after high school
2. Helping students with personal growth and development
3. Helping students plan and prepare for postsecondary schooling
4. Helping students improve their achievement in high school

Three-fifths of the Protestant school sample identified college preparation as their school’s top goal. One-third of the Protestant school sample responded that personal growth was the top goal. One in ten Protestant school leaders reported that academic achievement was the top goal. No Protestant school leaders in the sample stated that vocational preparation was the top goal (see Table 2).

How do Protestant school leaders’ priorities compare to those in other sectors?

Comparing the educational priorities of heads of school in Protestant schools with heads in other sectors provides several insights. First, we should consider some of the ways in which leaders in all four sectors are similar. Leaders in all four sectors most frequently identified helping students plan and prepare for postsecondary schooling as the most important goal. Leaders in all sectors overall ranked achievement in high school ahead of vocational preparation.

Table 2: Rank Order of Educational Goals by Sector

	Protestant	Public	Catholic	Secular
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
1 st Priority	College Prep	College Prep	College Prep	College Prep
2 nd	Personal Growth	Achievement	Achievement	Personal Growth
3 rd	Achievement	Personal Growth	Vocational Prep	Achievement
4 th	Vocational Prep	Vocational Prep	Personal Growth	Vocational Prep

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 (HSLS:09), Base Year and First Follow-Up.

And Protestant school leaders and secular private school leaders were identical in the rank order of the four educational priorities.

Considering differences between the Protestant, public, and Catholic sectors yields further insights. Protestant school leaders on average ranked personal growth ahead of both academic achievement and vocational preparation, perhaps because these respondents considered personal growth as a proxy for spiritual growth. Public school principals ranked growth after achievement but ahead of preparation for work roles, while Catholic school leaders ranked personal growth behind both achievement and vocational training.

Discussion

Limitations

Before discussing any practical implications that may flow from this research, we should consider a few notable limitations. First, because we rely on NCES survey data, we are limited to the areas of leadership training and educational outcomes chosen by NCES. Areas of preparation Christian school leaders may consider important, such as spiritual leadership, will not be picked up by the data. The same is true for educational outcomes such as faith formation, for which the available choice “personal growth” may be a poor proxy.

Second, although school administrators responded to the survey, the question on educational priorities specifically asked about the goals emphasized by the school’s counseling program. To the extent that a school leader does not direct the goals of the counseling program, or that the school leader considered the goals of the counseling program distinctly from the overall mission of the school, this question may not fully capture the principal’s true pedagogical priorities.

Practical Application

With these limitations in mind, let’s turn to reflect on some possible implications for Christian schools. First, although Protestant school principals generally reported lower levels of leadership preparation and educational attainment than their peers in other sectors, this difference is not necessarily reason to sound the alarm. Keeping in mind the limitation of NCES categories of leadership, Protestant school leaders may prepare for their school headship in ways that are not captured by the available data.

Lower levels of reported preparation in certain areas of leadership may signal philosophical convictions about Christian education. The NCES category “Data-Driven Decision Making” comes to mind. While data may provide important feedback for improvement in Christian schools, it may not be an ultimate authority for decision-making in Christian schools. Indeed, we’ve identified “Data-Driven Improvement” as a key construct in the Flourishing School

Culture Model (Swaner et al. 2019). But data must always be used subordinate to the Word of God. (For more on this topic, consider Albert Cheng’s excellent “Meditations on ‘Meditation in a Toolshed’” in the fall 2020 issue of *Research in Brief*.)

Still, we shouldn’t eschew an opportunity for sober-minded reflection. Are there areas in which Christian school leaders could be better prepared and equipped for their responsibilities (see Table 3 for examples)? If so, how can we effectively deliver additional training in those areas?

Table 3: Areas in which Christian School Leaders Reported the Lowest Levels of Training

	NCES (Lee & Cheng)	CESA (Lee, Cheng, & Wiens)
	(1)	(2)
Least	Physical Plant Management	Education Law
2 nd	Data-Driven Decision Making	Finance and Budgeting
3 rd	Fiscal Management	Human Resource Management

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 (HSL:09), Base Year and First Follow-Up; Council on Educational Standards & Accountability, 2020 Principal Survey.

Being thoughtful about leadership training means we shouldn’t needlessly seek to add tasks to a head of school’s already extensive responsibilities. Time is a scarce resource, one that must be stewarded well. As it stands, heads of Christian schools may already be too eager to shoulder additional responsibilities. They are far more likely to be concerned for the wellness of others in their school communities than their own (Swaner and Lee 2020), and U.S. Protestant school principals are significantly more likely than principals in other sectors to have teaching responsibilities on top of their administrative duties. How can we discern when further training is necessary and redirect time and energy towards effective and efficient professional development?

There’s clearly a need for further research on leadership in Christian schools. I’m encouraged to find that Protestant school leaders were substantially more likely to prioritize personal growth—what I would consider the closest proxy to faith development in this dataset—than Catholic and public school leaders, but more work needs to be done to statistically clarify differences across sectors. Future work on Christian school leadership should consider categories and educational priorities more representative of Christian schools. [RIB](#)

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SHARED LEADERSHIP:

A Framework for Collaboration and Innovation in Christian Schools

PATRICK STUART

Of the many reforms in American education, shared leadership may be one of the most meaningful. The current expectations of educational leaders are both challenging and complex, and make it nearly impossible for one leader to do all that is expected daily (Akdemir and Ayik 2017). Shared leadership helps make it possible for leaders to meet these expectations.

Shared leadership is defined by Pearce and Conger (2003) as "a dynamic, interactive influence process among individuals in groups for which the objective is to lead one another to the achievement of group or organizational goals" (1). Key elements include shared purpose, social support, and voice (Carson et al. 2007). A shared leadership framework enables principals and teachers to examine the complex issues in education as they work together to create an enhanced learning environment (Bagwell 2019).

This practice is emerging within K-12 schools as school leaders seek ways to accomplish the multitude of expectations from stakeholders. Educational leadership recently evolved from a model in which one person, often the school principal, is the leading educational leader, to a paradigm that allows for a more shared perspective of leadership (Huggins et al. 2017). This shift has gained favor in recent years as a useful approach to help schools continue to improve while providing opportunities for teachers to



share in the leadership process in their schools (Eckert 2018). Innovative leadership ideas and practices have emerged to help school principals as they move away from a singular, heroic leader concept to embrace a more collaborative, collective, and shared experience of school leadership. These new ideas can help a broader community of school leaders, including teachers and students, manage and guide their schools.



Literature Review

Prior research on collaboration in educational settings has focused on the role of teachers. Teachers can provide essential understanding and perspective to leadership decisions in a school setting when principals and teachers work together collectively for school improvement (Eckert 2018). Teachers express a greater sense of satisfaction in collaborative settings (McBrayer et al. 2018). The opportunity to share their voice is also related to a greater sense of ownership (Carson et al. 2007).

By empowering teachers to lead, principals enable them to grow and learn as they engage in the practice of shared leadership. Research has documented a direct relationship between shared leadership and innovation (Zafer-Dunes 2016). Shared leadership also creates an opportunity for mentoring new teachers (Gahwaji 2019; Tafvelin et al. 2019; Schwabsky et al. 2020). While uncertainty remains about how and when to enact shared leadership, it seems promising that

“The Christian school setting can be a productive environment for positive leadership sharing to occur, which can lead to further empowerment and engagement of teachers.”

the Christian school setting can be a productive environment for positive leadership sharing to occur, which can lead to further empowerment and engagement of teachers.

Within the existing literature, it is evident that shared leadership is still emerging as a leadership model within the education community. While school principals are interested in understanding shared leadership and how shared leadership is practiced within schools (Mokoena 2017), research has not supplied answers for how to practice shared leadership effectively (Mokoena 2017; Wang et al. 2017). This is a crucial gap in the research literature because an understanding of shared leadership in K-12 Christian schools can help administrators and teachers identify best practices for working together to accomplish school goals. This study aimed to help fill that gap.

Methodology

The key purpose of the research was to identify how Christian school principals describe their understanding and use of shared leadership when leading teachers within a K-12 Christian setting. To achieve this purpose, I employed a qualitative research methodology. Sandelowski (2000) posited that “qualitative descriptive study is the method of choice when straight descriptions of phenomena are desired” (334).

The key data collection occurred within semi-structured interviews with twelve Christian school principals in the spring of 2020. The semi-structured interviews occurred using Zoom conferencing software, which was video/ audio recorded. Each interview lasted between twenty to sixty-six minutes and overall yielded one hundred pages of

Table 1 – Sample Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	SD	Min	Max
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Female	0.33	0.49	0	1
Experience (Years)				
As principal	10.17	7.23	3	25
In Christian schools	17.83	11.26	8	45
Highest Degree				
Bachelor's	0.08	0.29	0	1
Master's	0.67	0.49	0	1
Doctorate	0.25	0.45	0	1

transcription for analysis. The researcher used the six-phase thematic analysis of Braun and Clarke (2006) to guide the data analysis process to identify, analyze, and report patterns through an iterative process of reading and re-reading transcripts, and watching and listening to video/audio recordings of the interviews.

Each of the principals were asked thirteen questions derived from the research questions and shared leadership literature. For example, one question asked each principal to describe their understanding of shared leadership practice in schools. Another question asked respondents how shared leadership impacts teachers. The researcher used a descriptive design to explore how principals lead teachers using the principles and practices of a shared leadership approach.

The purposive study sample was comprised of Christian school principals with three or more years of experience who currently worked in an accredited school and who self-identified as using shared leadership when leading teachers. Participants were all working in Christian schools in the southeastern region of the United States. Of the twelve participants, four were females, and eight were males. The years of experience as a school principal ranged from three years to twenty-five years. In terms of highest degree attained, three principals held a doctorate, eight had earned a master's degree, and one reported a bachelor's degree as the highest level of education. The years of experience in Christian schools range from eight to forty-five (see Table 1).

Findings

The findings of this research revealed that principals believed sharing leadership with their teachers helped accomplish school goals, suggesting that shared leadership practices among educators are beneficial for both principals and teachers. The findings indicated five common factors were present among the participants of the study: collaboration; empowering teachers; trust; support; and partnership.

Collaboration

Collaboration is crucial in the process of sharing leadership.

Previous studies suggested that collaboration is essential for teacher satisfaction and school improvement (Akdemir and Ayik 2017; McBrayer et al. 2018). Nasreen (2019) posited that collaboration in education is the key to success. The principals in the study noted that they must encourage collaboration and provide time for it to occur. The participants further indicated that collaboration with their teachers occurred in many different ways as they worked together to achieve school goals.

The results suggested that principals understand the need to collaborate with teachers for school improvement and to provide opportunities to empower teachers.

“Empowering teachers within the school setting provides the opportunity for teachers to share with leadership innovative and new ideas that can improve schools.”

Empowering Teachers

Teacher empowerment was identified as a product of shared leadership. Previous research concluded that voice is a crucial element of shared leadership (Carson et al. 2007). Consistent with prior research, principals in this study reported that empowering teachers within the school setting provides the opportunity for teachers to share with leadership innovative and new ideas that can improve schools. Voice provides an opportunity for input, participation, and taking ownership of leadership. Since the classroom teacher has daily contact with students, they have the unique opportunity to see things from a different perspective than the school principal. The principal who finds the opportunity to empower teachers with leadership capacity can find new perspectives that originate with teachers as they work toward school improvement.

Trust

Trust is important in all leadership relationships. Research documented a direct relationship between trust and shared leadership in schools and innovation (Zafer-Dunes 2019) and that shared leadership should be based on mutual trust and

shared responsibilities between the principal and teachers in a school setting (Mokoena 2017). The principals in this study indicated that when teachers trust their principals, their perceptions of shared leadership were positive. Trust is a key element from both teachers and principals when it comes to sharing leadership. For shared leadership to be most effective, principals and teachers need to have trust in the process, and ample time must be allocated for collaboration and empowerment to occur.

Support

Support is another key aspect of shared leadership in schools. Previous studies discussed the importance of supporting teachers by training and mentoring them for leadership responsibilities (Gahwaji 2019; Tafvelin et al. 2019; Schwabsky et al. 2020). Similarly, leaders in this study reported that when teachers feel support from their administrator, they are more likely to engage in shared leadership opportunities. Support is a two-way street in shared leadership in a school setting. Principals in the study indicated that when teachers believed they were supported they were likely to share ideas and practices with principals and other teachers. One way in which teachers may feel supported is if professional development opportunities are provided for teachers' leadership. If principals are going to share leadership, teachers must be trained and given time outside of the classroom to participate in leadership activities in the school.

Partnership

The final finding of this study was the importance of partnership when sharing leadership. This is similar to support but speaks more about the relationships that are critical when sharing leadership. It is possible to support someone without partnering with them by simply completing tasks to move toward goals. However, the partnership involves people working together toward common goals. As a school leader, the principal is responsible for finding and developing partnerships between them and teachers by using shared leadership practices (Göksoy 2015). Eckert (2018) also noted the value of principals and teachers partnering together and practicing working together collectively for school improvement. Participants in this study commented that building relationships, communication, and inclusion were essential elements to partnering with teachers and shared leadership.

Discussion

This study identified the value of Christian school principals sharing leadership with teachers in schools as they work to provide the best education for students. The themes that emerged from the study indicate the principals should involve their teachers through a collaborative, trusting

environment that empowers teachers through supportive partnerships. Overall, participants were satisfied with their understanding and use of shared leadership within their schools. In addition, most of the principals indicated they wished they had more time to invest in teachers through shared leadership.

These concepts are essential to shared leadership practices in schools. With all of the demands on school leaders today it has become clear that the heroic leadership model where one leader makes all of the decisions is a way of the past. When school principals understand and use the principles and practices of sharing leadership with teachers they may find other benefits for the school such as team achievement (Carson et al. 2007; Spillane and Diamond 2007; Eckert 2018).

The results of the study strengthen the case that collaboration between principals and teachers is a crucial aspect of shared leadership within schools. Particularly, the specific practices described by participants included brainstorming, shared decision-making, and engaging teachers. A final challenge to those principals seeking to share leadership in the school setting is for them to allocate regularly scheduled time to meet with teachers and others as they seek innovative ideas and practices to accomplish the growing demands in Christian schools today. [RiB](#)

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Insights from Flourishing Schools Research

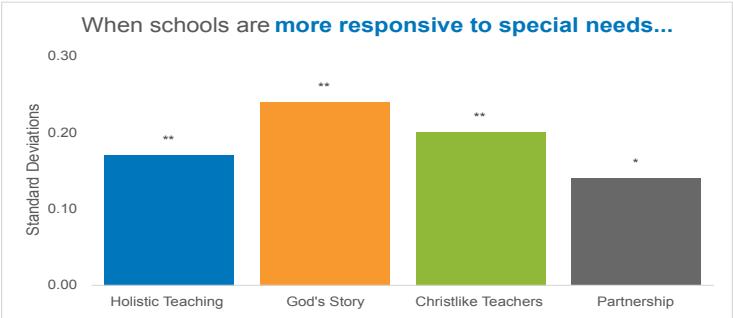
ACSI RESEARCH

The Flourishing School Culture Instrument has been fielded for three years, providing us with a wealth of data to explore key relationships within the Flourishing School Culture Model. Each issue, we'll bring you new insights on our flourishing schools. What have we learned so far?

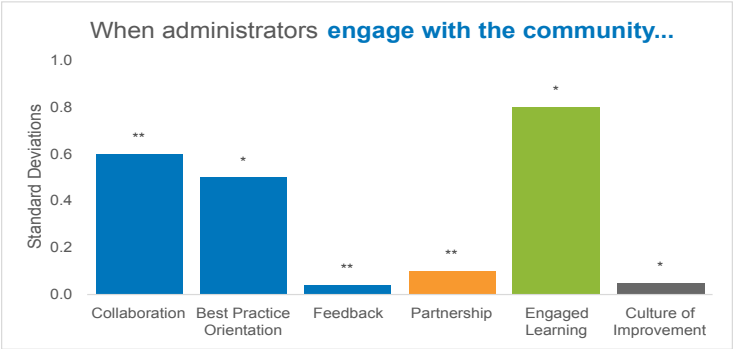
RESPONSIVENESS TO SPECIAL NEEDS

When comparing teachers, students, and parents in schools that are otherwise similar in enrollment, school finances, and local economic characteristics, when schools are more responsive to special needs:

- Teachers are more likely to engage in holistic teaching;
- Students are more likely to report understanding their purpose as part of God's story;
- Students are more likely to report that their teachers exemplify Christlikeness;
- Parents are more likely to be in a strong partnership with the school.



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

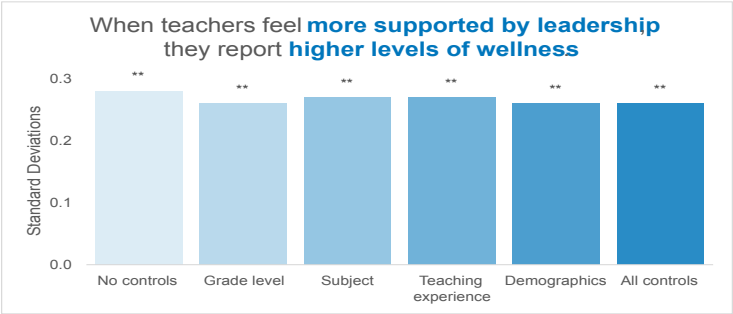


When comparing teachers, parents, staff, and alumni who are otherwise similar on demographic characteristics and experience in Christian education, when administrators are more engaged with the community:

- Teachers are more likely to collaborate with colleagues, have a stronger best practice orientation, and report receiving better feedback;
- Parents are more likely to be in a strong partnership with the school;
- Staff are more likely to observe engaged learning;
- Alumni are more likely to report a culture of improvement.

SUPPORTIVE LEADERSHIP

When comparing teachers in the same school, teachers who feel more supported by leadership report higher levels of wellness, regardless of controls used. [RiB](#)



Note: Asterisks indicate a statistically significant relationship was estimated, ** p < 0.01, * p < 0.05.

FSCI Participation Reaches Record High For 2021-22

ACSI RESEARCH

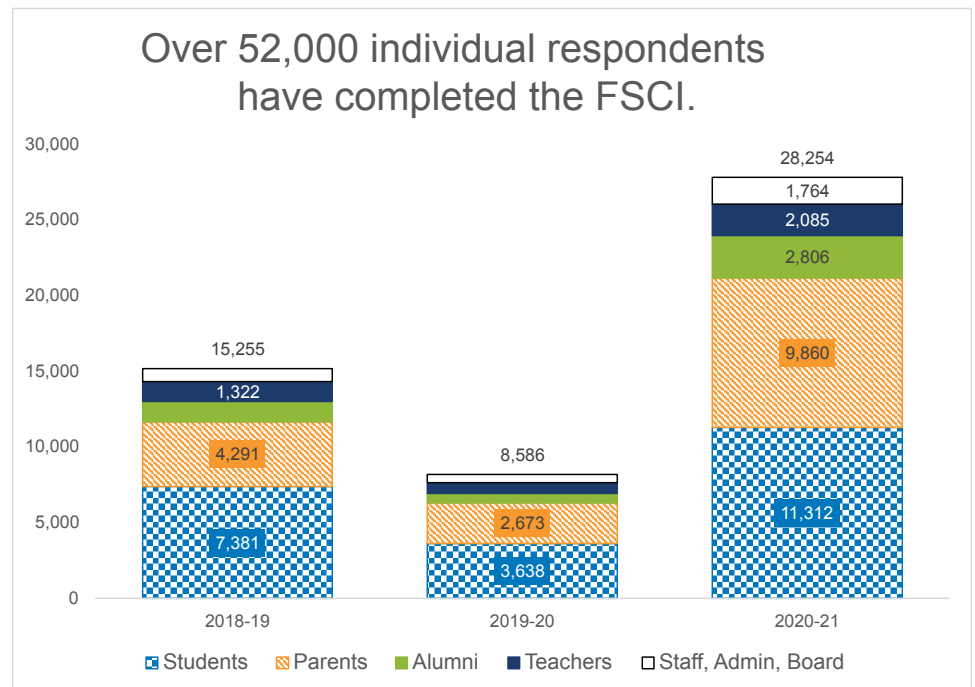
Participation in the Flourishing School Culture Instrument (FSCI) has already reached a record high for 2021-22, with 82 new schools registering to administer the instrument this year, topping the previous high of 76 in 2018-19. Altogether, 221 unique schools have participated or are currently participating in the FSCI.

This global community of flourishing schools represents twelve different countries, including Australia, Cambodia, Canada, the Czech Republic, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Kenya, Nigeria, the Philippines, Tanzania, and Senegal.

Altogether, over 52,000 individual respondents have completed the FSCI, including roughly 22,000 students, 17,000 parents, 5,000 alumni, and 7,000 teachers, administrators, support staff, and board members.

You can make the most of your school's flourishing journey by joining a Flourishing Schools Network, attending a

Flourishing Schools Institute, and administering the FSCI. To learn more, visit <https://www.acsi.org/flourishing-schools-culture>. **RiB**



COMING SOON: Converge 2022

Scripture promises that God “is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us” (Ephesians 3:20). This verse reminds us that God’s creativity and power will always far exceed our capacity to ‘dream big.’ As many educators across the world begin a new school year, we need this encouragement perhaps now more than ever. Many of the uncertainties of the past 18 months remain with us, with new challenges inevitably on the horizon. We need don’t just need big dreams for the coming year. We need God-sized dreams, backed by God-sized provision.

At **Converge 2022** (formerly the Global Christian School Leadership Summit, or GCSLS) to be held in San Diego in March, Christian education leaders from around the world will join together to share God-sized dreams for our schools and communities, specifically around the theme of “Leading Courageously, Renewing Hope.” Join colleagues from North

America and around the world at the Town & Country Resort on March 8-10, 2022, along with four exciting preconferences (including ACSI’s “Designed to Flourish: Growing in Relationships”). Register today, as well as view the speaker lineup and accommodations information, at <https://converge.education>. Special pricing for groups is available, so we hope to see your team in San Diego next year! **RiB**



Sustainability in Christian Education: Future-Facing Financial Models

ACSI RESEARCH


The 2019 Global Christian School Leadership Summit (GCSLS) drew over 1,100 Christian education leaders from North America and across the world. Attendees were asked in the post event survey, “What do you think is the number one priority that Christian schools need to tackle right away?” Their top response was *enrollment and sustainability*.

This finding is far from surprising. Market challenges to the Christian school sector have been felt and well-documented in recent years, such as the changing faith profile of parents, in which the number of self-identified Christians is shrinking, and the proliferation of school options like public charter schools and online academies (Barna and ACSI 2017). 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, growing secularism, and increasing learning needs of students—have impacted schools of all types. This is all before the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, which continues through today.

The world in which the majority of Christian schools were founded—in the second half of the 20th century—no longer exists. The models on which Christian schools were built (tuition-driven, loyalty-based, brick-and-mortar) are often no longer suited to the market, cultural, and societal realities of today. But what is needed is far from a quick fix—more than tweaking a practice or process here or there. Paradoxically, for Christian education to be sustained into the future, the way Christian education looks and functions—the underlying models by which schools operate—must change. **Sustainability is not finding a way to continue current practices into the future, as much as we might wish it. Rather, sustainability means ensuring the school’s mission continues into the future, which likely will require that schools look very different from the past or today.**

ACSI’s grant-funded, multiyear research project to identify and share data on promising financial models for Christian education will conclude in early 2021. These adaptive financial models include things like new delivery systems enabled by technology, mergers and acquisitions, cost and resource sharing, entrepreneurship, boutique programs, school choice, wrap-around programs, church and community partnerships, and charter networks. Through the research process, much is being learned from visiting



and studying schools that have implemented these models, including the process of transitioning to these models from a more traditional one. In addition to research reports to be released in conjunction with Cardus in early 2021, ACSI will also host dialogues and facilitate networking around study findings. This research project is designed to be successful catalyst for change that would not only increase the number of schools developing such models, but also connect them together so that insights, learning, and encouragement can be shared among them—with the goal of catalyzing the growth of sustainable financial models for Christian education. 

Questions about this project? Email research@acsi.org.

REFERENCES

- Barna Group and the Association of Christian Schools International. 2017. *Multiple choice: How parents sort education options in a changing market*. Colorado Springs, CO: ACSI; Ventura, CA: Barna Group.
- In Christ Communications. 2019. Landmark summit survey reveals encouraging signs for Christian school movement as leaders commit to innovate. 22 March 2019 press release.




GOING DEEPER TO FLOURISH: ACSI Offers New Flourishing Schools Institute (FSi) for 2021

The biblical concept of flourishing, backed by ACSI's groundbreaking Flourishing Schools Research, serves as the framework for a premier professional development offering coming in 2021. Designed for Christian school leaders who desire to take their schools deeper into flourishing, the **Flourishing Schools Institute (FSi)** will feature nationally known speakers and a unique event structure designed for rich learning and engagement.

Speakers for 2021 include **John Stonestreet**, President of the Colson Center for Christian Worldview (for the *Purpose* domain); **Joel Gaines**, Head of School at The City School in Philadelphia, PA (for the *Relationships* domain); **Peter Greer**, author of *Mission Drift* and *Rooting for Rivals* (for the *Expertise & Resources* domain); **Dr. Althea Penn**, educational consultant and development specialist (for the *Teaching and Learning* domain); and **Rex Miller**, author and creator of the *MindShift* for teacher wellness (for the *Well-Being* domain).

The 2.5-day event will engage leaders in the “GLEAN” cycle, where they will Gauge their schools' strengths and opportunities for growth; Learn about the flourishing

domains and constructs; Experiment with other leaders to design programs and interventions for flourishing; Apply new learning across their school culture; and Network with other leaders who are focused on their school's flourishing.

The next Flourishing Schools Institutes (FSi) will take place in Orlando on November 1-3, 2021 and in Chicago on June 21-23, 2022. Bundle pricing is available for schools wishing to administer the Flourishing School Culture Instrument (FSCI) in tandem with attending the institute. To register, please visit our website at <https://www.acsi.org/flourishing-schools-institute>. 

FLOURISHING SCHOOLS
Institute

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